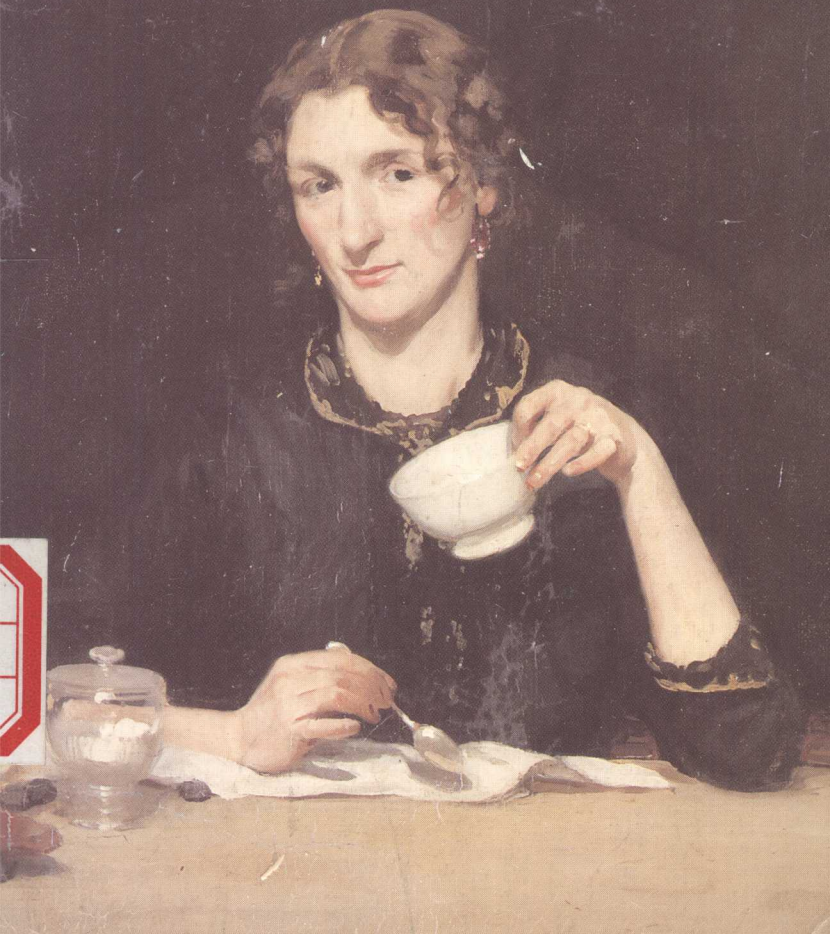
WORLD'S CLASSICS

KATHERINE MANSFIELD

SELECTED STORIES



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KATHERINE MANSFIELD

Selected Stories

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
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Introduction

I

Spring was always a season of hope for Katherine Mansfield and in spring she was born, in Wellington, New Zealand, on 14 October 1888. When she died, on 9 January 1923, she was far away from the birthplace time and absence had made her idealize and deep in the European winter she had learnt to dread.

Only a brief account of the life between these two dates – half the normal span, but lived with more than the normal intensity of joy and pain – need be given here.[1] The daughter of Mr. (later Sir) Harold Beauchamp, she had her preliminary schooling in Wellington and then, in 1903, was sent with her two sisters to complete her education at Queen's College in London. Here she stayed till 1906, taking violoncello lessons at the London Academy of Music, reading much, writing for the school magazine, and beginning a novel later abandoned. In December 1906 she was again in Wellington, home, but an expatriate from London, the only city where she could become the artist she now felt it was her fate to be.

This was only the first of her exiles, for she did not yet see – if she ever saw – that it was also her fate to be seldom content with the present of time or place; that only when the past had receded beyond any possession except that of memory would it become for her a time of happiness; that the future would remain hopeful only while it was

[1] The most recent biography is Anthony Alpers' *The Life of Katherine Mansfield* (London, 1980). It is very full and thorough and a great advance on his *Katherine Mansfield, A Biography* (London, 1953). It contains a detailed chronology and an excellent bibliography. A brief chronology and severely select bibliography is appended to the present selection.

still tomorrow; and that places were paradise only so long as they were elsewhere.

