Introduction

Fables and fairy tales are age-old and used to be passed around by word of mouth, but short stories are a modern invention and reflect something of the loneliness of the acts of writing and reading. With the modernist movement in the early years of the twentieth century, the form took on a particularly obsessive character, and writers like Katherine Mansfield (and James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence) made short stories into intensely crafted and evocative objects-on-the-page, sometimes with nearly no plot at all in the conventional sense. Katherine Mansfield put even more into the story form than her contemporaries, however, since it was really her *only* form. She sometimes regretted this – she joked that Jane Austen's novels made 'modern episodic people like me . . . look very incompetent ninnies', and said to an old friend, sadly, at the end of her life, that all she'd produced were 'little stories like birds bred in cages'. But her very dissatisfaction feeds into her stories, and gives them a special edge. And in any case, her pleasure in the form is clear. She felt at home in it, being so little at home anywhere else.

She left well-to-do New Zealand society behind in 1908 at the age of nineteen, but she remained something of an outsider in English literary circles. Her contacts with the people she met were eager, tense, competitive and mutually mistrustful. Most women in this world were helpmeets or patrons or muses or mistresses, not artists in their own right, as she wanted to be. And even in literary Bohemia the old social distinctions died hard. She was a colonial and her banker father was a self-made man, so that she fitted all too well into a certain ready-made snobbish stereotype: 'provincial', 'trade'. It's possible to recapture something of the impact she made on English sensibilities by looking at her relations with the one major woman writer she knew well, Virginia Woolf. Their on-off friendship was marked by conflicting feelings of alienation and intimacy. A diary entry by Woolf for 1917, after she and Leonard had had Mansfield to dinner, reads:

We could both wish that ones first impression of K.M. was not that she stinks

like a – well civet cat that had taken to street walking. In truth I'm a little shocked by her commonness at first sight; lines so hard & cheap. However when this diminishes, she is so intelligent & inscrutable that she repays friendship.

Even if you make allowance for Woolf's habitual private savagery, this passage shows what a powerful physical presence Mansfield had. Pioneering Mansfield scholar and biographer Antony Alpers was puzzled by Woolf's over-reaction. Katherine, he said in his 1980 *Life*, liked expensive French perfume (and dressed very well, for that matter). Perhaps the Woolfs thought it vulgar to wear scent at all? Alpers concluded that it must have been Mansfield's passion for 'the life of the senses' that offended Woolf's sensitive nose.

He was putting it too mildly. That 'civet' reference is to the secretions of the musk glands of a cat, once upon a time an ingredient for making scent. Woolf was probably thinking of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, where bawdy Touchstone explains (Act III, scene 2) that sweet-smelling courtiers who use civet aren't as clean as they seem, because 'civet is of a baser birth than tar, the very uncleanly flux of a cat'. Put the implications together and Woolf is saying – with a sort of fascinated disgust – that Mansfield is like a tom-cat marking out its territory and (at the same time) a she-cat on heat. And of course the social and sexual messages are mixed up, too, so that the 'lines' of her personality seem 'hard & cheap'. Yet in the next sentence she's transformed into someone 'intelligent and inscrutable', a new kind of aloof and attractive cat who has an inner life. This was a sentiment Woolf repeated in a diary entry of 1920: 'she is of the cat kind, alien, composed, always solitary & observant'. When she thought of Mansfield in this way Woolf felt very close to her: '. . . we talked about solitude, & I found her expressing my feelings as I never heard them expressed'. She felt, she said, 'a queer sense of being "like" – not only about literature'; 'to no-one else can I talk in the same disembodied way about writing'. And Mansfield wrote to her in a letter of that same year: 'You are the only woman with whom I long to talk work.'

Looking back in 1931, some years after Katherine's death, Virginia wrote to Vita Sackville-West:

I thought her cheap, and she thought me priggish, and yet we were both compelled to meet simply in order to talk about writing . . . she had, as you say,

the zest and the resonance – I mean she could permeate one with her quality; and if one felt this cheap scent in it, it reeked in ones nostrils . . .

