

## Modernist short story

Most of us have read and do read short stories, but most of us – lets face it- prefer the novel, This is what is most publicised in the marketplace and what the big literary prizes are for, - The novel is always the art form celebrated when a particular author is promoted or a new trend in writing such as the post 9/11 novels, the novel of terrorism; utopian fiction, . SO novels with their breadth of topic the expansion and capacity to develop character, and flexibility in terms of time/space seem best suited to represent social concerns, to grapple/engage with change in society, and to articulate our dreams and fears.

The short story on the other hand provides us with a particular angle, a slice of life, a moment in time when something changes , a perception of the world that is new whether this be a revelation of beauty or realisation of horror as in Edgar Allen Poe's gothic vision, or the social realism of Kipling, Guy de Maupassant or Chekhov, or the doppelgangers of Joseph Conrads short stories. The story requires condensation of action and character by contrast to the novel, a narrower focus, and economy of style: the precise and telling detail, Everything has to count as it draws together a view of the world into a single impression or perspective. As such it is more self consciously 'artificial' than the novel which often aims to imitate life—and in the modernist era, is as much concerned with meaninglessness as with meaning. For those who are less favourably inclined it is seen as enigmatic ,oblique, or inauthentic as compared to the novel which often aims to imitate life

When it comes to modernist short stories there is a swing away from the realist, linear and chronological approach of earlier fiction ( Victorians or Edwardians)—which show the individual in relation to society. IN stead they focus on the impression of life as conveyed by the workings of the mind- and the operation fo the unconscious often conveyed through dream, revelation or reflection- in other words there is a greater emphasis on interiority- Ford Maddox Ford coined the term literary impressionism, an aesthetic which moves away form the omniscient narrator and

shows the impact of the real world as impressed through sight, sound and hearing (the senses) of the protagonist. QUOTE Of course the modernist writers of fiction were heavily influenced by William James and following him Freud's psychoanalytic theories of the mind and they aimed to capture the authenticity of subjective experience in which various mental processes are involved: and they do this through innovative literary techniques, not just metaphor and symbol, but also the stream of consciousness (the best example of this is Molly Bloom's speech at the end of *Ulysses*) and what is known as Free Indirect discourse – where it is impossible to distinguish between the narrator's voice and the character's (as I shall show in the case of KM)

In my own work I have been looking at the short fiction of VW and KM and comparing them as writers -- both used this as a form for radical experimentation, as well as an art form in its own right. When they first met in 1917 (and they had a friendship till 1920) Woolf had published *The Voyage Out* her first novel (1915) and KM her stories in *In a German Pension* (1911) but she was also publishing stories regularly in *The New Age* (A.R. Orage's magazine) and then with her husband JMM in the avant garde experimental journal, *Rhythm*, (that published work by Picasso Modigliani and others) in 1912-3.

Their friendship based on their pleasure in discussing their art, was important but fraught. It began after Mansfield had read Woolf's first novel *The Voyage Out* at Garsington and wanted to meet its author- she wrote to Woolf in June 1917, 'We have got the same job Virginia and it is really very curious and thrilling that we should [...] be after so very nearly the same thing'. Woolf was at first suspicious of Mansfield and spoke of her as being 'like a civet cat that has taken to street walking' although she said in the same sentence, 'that she was so intelligent and inscrutable that she repays friends'. Their intermittent attraction was always at the risk of being undermined, either by professional rivalry or class consciousness: the gossip of the Bloomsberries like Clive Bell or Maynard Keynes, or critical judgement of each other's work such as Mansfield's negative review of Woolf's second novel *Night and Day* in 1919, or Woolf's disdain for Mansfield's story 'Bliss' as 'so hard, so

shallow and so sentimental'. As Hermione Lee Woolf's biographer sums it up, Woolf was snobbish and unkind; Mansfield was 'ambivalent and inconsistent'. Yet Woolf called their conversations 'priceless'—'priceless in the sense that to no one else can I talk in the same disembodied way about writing'. Their exchange of insights may have led to mutual inspiration and influence although it is more likely that Mansfield extended Woolf's understanding of modernist practices than the other way round.

Woolf at this time was seeking to overturn the tyranny of the male authored novel as practiced by John Galsworthy, H.G. Wells and Arnold Bennett (and wrote critically of them in articles such as Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown and 'Modern Fiction'). So there is a female-even feminist orientation to her work which comes out in her critical comments about society (in 'A Nail on the Wall' she speaks of the Whitaker Almanack of Precedent- the order of a patriarchal world) and is reflected in her experimentation and rewriting of tropes of earlier fiction. She was seeking to convey depth of feeling while also representing the fleeting, fragmentary qualities of modernity through the breaking up of narrative form. Stories like 'A Nail in the Wall' and 'An Unwritten Novel', which anticipate her radical novels like *Jacobs Room* and *The Waves*, are revisions of the quest motif, interrogative in orientation, and contain metafictional comments on the art of writing. Mansfield by the time they met had written her masterpiece 'Prelude' which is longer than a short story – with 12 subdivisions- she was never to write a novel but this was as close as she got to a more extended form. 'Prelude' was published by Virginia and Leonard Woolf's Hogarth Press in 1918.