To the passionate and moody girl, therefore, Wellington was a detestable provincial durance. All that it did for her was to give her the time to try her talents and determine that writing and not music was her art. Her resolution to escape back to London hardened throughout two restless years until in 1908 she prevailed on her father and forced him to a decision remarkable for the time and for a man not by temperament sympathetic to the imperatives that drive an artist. He accepted that she must go and made her a not illiberal allowance. On 9 July she sailed from New Zealand. Only in memory and dreams would she ever see its shores again.

Ardour for life and innocence of its malignant treasons are a dangerously weak armament for the siege of a capital city. Her repulse was soon and severe: on 2 March 1909 she was married to a man whom she did not love and who was not the father of the child with which she was pregnant. After a few months at most she left her husband. And, later in the same year, her child was still-born in the Bavarian village where her mother, hurrying to London, had sent her.

Early in 1910 she was back in London and stories of hers began to appear in the *New Age*. Many of these, with others added, were published in December 1911 as *In a German Pension*. About the same time she met and befriended John Middleton Murry and in 1912 they began to live together, intending marriage as soon as she could get a divorce.

Hard times followed. Stephen Swift, the publisher of Katherine Mansfield's book and of Murry's magazine, *Rhythm*, failed in the autumn leaving them with a printer's debt of £400. They decided to continue the magazine and pay the debt from her allowance. But the magazine disappointed their hopes also and in July 1913 publication ceased.

To Paris the couple now turned, Murry to become reviewer of French books for *The Times Literary Supplement*. But failure followed them here also and in the spring of 1914 they were back in London. Then the war settled on them, making it more than ever difficult to wring a life out of letters. To them as to the Lawrences

with whom they had become friendly in 1913 the war was a horror, something for which they accepted no responsibility and in which they felt no call to take part. Dismal and destructive it closed down on the life of their hopes.

Wretchedness and despair and the tensions with Murry that they created persuaded Katherine Mansfield, as they had done before and would do again, that to go away was to escape. In February 1915 she set off on a rash excursion, described in her story 'An Indiscreet Journey', to join Francis Carco, a writer friend from Parisian days who was now serving as a corporal in north-eastern France. The adventure ended inevitably in fiasco. At the end of the month she was back with Murry in London.

Some restless shifts in England followed; but she was now convinced that only in Paris could she use her talent and write. She went there in March for a fortnight and again in May. With the end of May the mood ended also. The rest of the summer was spent in England where she wrote, talked life and books with Murry and the Lawrences, and planned futures very different from the one reserved for her.

So far the war had been somehow or other kept at a distance. In the autumn of 1915 it got inside her guard. She had been seeing much of her brother Leslie, now an officer in the New Zealand forces and in England on a training course. Enough time had elapsed since her departure in 1909, there had been enough unhappiness and disappointment, for New Zealand to have changed from a prison to a paradise. Shared memories made the brightness of the lost country doubly real; its shadows were forgotten. Then in October Leslie Beauchamp was killed.

This was the heaviest of the blows she had received till now. A worse was to follow. Meantime, she and Murry took the first of many journeys to the south of France. There she was able to find some consolation in the beauty of Bandol which lay around her and in the beauty of her childhood in New Zealand which sprang even more vividly to her memory now that her dead brother formed so poignant a part of it. Spring, as always, strengthened hope and she began to write 'The Aloe' which in its final and perfected form was to become 'Prelude'.

But soon the Lawrences persuaded her and Murry back to England, the summer passed, and after several moves they were in London with war and the winter all about them. 1917 found her living apart from Murry, though seeing him daily, and she now fretted against England as once she had fretted against Wellington. But she was writing and there were intervals when she was happy enough. It was not to last. In the early winter she contracted pleurisy from a chill. She determined on escape once more and in January 1918 she set off alone for the south of France. In February came her first haemorrhage.

From the trap she was now in she would never escape, though her life became a desperate struggle to do so. To defeat the disease and to write in spite of it, these were her most urgent purposes and in time she came to see them as one: the flaw in her health and the flaw in her writing she began to think of as radiating outwards from a flaw central to herself. And since both were therefore products of the same weakness she sought a cure which would remove both. The same hope would overcome the same despair.

In this attempt to break out she followed many trails, climbed down into chasms and climbed up again, fled from place to place and from one illusory comfort to another, was confined more and more sombrely in the solitary individual darkness, and came closer and closer to the one way out the disease would leave for her. But the artist in her always rallied and by a paradox she was able to create a life more living as death advanced on her.