It's as though, as soon as she thinks about Mansfield, even eight years dead, she catches that shocking feral smell on the air: of the sexual adventuress, the stray cat, so disturbing because they shared the same dedication to writing. Katherine was a rival writer, not someone's girlfriend. Woolf liked, as she said, to talk about work in a 'disembodied' way, but Mansfield's body wasn't so easily dismissed.

We know how she struck another rival writer and sometime friend, too, for D. H. Lawrence based the character of Gudrun in *Women in Love* at least in part on Mansfield. In the spring of 1916 Lawrence, Frieda, Katherine and her lover (later husband) John Middleton Murry had rented next-door cottages in Cornwall. They lived in great emotional closeness too. Katherine, in a letter to a mutual friend, Koteliansky, famously provided an eye-witness account of one of Lawrence's murderous rows with Frieda ('Suddenly Lawrence . . . made a kind of horrible blind rush at her . . . he beat her to death . . . her head and face and breast and pulled out her hair') and the even more horrid spectacle – she implies – of their reconciliation afterwards: '. . . next day, whipped himself, and far more thoroughly than he had ever beaten Frieda, he was running about taking her up her breakfast in bed and trimming her a hat.' Lawrence, Claire Tomalin argues in her biography of Mansfield *A Secret Life* (1987), made Gudrun very like Katherine in general – 'gifted artistically, charming, spirited, a good talker, a bit of a feminist, a bit of a cynic . . .' (p. 151) – as well as putting actual incidents from the period of their friendship into the novel. By the time *Women in Love* was finished, she and Murry had disappointed Lawrence, by refusing to fit into his plans, particularly Murry, with whom he imagined making a male bond of brotherhood. Claire Tomalin suggests, though – gruesomely but plausibly – that the real blood-bond (*Blutbrüderschaft*) was the one Lawrence formed unknowingly with Katherine: he may have infected her with the tuberculosis that killed her, since he was already suffering from the disease, though he died later than she did.

Woolf and Lawrence in their very different ways reflect the force of Katherine Mansfield's personality, her gift for closeness and her sly separateness, too. She was an object of speculation and gossip and jealousy, and she often gave as good as she got. The philosopher Bertrand

Russell, with whom she flirted in 1916, wrote that 'her talk was marvellous . . . especially when she was telling of things she was going to write, but when she spoke about people she was envious, dark and full of alarming penetration' (*The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. II, London, 1963, p. 27). The hostility to her, as a species of adventuress, was very real. You can, though, catch more inward and tender glimpses of her in the work of her contemporaries. Tomalin points out that Lawrence's portrait of Gudrun includes passages which peer inside her head when she lies sleepless in the night as Katherine often did, 'conscious of everything, her childhood, her girlhood, all the forgotten incidents, all the unrealized influences, and all the happenings she had not understood, pertaining to herself, to her family, to her friends, to her lovers, her acquaintances, everybody. It was as if she drew a glittering rope of knowledge out of the sea of darkness . . .' (*Women in Love*, Ch. 24). If this is Katherine, she must have talked eloquently to Lawrence about her past, 'telling of things she was going to write . . .' For as time went by she did indeed turn for inspiration more and more to the world she had left behind, across a 'sea of darkness', the New Zealand of her childhood and adolescence. In this collection, in fact, nearly half of the stories have a New Zealand setting, including 'The Garden Party' itself and 'At the Bay', which has pride of place as the opening story.

It is appropriate that 'At the Bay' comes first. Along with 'Prelude' (1917, collected in her earlier book, *Bliss and Other Stories*) and 'The Aloe', a longer, messier, early version of 'Prelude', it represents Katherine Mansfield's fragmentary and extraordinarily vivid account of her origins and of her family, the Beauchamps – renamed Burnell in the stories. 'At the Bay' is set in Karori, four miles outside Wellington; the Beauchamps moved there when Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp, as she was christened (Mansfield was her maternal grandmother's maiden name), was four and a half years old. The move was a sign of her father's success and growing prosperity – Harry Beauchamp was already well begun on the brilliant business career that would make him a prominent figure in the colony's commercial life, leading to directorships of many companies, and (eventually) the Chairmanship of the Bank of New Zealand and a knighthood. Kathleen was the third child. The fourth, Gwen, died as a baby, and after the sixth, Leslie, the only son, there would be no more, probably because Annie Beauchamp (like Linda Burnell in the story) had a 'dread of having children', and so stopped after producing the necessary boy.

