

# FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN THE STORIES OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD

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**Abstract.** *This article discusses the portrayal of female characters in the stories of renowned English writer Katherine Mansfield. The article highlights Mansfield's impressive skills in creating vivid characters, utilizing motifs, and employing language. Additionally, the article explores how the feminist movement influenced literature during that time, the representation of women in literature, the challenges they faced in real life, and the call to action to prevent and combat such issues.*

**Keywords:** *story, feminism, tragic optimism, gender inequality, gender stereotypes, style, plot, development of events, symbolism, image, character, motive, tradition.*

Katherine Mansfield was a renowned English writer who lived and worked during the 20th century. Although from New Zealand, she lived in several countries, including Germany and France, throughout her life. Her stories were based on the social life of the places she lived in, and she extensively studied the lifestyle of the local population. Notably, the fate and destiny of women played a vital role in her stories, with almost all the main characters being women of different personalities. When discussing the portrayal of women in the works of Katherine Mansfield, it is reasonable to dwell on feminism as her works' contents and ideas aimed to protect women's role in society, and their rights, and expose situations where their rights were violated while preventing such situations.

Feminism is a collection of socio-political movements and ideologies aimed at defining and establishing political, economic, personal, and social equality between men and women. It includes efforts to combat gender stereotypes, as well as improve education, professional and interpersonal relationships, and opportunities for women. Beginning in Europe at the end of the 18th century, feminist movements fought for women's rights, including the right to vote, hold public office, work, receive equal pay, own property, receive education, enter into contracts, and have equal rights.

Throughout history, women have been restricted to household work, with public life reserved exclusively for men. In medieval Europe, women were denied the right to own property, study, or participate in public life. In France, until the late 19th century, women were required to cover their heads in public. In some parts of Germany, husbands had the right to sell their wives. Even as recently as the early 20th century in much of the United States and Europe, women were unable to vote or hold elected office. Women could not trade without a male representative, whether it was a father, brother, husband, or even a son. They had limited access to education and were unable to occupy many professions. Unfortunately, in some countries, such restrictions on women continue to exist. To put an end to these injustices, women began to organize societies for the struggle for women's rights.

Many women writers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including Katherine Mansfield, were influenced by feminist ideas and aimed to restore the status of women in society. They fought against gender inequality in their works.

Katherine Mansfield is widely known as one of the most famous writers in the world. As a result, much research has been conducted on her stories. Aihong Ren, in his article titled "Women Characters in Katherine Mansfield's Short Stories," drew important conclusions about the female characters in Mansfield's stories and their unique forms of expression. Ren categorizes the female characters into several groups:

“As a woman writer, Mansfield is very much concerned with the position of women in society. Stories of women take up most of her compositions, in which she captures various women’s plight and pain. Her female characters can be neatly divided into three categories: victims in the family, invisible women at the workplace, dolls and rebels. Poor or rich, single or married, Mansfield’s women characters are all victims of their society. A discussion of Mansfield’s stories about women can enrich understanding not only of the complicated conditions of women in Western society at her time but also of her contributions to modern literature, especially to the female culture.” [Aihong Ren. CS CANADA. Studies in Literature and Language. Vol.5 No 3 (2012)]

It is evident from the scientist's comments that he carefully analyzed the writer's works. He categorized the female characters in the stories into distinct groups. The main protagonists in Mansfield's works are women who have encountered numerous challenges in life, are weary of trials, and are engulfed in a state of despair. The article highlights that the societal norms during that era had a significant impact on their downfall, as they were victims of the environment and political system.

The works of Katherine Mansfield have shed light on the interpretation of societal problems. Her story "Bliss" follows a young woman's journey trying to understand herself as an individual. Meanwhile, "Pictures" narrates the story of a female singer who is forced to work as a prostitute.

Through their literary works, women writers like Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf, and Richardson have called upon society to restore women's status and fight for their rights. Like other modernist writers, Mansfield focuses on the inner world of her characters and describes their emotional experiences through various internal monologues.

Although Mansfield typically writes in the third person, she has a unique ability to delve into the psyches of her characters, fully revealing their psychological states. In her writing, Mansfield frequently incorporates symbolism and vivid imagery to illuminate her characters' psychological states. Her stories are rife with symbols, such as the pear tree and cat in "Bliss," the fox fur wrap in "Miss Brill," and the glove in "Dill Pickle."

Bliss, one of Mansfield's most successful stories, is a symbol of human strength with original and innovative methods of expression. Unlike nineteenth-century realism, it represents a triumph of style by surpassing the traditional limitations of plot, sequential development, and conclusion. Although not a central figure of the modernist movement, Mansfield persistently attempted to adopt the new methods of writers such as Woolf and Joyce and incorporate them into her works. The short stories of Mansfield, much like modern developments in the visual arts of the period, highlight the expression of moods, impressions, and fleeting emotions.