In 1918 she and Murry, her divorce at last conceded, were married. It was too late for the home whose hope she had cherished, for the child she had dreamed they would have. Each winter was now sterner, the springs more feeble. Illness isolated her and she became still more convinced that she must seek a cure which would make whole not merely her lungs but her heart and mind. In 1922 she joined the Gurdjieff Institute at Fontainebleau. In its discipline she persuaded herself she would find the harmony of body, mind, and spirit which would heal her illness and overcome the weakness which, ruthless critic of herself, she still found in her best work. This hope was consistent with the others. She died in her room at the Institute on 9 January 1923.

II

The practice of an art is a continual exaction which, if accepted with passion, devours a life. To its demands a grave illness is an implacable rival; and, though there have been talents ardent enough to endure the double demand, they have not been many: Keats, Katherine Mansfield's own chosen master Chekhov, her friend D. H. Lawrence, and she herself are notable among those few devoured by their art as revolutionaries are devoured by the revolution they serve. In remembering what it must have cost them to balance their illness and their art we should remember also their struggle against an even more insidious enemy, hope, the hope that defers.

Believing almost always that present pain was only temporary, Katherine Mansfield must have been peculiarly vulnerable to hope; yet, if we consider how easy it might have been to postpone working against better days and if we observe how unremittingly she insisted to herself on her own best standards, we can hardly avoid surprise at the amount of work she accomplished. Apart from their single appearances in various periodicals, her short stories gave occasion for five separate collections: *In a German Pension* (1911); *Bliss* (1920); *The Garden Party* (1922); *The Dove's Nest* (1923); and *Something Childish* (1924).

These were all brought together in 1945 in a single volume, *Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*. A few stories which appeared in periodicals now rare escaped the net of her husband but this collection gives the substance of her creative work. Much gratitude is due to John Middleton Murry for the piety with which he brought together her scattered writings and he was beyond doubt right to include material that she herself, had she lived, would have excluded from a collected edition. Indulgence that is not self-indulgence is an editor's obligation and no serious admirer of Katherine Mansfield's writings would wish to be deprived of even her weakest.

But the present volume can be only a selection and the editor, wishing to present his author at her best, has therefore decided to use criteria (always subjectively) which Murry had to deny himself. Thus no story from *In a German Pension* has been included: not because some of the stories are not good, but because they do not seem to be Katherine Mansfield at her best and most mature. She

herself repudiated them when a question of reprinting arose and, severe though she was, she was right. Technically they are often weak, the author's shadow lying too strongly athwart the picture. More important, in the underlying attitude they are one-sided. In her German exile Katherine Mansfield was unhappy and she was young enough in her stories written during that exile to wreak her unhappiness on the Germans. Even if the point of view can be defended as satirical, satire – though, and perhaps because, it came easily to her – was not her medium and the complacency implicit in it fell far short of the approach she was later to set her heart on.

True, in her subsequent exiles her journals and her letters will often etch a sharp dislike of the company and surroundings to which illness condemns her; but, in the stories of the same places and periods, that dislike disappears or is muted to an artist's purpose. As artist always, if fitfully as a person, she knows that good and bad belong to individuals and not to types – least of all to national types – and that even in individuals their occurrence is too complex of origin to warrant a satirist's certainties. Ugliness and beauty, like evil and good, do not exist alone but as parts of each other; and art, like life, consists in their blending. She makes the transition from the satirist's black and white, with all its half-concealed premisses and reservations, to the complete artist's knowledge of the dome of many-coloured glass and the white radiance beyond.

Again, all the unfinished stories have been excluded. Not always without remorse. For the best of them still throb with the life they took from her before some interruption, some hesitation, turned her mind elsewhere – the branch still trembles, though the bird is gone; and even her most fragmentary sketches evoke the same wondering interest that lingers with us after an unknown voice has spoken a mysteriously significant phrase in a passing crowd, or a face never to be seen again has looked into our eyes from a busy street with some mute message which we shall never be allowed the time or the intimacy to understand. The very absence of a beginning or an ending in these stories as in our lives challenges wonder. Yet they are fragments still; without an ending such stories are uncrowned.

The stories set in New Zealand, whether or not the setting is ostensible, are another problem. Her best are among them; but there

are some that are weak. Because of her special feeling for New Zealand was there a special case for including all? No, if quality as criterion were to be strictly taken. And so stories like 'The Wind Blows' where the mechanism is too crude or like 'An Ideal Family' where, as rarely in her work, imagination and memory have fused imperfectly have been rejected.