Certainly she didn't dote on her offspring any more than her fictional counterpart. She went with her husband on a long trip to Europe when Kathleen was one, and in general the mothering was left to *her* mother, Granny Dyer.

Kathleen, the middle child, was plump, intense and bespectacled, and maybe more trouble than the rest – though the evidence for that may have been informed by hindsight, when she became the family's black sheep. The first innocent step in that direction was in 1903 when, along with her two older sisters, she was taken to England for the first time, and enrolled in Queen's College, Harley Street. It was an expensive school that offered a very good education, one of the best available for girls then, and there she became absorbed in music, literature, fashionably 'decadent' taste (Wilde in particular) and passionate friendships. She wrote for and later edited the college magazine, learned the cello, and fell in love with London – or at least London as reflected in the paintings of Whistler. She began to see herself as an artist, though it wasn't clear at all which art she meant. And (perhaps most important) she formed a connection that would be life-long with Ida Baker, who'd also had a colonial background, being born in Burma. This wasn't a lesbian relationship – though people sometimes thought so – but a kind of surrogate sisterhood, or even marriage (Mansfield actually referred to Ida as a 'wife', not exactly a term of affection for her). Ida would over the years become companion, nurse or servant when required, and would retreat into the background whenever Mansfield didn't need her. She was needed a lot, and much resented for it. None the less, it may be said that if Kathleen/Katherine discovered the beginnings of her vocation at Queen's College, she also discovered, in Ida – whom she later renamed Lesley Moore, 'L.M.' for short, a pseudonym to complement her own disguise – the person who would supply the support that made it possible for her to produce her best work.

From her family's point of view, however, her superior London education was not at all meant to lead to a career; it was designed to fit her for a superior style of domestic and social life, and in December 1906, at eighteen, she returned according to plan to New Zealand. As it turned out, it was too late: she had become a native of elsewhere. In the words of biographer Claire Tomalin, 'something more than the sense of being at home in Europe was stamped on her . . . this was the habit of impermanence. The hotel room, the temporary lodging, the sense of

being about to move on, of living where you do not quite belong, observing with a stranger's eye – all these became second nature to her between 1903 and 1906' (p. 30). Certainly, once home in Wellington, she became outrageously and unmanageably discontented. And now there were lesbian affairs – or at least one: she re-met and flirted with glamorous Maata, a Maori 'Princess' she'd first known as a girl; and was passionately, physically in love with Edith Bendall, an artist and illustrator in her twenties.

She was full of loathing for the Beauchamp world – 'Damn my family . . . I detest them all heartily' – and she began to stand back from it, and see it with vengeful coldness, as a confidence trick on women:

> Here then is a little summary of what I need – power, wealth and freedom. It is the hopelessly insipid doctrine that love is the only thing in the world, taught, hammered into women, from generation to generation, which hampers us so cruelly. We must get rid of that bogey . . .

By 'love' she meant love-and-marriage of course. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) would quote Mansfield's autobiographical Beauchamp stories with special approval, for the clarity with which they identified the mystificatory processes that entrap women. She picks out a passage from 'Prelude', where the unmarried sister Beryl (based on Mansfield's young aunt Belle) admires her own guitar-playing, as a splendid example of the way 'the romantic desire for a woman's destiny' is fuelled by narcissism and the cult of self. And from 'At the Bay' Beauvoir quotes at length the passage where Linda Burnell thinks about her husband and the doubtful meanings of 'love' – including her dread of having children – and concludes that Mansfield as good as demonstrates 'that no maternal "instinct" exists'. The stories refuse to honour conventional sentiments – that is part of their modernity, and their courage and distinctiveness. Beauvoir said rather solemnly that this was because Mansfield looked at her characters in the light of their 'total situation'. Another writer, Willa Cather, had put it more expressively: 'I doubt whether any contemporary writer has made one feel more keenly the many kinds of personal relations which exist in an everyday "happy family" who are merely going on living their daily lives . . . every individual in that household (even the children) is clinging passionately to his individual soul, is in terror of losing it in the general family flavour' (*Not Under Forty*, 1936). With the young Kathleen/Katherine, this 'terror'