IN comparing the two stories circulated—both set in public gardens of Europe -- I want to show their differences of technique and to argue that Mansfield is able to go further than Woolf in her mastery of this genre, as VW recognised this after her death when she wrote: 'though I can do this better than she could (write novels), where's she who could do what I can't.' The topic of 'Kew Gardens' may in fact have been suggested to Woolf by Mansfield who wrote in a letter to Woolf and in another one to Lady Ottoline Morrell, that the gardens in Garsington Manor inspired her to think

of a composition that would be 'like a conversation set to flowers' - in fact this is what the story is about—a focus on a flower bed which then switches to the conversation of four couples strolling among them. The frame of the opening and conclusion has a formal relationship to the content, offsetting it like a picture frame

From the oval-shaped flower-bed there rose perhaps a hundred stalks spreading into heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves half way up and unfurling at the tip **red, or blue or yellow petals** marked with **spots of colour** raised upon the surface; and from the **red, blue or yellow gloom** of the throat emerged a straight bar, rough with gold dust and slightly clubbed at the end. The petals were voluminous enough to be stirred by the summer breeze, and when they moved, the **red, blue and yellow lights** passed over one another, staining an inch of the brown earth beneath with **a spot of the most intricate colour**. The light fell either upon the smooth grey back of pebble, **or the shell of a snail with its brown circular veins**, or falling into a raindrop, it expanded with such intensity of **red, blue and yellow**, the thin walls of water, that one expected them to burst and disappear.

Close up, this observation of flowers as if under microscope is a kaleidoscope of colour – and resemble the art of the Expressionists art (and show how much visual culture of the time interacted with the literary one) in that the artist's feelings influence the external reality. It offers a dense multi-coloured scene of red, yellow and blue petals irradiated by light, animated by a breeze (almost sensory overload), narrowing in focus to where the filtering light creates a spot of prismatic colour like a rainbow as it strikes disparate objects, a pebble, snail shell or raindrop . This visually arresting, pointillist technique, extends to include a passing snail, which moves around in the scene, almost as the narrator's alter ego. Woolf's signal that this is a modernist text consists of a revision of the concept of the panoramic or omniscient narrator who has a bird's eye view; the most lowly and humble creature is the only one with a narrative component: a point of view and an idea of progress, and whose movement links up the snapshots of different groups of people.

... in the oval flower-bed the snail, whose shell had been stained **red, blue and yellow** for the space of two minutes or so, now appeared to be moving very slightly in its shell, and next began to labour over the crumbs of loose earth which broke away and rolled down as it passed over them, ]...]

The snail had now considered every possible method of reaching his goal without going round the dead leaf or climbing over it (87)

By contrast is the opening of Mansfield's 'Miss Brill' (1920), set in the Botanical Gardens of Menton which exemplifies her impersonal approach: the narrative or authorial point of view is nowhere to be found: in this example of Free Indirect Discourse the seeing perspective could be either that of the narrator or the character. Miss Brill's character, weather and setting are all succinctly evoked:

Although it was so brilliantly fine—the blue sky powdered with gold and the great spots of light like white wine splashed over the Jardins Publiques—Miss Brill was glad that she had decided on her fur .

Like the snail with human motivation in 'Kew Gardens', KM uses the device of anthropomorphism but takes it further than Woolf does, by attributing voice to the object, constructing it as another version of its owner's . Taking her fox fur out of box and rubbing life back into 'the dim little eyes'; Miss Brill says; 'Dear little thing. It was nice to feel it again' and ventriloquises its reply: "'What has been happening to me?" said the sad little eyes'. The technique of prosopopeia, giving voice to the inanimate objects here illustrates Miss Brill's fetishisation of her fox fur as representing some part of herself. The turning point of the story is her shock at overhearing herself being described as 'that stupid old thing' with a 'silly old mug' and the fox-fur as 'exactly like a fried whiting' , and her reaction in the conclusion when she gets home of putting fox fur back into its box show her inner feelings as expressed through empathy with this beloved object: 'But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying' .