Particularly, 'The Woman at the Store' and 'Millie' may be missed. No New Zealand writer of Katherine Mansfield's ability had attempted such subjects before and they are interesting for their suggestion of a direction her talent might have followed had she stayed in New Zealand. But both are early, and to the present editor the instinct which deterred her from following their vein of violent action seems to have been a true one: they deal with scenes she had glimpsed only superficially and characters whom she could not have deeply known – as indeed her failure to use their idiom in convincing dialogue goes far to suggest. The two stories are skilfully enough constructed but rely on a plot which, in her hands and with her special limitations, seems self-conscious; whereas in her best work the plot, however cunningly contrived, seems to conceal itself and develop with an inevitability that is life's and not the author's.

Similar reasons and reasonings have led to the rejection of other stories. Since none of Katherine Mansfield's work lacks quality it is easier to justify inclusions than to avoid a charge of temerity in omission. Lacking space to defend each separate omission an editor is perhaps most prudent if he admits that all selection entails the imposition of a particular taste and contends that there is at least something to be said for the presumption of pleasing oneself.

III

The order is chronological by date of original publication. The New Zealand stories might have been grouped together. At the deepest level of Katherine Mansfield's feeling they are all connected and it is interesting to study the differences and resemblances of the reappearing prototypes in their earliest and latest guises. The development, for example, from Andreas Binzer of 'A Birthday' (*In a German Pension*), probably the first version of the recurring father figure, to Stanley Burnell of 'At the Bay', one of the latest versions, shows by

itself how far Katherine Mansfield travelled in sympathy and understanding.

To make such a grouping worth while, however, all the New Zealand stories would have had to be included and this would have meant the introduction of another standard than that of simple quality. Again, Katherine Mansfield's *Scrapbook* with its lists of stories in order of projected publication suggests a deliberate alternation of New Zealand short stories against those with another setting. Her own design thus evident, the balance it gives, and the more obvious advantages of a strictly chronological order, have therefore prevailed.

IV

If someone who had never read Katherine Mansfield's work were to be given a page from an early story, a page from a late one, a letter of hers and a page from her *Journal*, he would be strangely imperceptive if he did not see at once that they all came from the pen of the same writer. She had, in fact, something which does not necessarily make a writer great but something no great writer is without: a marked individual style, present in everything she wrote.

To try and determine in what precisely so individual a quality lies is probably always impossible. Like the personality itself it is the product of an infinite complexity, something to be immediately recognized but not described. Some of the more obvious features of Katherine Mansfield's style can, of course, be seized: a swift fantasy which delights in simile and metaphor, witty in the linking of the unexpectedly alike, usually – though not always – enough controlled for the figures to serve the immediate purpose of the story; a sensibility almost morbidly alert to detail and to the evidence of the senses, to colour and shape, to the feel, smell, and sound of things; a matching delicacy of aesthetic and moral perception; an exultation in life, movement, and beauty and an appalled shrinking before the crude, the ugly, and the cruel.

These are some of the things always present in her work, part of her equipment from the beginning. But with them went the permanent dissatisfaction of the artist with the thing done: after the first gratification at having created something comes the sense of

how inadequate it is to the original conception and the resolve that at least from one idea marred in its execution a lesson can be learnt by which the next idea can be wrought into work a little closer to perfection.

So through Katherine Mansfield's diaries, note-books, and letters one theme is constant: the necessity to write better. And, accompanying that dedicated resolution, a direct result of its unremitting action, is the growing mastery of form that can be traced through her stories. Illness itself, however resented, whatever its anguishes and despairs, contributed: as her power to live a normal healthy life grew weaker, her sense of life, her love of life, grew more passionate and more aware. The intensity thus generated lit up the present in a vividness of detail as does the Very light hovering over a night battlefield; and this vividness imparts its special clarity to those stories where the settings are those of her own battles with illness. Where the present was too unbearably drab this same intensity burnt backward over the past and enabled her to enter in memory the dark places of her mother's and father's hearts, to live with an understanding she had not had when she first observed them, the perplexities of the energetic and baffled father, the subtle emotional inertia of her enigmatic mother.