became so acute, and so uncomfortable to everyone else, that in 1908 she was allowed to do as she wished, and leave once more for London, after eighteen months of 'home'.

She would never return, except in imagination. But before she became the woman who could write up the Beauchamps in this fashion, and turn them into the luminous characters of her fiction, she would have many adventures. Before she really became a professional writer at all, indeed, she herself lived rather like a character in a book – though in her case, it was as the heroine of a picaresque novel, 'modern' and 'episodic' to excess. An account of her first year and a bit will set the tone of her new life. On arrival she more or less adopted the musical Trowell family, known from New Zealand, but her affair with the son, Garnet, foundered on his parents' disapproval. In a bizarre gesture of defiance, in March 1909, she married a mild-mannered English admirer with artistic hobbies, a man she hardly knew called George Bowden, and left him on their wedding day to join Garnet, who was in the orchestra of an opera company touring the provinces. In May (by now she was pregnant) her mother arrived in London, carried her off to a Bavarian spa town, left her there to have the baby, returned to New Zealand, and briskly cut her disgraceful daughter out of her will (her father, however, would continue to send her an allowance during her life). Meanwhile Katherine had a miscarriage, collected material for stories by observing her fellow guests, and wrote to Ida Baker asking her to send her a child to look after, which Ida duly did (an eight-year-old boy called Charlie Walter, who was recovering from pleurisy, and who was sent back at the end of the summer, having served his purpose). She now met Floryan Sobieniowski, a Polish writer and translator who introduced her to Chekhov's stories; they had an affair, and she contracted the gonorrhoea which – unrecognized and untreated – would give her agonizing rheumatic pains for years, and probably made her infertile. By the beginning of 1910 she was back in London (with the help of a 'loan' from Ida) and had produced a story freely adapted (some would say plagiarized) from Chekhov, 'The-Child-Who-Was-Tired', which was published in the magazine *The New Age* edited by A. R. Orage, who also printed a story called 'Germans at Meat'. She settled on the name Katherine Mansfield, in life as well as on the page. Her writing career had begun.

It was small wonder that Woolf scented an adventuress. For Mansfield

the years between 1908 and 1918 were hectic, crowded with people and restless with movement. By 1918 she had become seriously and unmistakably ill with TB, and had just begun to produce her best work – '*grown up* as a writer', as she put it. She'd lived like someone on the run, an escapee from the prisons of respectability, making up her life as she went along, often disastrously, but at least the mistakes were *hers*. There is no room here for a blow-by-blow account, but two people in her history must be singled out, since they represent (apart from Ida) the nearest thing to continuity she could bear to claim: her second husband John Middleton Murry, and her brother Leslie Beauchamp.

Mansfield met Murry in December 1911, in March the following year he became a lodger in her flat, and shortly afterwards her lover. He was a year younger than she in literal fact, but a lot younger in other ways: a clever, charming, ambitious young man, making his own way in the world from humble origins, via Oxford, where he founded a short-lived little magazine called *Rhythm*, on which she joined him as a co-editor. They seem to have been surrogate siblings to each other: playfellows, chums and allies. Though he was a would-be novelist at the beginning, his was a critical sensibility, and it was as an editor, reviewer and critic that he would make his name, for the most part after her death. Their eventual marriage, after her divorce from Bowden in the spring of 1918, makes them sound a more settled couple than they were. Many commentators, looking back on Mansfield's life-story, have found Murry wanting. He was slippery, restless, indecisive, unreliable and seldom at her side when she needed him. On the other hand, it's hard not to feel that – having made the running from the beginning – she continued the relationship less out of passion for him than out of a failure of energy and nerve. She was too ill and time was too short to go on the prowl any more.