Many of Mansfield's stories revolve around a moment of epiphany, where a character becomes self-aware. However, this realization seldom leads to happiness. For instance, in "Dill Pickle," Vera suddenly comprehends that her ex-lover understands her better than she thought. Unfortunately, she does not see any benefit in it. This is because Mansfield's characters exist in a world where opportunities for women are limited.

“Her work does not conform to particular linear structures, but rather, Mansfield takes the ordinariness of modern society and juxtaposes it with unconventional or unforeseen circumstances, leaving her reader to interpret the various meanings portrayed in her work. It is regarded that Mansfield is “considered one of the best short-story writers of her period, frequently included in short-stories anthologies, have written stories with themes ranging from class consciousness, loneliness, women’s rights, Maoris, reality versus appearances, relationships and to childhood” (Begotti and Conrad 2) [Kyle Knickelbein. 200601890 English Honours: Literary Theory Lecturer: Dr. Dianne Shoher. October 7, 2010. “A Feminist Surveillance of Katherine Mansfield’s Selected Short Stories of the “New Dawn”]

As per the analysis of Begotti and Conrad, Mansfield's stories do not follow a specific pattern. Instead, they present unexpected situations that reflect the difficulties and uncertainties of life. It seems as if Mansfield intends to prepare the reader for such situations. Moreover, many of her works do not have a clear conclusion, leaving it up to the reader to draw their conclusions. Begotti and Conrad's analysis suggests that Mansfield's stories mainly revolve around themes of class stratification, loneliness, women's rights, family relations, and childhood.

Katherine Mansfield once said, "I am a writer first and a woman after," which suggests that she identified more as a female writer. This can be seen in her story "The Tiredness of Rosabel," which is told entirely from the perspective of the main character, Rosabel. Throughout the story, Rosabel is portrayed as a young, unmarried woman living in poverty, who finds solace in her dreams. She is tired of the struggles of everyday life and often daydreams about a better future. At one point, she even envies a woman who visits her shop with her husband, imagining him as her husband. Rosabel, who is suffering from poverty and loneliness, imagines herself as a rich lady for a day. As she enters her room with a burning fireplace, she finds a pile of letters waiting for her, but she doesn't pay much attention to them. The letters contain various invitations, including invitations to the opera, dinners, cruises, and car rides. Her luxurious clothes, covered with silver, are laid out in her bedroom. Rosabel feels more attractive than all the other women at the ball. The men at the ball are fascinated by her beauty, and a prince from abroad hopes to meet this "English wonder" (Summary of an excerpt from the story).

“В будуаре горит камин, занавеси опущены, ее ждет целая груда писем: приглашения в оперу, на обеды, балы, приглашение совершить в конце недели лодочную прогулку, автомобильное турне. Она равнодушно пробегает их глазами и идет вверх одеваться. В спальне тоже пылает камин, а на кровати разослано роскошное сверкающее платье- белый тюль поверх серебристого чехла, - серебристый шарф, серебряные туфельки и крошечный серебряный веер. Розабел знает, что она привлекательней всех женщин на этом балу, все мужчины отдадут дань ее красоте, чужеземный принц жаждет быть представленным этому английскому чуду. ” [ Л. Володарская, К. Менсфилд и ее рассказы, ст-43-44, Москва “Книга”, 1989]

The sentences above describe Rosabel's dreams. She lived with optimistic thoughts and found pleasure and calmness in them. However, it's important to remember that people cannot

solely rely on fantasies, as they can blur the line between reality and imagination. This can lead to a lack of willpower when faced with challenges, causing people to give up easily. In the writer's story, Rosabel is portrayed in this way: "She inherited tragic optimism, often youth's only asset." ("И оттого, что в наследство ей достался тот трагический оптимизм, который слишком часто оказывается единственным достоянием юности") [Л. Володарская, К. Менсфилд и ее рассказы, ст-46, Москва "Книга", 1989]

The writer refers to a state of mind as "tragic optimism", which is characterized by a tendency to daydream. The author does not endorse the protagonist's fantasy world but rather aims to convey that excessive daydreaming is not a positive habit. The only way to achieve one's dreams is to take action and move forward with determination. Through this story, Katherine encourages women to be proactive, take action, and lead an energetic lifestyle.

#### Conclusion

It appears that Katherine Mansfield attempted to portray the world of women, their thoughts, and lifestyles in her literary works. She particularly focused on women who were struggling in life, living alone, and feeling helpless, making them the protagonists of her stories. Through her writing, she aimed to convey to her contemporaries the importance of paying attention to women and supporting them. Additionally, her stories encouraged contemporary women and friends to awaken to their potential. Women are a significant force in society, and besides raising the younger generation to be educated and spiritually enlightened, they also have the power to actively participate in society. As an active representative of women, the writer holds up a mirror to them and directs them towards self-awareness. A person who knows their worth will never let themselves be hurt. This is the significance of Katherine Mansfield's stories. For this reason, her stories remain relevant even as time passes.

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