It is inevitable, indeed, that the past should have been for her, as for Proust, the true hero of her best stories. All her sanguine sallies into the future had met with brusque rebuff. She and Murry had tried to face the world like grown-up children, as if defencelessness were itself a defence – the story 'Something Childish But Very Natural', though not autobiographical, suggests something of Katherine Mansfield's conception of the relation between her and Murry on the one hand and the world on the other. The world had not been slow to retaliate against an innocence so rash. Unhappiness broke through in many guises: poverty, the war, separation and loneliness, desperate illness, deaths of those she loved, and the realization that her own death could not be far. Places once loved turned out hateful; friends proved bitter, indifferent, or cruel; hopes always lied.

Without a future any surer than a dream she turned more and more to the past, as the only thing inviolable. To make it still more secure she chose a past inaccessible by distance also. Safe by twenty

years and 12,000 miles her New Zealand could be recreated, and out of her long reveries and loving, dedicated labour she built again the life of long ago: 'Prelude', 'At the Bay', 'The Doll's House', and all their attendant stories; built it with such a cherishing art that it lives still.

Without that art it would not live, however cherishing the memory. For many have turned back from the world they knew to a world in their childhood where all that they knew was innocent and yet not made their nostalgia into imperishable stuff. These stories live because she put life into them and she could not have done this without having, besides the passionate intensity, the matching technique.

There is no space here to examine this technique; but an example may be taken which helps to explain one of the most striking characteristics of her stories, the speed with which the reader's sympathies are engaged. 'The Doll's House' opens: 'When dear old Mrs. Hay went back to town . . .'. Already Mrs. Hay is known to us and the adjective has given us an attitude to her. A silent reverie has suddenly broken into speech. The writer's imagination has been brooding so intently that the scene is ready and waiting for the last stroke of reality, the first stroke of the pen. Technique is indeed merely the mode of the intensity's expression and perfectly adapted to it.

This accounts, too, for the simplicity, the unselfconsciousness of the writing. Katherine Mansfield began with a natural facility and few days must have passed once she could write at all without her practising her gift. When the story was formed in her mind, then, and with her this meant the heart also, it seems to have poured naturally and inevitably into a mould which had already formed for it; so that, although analysis of her longer stories will show that their underlying pattern is sufficiently complex, its complexity never obtrudes itself.

The immediate embroilment of the reader has another consequence. Since he, too, has been beguiled into living the story, intelligence and the imagination quicken with the sympathetic identification, transitions can be made swiftly without his failing to follow, the force of a symbol can be grasped without iteration to underline

the significance, a hinted sigh is heard, a laugh shared, and the story is alive because the reader lives in its characters.

This is the fundamental explanation of the vitality of Katherine Mansfield's writing. Her stories are for the most part domestic, her range seldom reaches beyond the familiar, beyond the walls, the garden, the street. Her concern is with the experiences that overtake everyone, not with what is externally rare or strange. But the most unquiet of us have been children and are still in some sense simple, and for most the family has at one time been the world. Katherine Mansfield's imagination stretches back into time, re-creates the figures that the past contained, breathes life into them, and the life passes through into us who read. The artist's circle is complete. Artist, creation, and reader are fused in the temporary eternity.

1953 D. M. DAVIN

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Brief Chronology

1888–1903 Born 14 October 1888 at 11 Tinakori Road, Wellington, N.Z.; third daughter of Harold and Annie Beauchamp. A younger sister, Jeanne, was born in 1892, and a brother, Leslie, in 1894.

The family was of English extraction and Harold was far advanced already in a prosperous business career at the time of K.M.'s birth.

K.M. was educated at various Wellington schools and early exhibited signs of literary and musical talent.

1903–1906 K.M. at Queen's College, Harley Street, London, for further education. She becomes friendly with Ida Baker, whom she names 'Lesley Moore' or 'L.M.'. She contributes to *Queen's College Magazine* and visits Germany and Belgium.

In June 1906 she finishes at Queen's College. In July she meets the brothers Arnold and Garnet Trowell, students of music whom she had known in Wellington. And in October she returns with her family to Wellington.

1907 Harold Beauchamp made Chairman of Directors of the Bank of New Zealand. K.M. very restless and involved in emotional relationships with two young women friends. Her *Vignettes* accepted by the Australian periodical, *Native Companion*. She takes part in an expedition to the 'King Country' in the North Island and keeps a journal. Eventually she prevails on her father to let her return to Europe so as to develop her talents.