Her brother, Leslie 'Chummie' Beauchamp, was twenty-one when he arrived in England in February 1915 to join up. After a spring and summer in officer training-school, he left for the Front in France in October, and a few days later he was killed in a grenade accident, 'blown to bits' in Katherine's words. During their re-acquaintance she had lied to him merrily about her relationship with Murry: 'more than ever in love', Leslie wrote to their parents. In fact, they were on the verge of parting company, and to prove the point and assert her independence, Katherine made her own excursion to the Front, unknown to Leslie.

She went to join a lover, Francis Carco, a novelist of the Parisian underworld, and a friend of another writer–adventuress, Colette, and she succeeded in outwitting the military to join him for a brief idyll, which she described in her journal.

In a sense, this has little to do with her relations with her brother, except that, with both Leslie and Carco, what is striking is her sense of the man as a double, a kind of lover/brother, an other self. Describing going to bed with Carco, she focuses on his prettiness ('one hand with a bangle over the sheets, he looked like a girl'), and their talking and laughing together under the bedclothes: 'lying curled in one another's arms . . . A whole life passed in thought. Other people, other things.' Their resemblance was perhaps increased by the fact that she seems to have chopped off her hair on the way as a vague 'disguise'. As for her real brother, again they were said to look very alike, and according to her biographer Alpers, Leslie was known to contemporaries as rather a 'pansy'. After his death, she wrote to him in her Journal: 'You know I can never be Jack's lover again. You have me. You're in my flesh as well as in my soul.' Though she and Jack were reconciled once more, she did make dead Chummie into a kind of Muse: 'The next book will be yours and mine. It is the idea that I do not write alone. That in every word I write and every place I visit I carry you with me.' He was one of the reasons why she turned more and more to New Zealand memories, and he is also a character in some of those same stories: a new-born baby – but already a charmer – in 'At the Bay'; the real-life original of the ideal brother whose very name mirrors the heroine (Laura/Laurie) in 'The Garden Party':

'. . . 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.

'*Isn't* it, darling?' said Laurie.

These famous last words of one of her best-known stories are of course thoroughly ambiguous, and include an element of mockery. But that only means that – characteristically – Mansfield was critical of her own longing for closeness, someone 'in my flesh . . . in my soul'. Any Muse of hers could not be all sweetness and light. Indeed Alpers thinks that Leslie also lurks behind spoiled Harold in 'An Ideal Family', the despair of his father: 'too handsome by far; that had been the trouble all along.

No man had a right to such eyes, to such lashes and such lips; it was uncanny.'

Mansfield seems to have felt that her own vocation as a writer was vindicated in Leslie's death: she could immortalize their shared childhood world somehow, carry on the family 'line' in the way only an artist can. That he was not aggressively masculine, may have been bisexual or gay, underlines their closeness. He was on her 'side' somehow, also an outsider. Carco too lived on in her fiction, in no very flattering fashion. Mansfield scholars generally agree that she borrowed his voice, and something of his feline knowingness, in creating Raoul Duquette in her 1918 story '*Je ne parle pas français*', one of the first in which she found her own distinctive voice. Maybe in the end Katherine Mansfield's bisexuality was not so much a matter of sexual practices (there's no evidence of sexual relationships with women after her teens), but of what went on inside her head, the character of her creative self.

Like almost all her important work '*Je ne parle pas français*' was written outside England, at the various resorts and refuges she visited in search of kinder weather and better health. She was increasingly driven by her illness, and subject to despair and rage. She wrote to Murry from the South of France, in November 1920, in this vein, scorning his long-distance praises and desperate for his real attention:

> I don't want dismissing as a masterpiece . . . I haven't anything like as long to live as you have. *I've scarcely any time, I feel* . . . Talk to me. I'm lonely. I haven't ONE single soul.

D. H. Lawrence, himself very ill but refusing to know it, raging on his own account, sent her a horrible letter – 'He spat in my face and threw filth at me, and said: "I loathe you. You revolt me stewing in your consumption."' Curiously, perhaps because of her own volatile and terrible temper, she doesn't seem to have found this as devastating as one might expect. And in any case, she was *not* alone, for she had L.M. (Ida Baker), though all too often L.M. didn't quite count except as an object of disgust and resentment. The very physical resilience and stolid *presence* on which Mansfield relied also drove her to ecstasies of hate: 'Her great fat arms, her blind breasts, her baby mouth, the underlip always *wet*, and a crumb or two or a chocolate stain at the corners – her eyes fixed on me – fixed – waiting for what I shall do so that [she] may copy it . . .' Nevertheless it worked, and she worked. By the time her

first major collection, *Bliss and Other Stories*, was published in 1920 she had already begun on the next, *Garden Party* stories, at the Villa Isola Bella in Menton.

In fact two of these stories, 'The Young Girl' and 'Miss Brill', are actually set on the French Riviera, and feature characters from the endlessly shifting, motley, rootless population of towns like Menton. Mansfield's immediate surroundings weren't a major stimulus, though: she was working largely with themes and materials she had squirrelled away in her memory. However, it is rash to generalize about her processes of composition, as one particular example, 'The Daughters of the Late Colonel', will demonstrate. One of the germs of this story, Antony Alpers was able to show, is found in a scribbled note interpolated in the manuscript of 'The Young Girl', a monologue from L.M. which Mansfield seemingly took down verbatim, as it was uttered: '"It's queer how differently people are made," observed L.M. "I don't believe you could understand even if I told you . . . And it isn't as if there were anything to explain – if there was I'd understand – anything tangible, I mean. But there it is, I've always been the same from a child . . . out of my depth in the big waves – or when I'm walking along a dark road late at night . . ."' This she made over into Constantia's closing meditation in the story, with its marvellous evocation of misgivings, signs misread, a life let slip. She began, 'The Daughters of the Late Colonel' in late November 1920, and finished it in a marathon session on 13 December: '. . . at the end,' she wrote in her journal, 'I was so terribly unhappy that I wrote as fast as possible for fear of dying before the story was sent'. When she finished it, late at night, L.M. provided egg sandwiches and tea. Like the other stories, it was published first in a magazine, in this case the *London Mercury*: Mansfield had no difficulties now in placing her work, and did not rely only on the *Athenaeum*, which Murry edited, though she was as always short of money. One group of the *Garden Party* stories was written for the *Sphere* magazine, at ten guineas each – 'Mr and Mrs Dove', 'An Ideal Family', 'Her First Ball', 'Marriage à la Mode', and 'The Voyage'. She worked on these with great speed, and in some cases it shows, in the rather pat shapes, and stagey effects. But again, it's wrong to generalize, since 'The Voyage' is as fine-tuned and suggestive as the best of her late writing.

She was writing against her body's clock in any case, and this pressing sense of urgency is always felt in the work. Her very experimentalism –

the way, for example, her narrative voice speaks through one character after another, her refusal to take a secure, generalizing overview – is itself informed by her impatience. There's no *leisure* to generalize, and no place to stand to take the broad, panoramic view. Claire Tomalin describes the effect very well: 'The particular stamp of her fiction is the isolation in which each character dwells . . . there is no history in these stories, and no exploration of motive. The most brilliant of them are post-impressionist . . . grotesquely peopled and alight with colour and movement' (pp. 6–7). The tone is not sad or depressed, often the reverse. She wrote in a letter to Murry from this period, from Menton, that 'suffering, bodily suffering such as I've known . . . has changed for ever everything – even the appearance of the world is not the same – there is something added. *Everything has its shadow.*' This shadow serves to heighten the colours, and sharpen one's awareness of the present moment. Her very lightness of touch, in fact, and her economy with description and analysis can themselves be read as signs of her changed sense of her bodily self.

The craft of writing is what's left to her, and the pleasure of the text becomes a kind of secular salvation. What's not said is frequently as vital as what *is* said – if she assumes the voices of different characters, she also takes possession of their silences, when they catch their breath and run out of words. Critics have registered this curious cross-infection of her illness and her style, sometimes in slightly macabre ways. So, for example, Claire Tomalin calls the work 'short-winded'; and even someone who starts from the texts rather than from the life, like feminist critic Kate Fullbrook, will write, 'her characters' identities are riddled with gender codes as if with an unshakeable disease . . .' (*Katherine Mansfield*, 1986, p. 31). And, of course, death is more or less openly a theme in the *Garden Party* stories, a terrible and tasteless event that can't be allowed to intrude on the land of the living, but does all the time and everywhere. 'The Stranger', a story which pays a kind of homage to James Joyce's 'The Dead' from *Dubliners* – a salute from one modernist to another – marvellously casts death as a most accidental acquaintance. Mr Hammond (based on Harry Beauchamp, and so boyishly energetic, possessive, hopeful) chafes at the delay on the quay as he waits for his wife's boat to dock, bringing her back from a trip to Europe. When she does arrive, he is ardent, proprietorial and – such is their relationship – aware as always that she holds something of herself back. This time, though, the

'something' takes on more definition than usual, for she tells him that the cause of the delay was that a passenger died, and he died in her arms. It's as though she'd confessed to a ship-board romance, but much worse. She has embraced the enemy that keeps people separate for ever, the fact of their deaths. This is why he can't own her, and why for all his striving he can't, in the end, compete. It's a frightening and blackly funny story – and it may in part have been inspired by a hidden set of family facts. Mansfield's parents had had a similarly shadowed meeting in 1909 in Hobart, Tasmania, though the 'stranger' had been buried at sea; perhaps even more to the point were her mother's death in 1918 and her father's marriage eighteen months later to his dead wife's closest friend, Laura Bright, one day after disembarking from the boat at Auckland – for all the world as if, faced with death, he did everything he could to deny it.

The resulting story stands on its own of course – and it also interacts in the reader's imagination with the others in the collection. Mansfield may have been too breathless – or simply too 'episodic' and 'modern' in her whole view of narrative – to settle to writing a novel, but she did create a different kind of continuity made up of allusions, cross-references and affiliations among the separate stories in the book. They were, in other words, open-ended not only in the sense that they frequently tail off on her characteristic note of questioning, evasion and bad faith (see the ending to 'The Garden Party' quoted on page xv above), but also in the sense that they suggest each other. One example is the very theme of death, which itself develops a weird continuous life from one story to another: in 'The Daughters of the Late Colonel' the death of Con's and Jug's mother is associated in their minds with the black feather boa round her neck in her fading photograph; the boa links across to Miss Brill's pathetic fur-piece, which 'dies' when she is mocked by a couple of young lovers in the public gardens. When she puts it back into its box, she links with another image, the little girl and her Grandma in their tiny cabin on the boat in 'The Voyage' – a cabin a bit like a coffin, though the child's mother's death, the reason for the trip, is never directly mentioned. And this 'box' takes one back to the blackly comic sense the daughters of the late Colonel have that he is somehow still living in the chest of drawers, or the wardrobe.

Associations of this kind are evanescent, unreal, created in the process of reading and re-reading. Now you see them, now you don't. But that

temptation to read between the lines is again a modern and modernist effect. It is a way, perhaps, of implying a shared world of meanings without exactly mapping it out, or giving it solidity. Mansfield's stories come together rather as people come together in some public place – the park, the square, the theatre, or indeed at a party, which is why she chose the right title for the book. Leonard Woolf, sounding less dismayed than Virginia, said, 'By nature, I think, she was gay, cynical, amoral, ribald, witty . . .' (*The Autobiography of Leonard Woolf*, Vol. III, London, 1964, p. 204). By which he implied that the tragic accident of her illness and early death, at thirty-four in 1923, had turned her against her real grain. It's impossible, of course, to tell whether this was so. However, it is striking that some of the best brief critical notes on her, by other women writers, have refused to see her as a figure of pathos, but emphasized instead her bloody-mindedness. Thus Brigid Brophy in a piece for the *London Magazine* in 1962 contrived to imply that her death from consumption was somehow self-created, a kind of turning inwards of her *consuming* passion: 'Katherine Mansfield had indeed a cannibal imagination . . . When Katherine Mansfield refused to undertake a proper cure for her illness, she was acting out what she had written years before as a healthy but wrought-up adolescent: "I shall end – of course – by killing myself." The disease through which she did kill herself was consumption . . . the cannibal disease which consumes its victim . . .' (pp. 46–7). This seems far too late-Romantic a view. Mansfield was not a prototype for Sylvia Plath, she absolutely didn't want to die young. However, one can appreciate Brophy's motive, which is, somehow, to make sense of Mansfield's suffering, make it an active act, not a passive thing. Another writer who praised Mansfield along similar lines, for her aggressiveness, was Angela Carter: 'one of the great traps for the woman writer is the desire to be loved for oneself as well as admired for one's work, to be a Beautiful Person as well as a Great Artist, and Katherine Mansfield was only saved from a narcissistic self-regard by the tough bitchery under her parade of sensitive vulnerability' (1972, *Nothing Sacred*, 1982).

This tone brings one back to Woolf's response to the rival writer – and yet the intimately recognizable writer – marking out her distinctive territory. *The Garden Party and Other Stories* was Mansfield's last book. She was too ill even to complete many individual stories after it was finished: the rest of the short time she had left was spent in an increasingly

desperate search for cures and miracles. At the very end she joined a bizarre, visionary commune in Fontainebleau. run by the Russian guru Gurdjieff, a kind of eccentric circus which gave her some peace at last. It was an improbable version of belonging, but it served. In her work she was and remains one of the great modernist writers of displacement, restlessness, mobility, impermanence. The very vividness of her New Zealand writing bears this out. She wanted, she said, 'to make our undiscovered country leap into the eyes of the Old World . . . It must be mysterious. It must take the breath.' Her own words are in the end the best introduction – she wrote so well about writing, since she invested the life she wouldn't see again in it: 'All that I write – all that I am – is on the borders of the sea. It is a kind of playing.'

Further Reading

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A Note on the Text

The text is that of *The Garden Party and Other Stories* first published by Constable in London in 1922, except that the unnecessary hyphen in the text of the title story ('The Garden-Party') has been dropped, to match the book's title, and various conventions of typography and spelling have been modernized: single quotation marks (and double within single) are used throughout, full points have been removed from contractions, 'ise' spellings have been changed to 'ize', and the following words have been made single and unhyphenated in accordance with contemporary usage – arm-chair, ash-tray, bird-cage, door-knob, eye-glass, fire-place, good-bye, hair-brush, hair-pin, sight-seeing, suit-case, to-day, to-morrow, to-night, week-end, wood-pile. In addition, on pages 108, 116 and 120, 'verandah' has been changed to 'veranda' (which is how the word is spelled in the opening story), and on page 121 'Meadow's' has been corrected to 'Meadows's'. Thirteen of the fifteen stories were published first in magazines: 'At the Bay', 'The Daughters of the Late Colonel' and 'The Stranger' in the *London Mercury* (in January 1922, May 1921 and January 1921 respectively); in the *Athenaeum* appeared 'The Young Girl' (29 October 1920), 'Miss Brill' (26 November 1920), 'Life of Ma Parker' (26 February 1921) and 'The Lady's Maid' (24 December 1920); in the *Sphere*, 'Mr and Mrs Dove' (13 August 1921), 'Marriage à la Mode' (31 December 1921) 'The Voyage' (24 December 1921), 'Her First Ball' (28 November 1921) and 'An Ideal Family' (20 August 1921); and 'The Garden Party' appeared in the *Weekly Westminster Gazette* in February 1922, coinciding with the book's publication.