Mansfield was determined to capture the exact cadences of Miss Brill's voice in an act of phonic representation as she wrote to her brother in law, Richard Murray, ' I chose not only the length of every sentence, but even the sound of every sentence—I chose the rise and fall of every paragraph to fit her- and to fit her on that day at that very moment (Letters 4, 165). And a self consciousness about performativity adds to the story's impression of unity linking the character of Miss Brill to the performance of band music that she listens to, and to her conversation with her fox fur. The

perceptoin that her visit to the park is part of a performance and that she is acting a part leads to a awakening as she listens to the music.

They were all on the stage. They weren't only the audience, not only looking on; they were acting. Even she had a part and came every Sunday. No doubt somebody would have noticed if she hadn't been there; she was part of the performance , after all .

Mansfield does not write metafictionally as Woolf does (i.e. she does not comment on the act of writing) , but builds an interest in how art functions and how it projects its own life force into her characterisation of Miss Brill: like a puppeteer when she takes the fox fur out of the box and then returns it, Miss Brill registers this routine enactment as a kind of performance, but with the irony that after being insulted by the young couple she closes down the act, yet the pain of what has happened remains.

The differences between Mansfield's writing which Woolf acclaimed 'as clear as glass', and Woolf's primarily interrogative, reflective style, can be further explicated/ with reference to the artistic views of the self/other relationship. ['Miss Brill' is an example how Mansfield borders on the fantastic –ventriloquism where by fox fur's voice represents the lonely Miss Brill's suppressed longing for love/life/ intimacy that she cannot get into touch with.] Mansfield constantly plays on the boundaries between human and non human in delineating reciprocal relations (as 'Miss Brill' shows), showing the individual as rooted in the natural world, in connections to flowers, birds, insects through relationships of heightened transitivity: e.g. Laura's burgeoning sexuality in 'The Garden Party' appears in her notion of the canna lillies as 'frighteningly alive... they were in her fingers, on her lips, growing in her breast'. This belief in a heightened transference between subject and object points to an aesthetic principle of her literary modernism, namely that art and life are inseparable.<sup>1</sup> It also informs her ideas about the artist's impersonality: 'The artist must give

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Van Gunsteren, *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Impressionism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990), p. 68.

himself so utterly to life that no self qua personal self remains'.<sup>2</sup> Mansfield illustrates the modernist view of perception, that the artist is implicated in the object perceived, but goes further than Woolf in suggesting that self can merge with the object, affirming the object's unique existence as part of the artist's:<sup>3</sup> [ inwardness , inscape while also projects outwardly a more vivid impression of life)

When I write about ducks I swear that I am a white duck with a round eye, floating in a pond fringed with yellow blobs and taking an occasional dart at the other duck with the round eye, which floats upside down beneath me [...]. There follows the moment when you are more *duck*, more *apple* or more Natasha than any of these objects could ever possibly be, and you *create* them anew.<sup>4</sup>

Woolf also represents intense and reversible relationships between the human and non-human : not only is the snail humanised in Kew Gardens, but people in last pgh seem like the raindrops of the first iparagrpah because they are illuminated by the same light and then to the all seeing narrator in this section, they dissolve like water does (synthaesthesia- dehumanising and anthropomorphising) .

Yellow and black, pink and snow white, shapes of all these colours, men , women and children, were spotted for a second upon the horizon, and then, seeing the **breadth of yellow** that lay upon the grass, they wavered and sought shade beneath the trees, dissolving like drops of water in the **yellow** and green atmosphere, staining it faintly with **red and blue**. [...]

Woolf discusses such human immersion and participation in the natural world in terms of life being like a work of art, to which the individual is subordinated, rather than through the self/other fusion due to the artist's necessary dedication to life, as Mansfield does.<sup>5</sup> By contrast to Mansfield's belief in 'the bounded outlines of things' that art aims 'to make that divine *spring* into,'<sup>6</sup> for Woolf there is difficulty in approaching or knowing the 'real' or the object of one's gaze, because the ebb and flow

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<sup>2</sup> *Letters*, 4, pp. 180-181.

<sup>3</sup> Sydney Janet Kaplan in *Katherine Mansfield and the Origins of Modernist Fiction* (Ithaca and London; Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 182, discusses this in terms of Bergson's intuition: 'the kind of *intellectual sympathy* by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible', quoting Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, tr. T. E. Hulme (New York; G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1912), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Letters* 1, p. 330.

<sup>5</sup> Melinda Harvey points out that Mansfield underscores this creative principle by always capitalising Life, in 'Katherine Mansfield's Menagerie', *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Modernism*, p. 205.

<sup>6</sup> *Letters* 1, p. 330. Mansfield attributes the phrase 'the bounding outline' to Blake. See Katherine Mansfield, *Novels and Novelists* (New York, 1930), pp. 44-45 (cited by Clare Hanson, *The Critical Writings of Katherine Mansfield* (London: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 14-15). Rebecca Bowler, "'The beauty of your line—the life behind it'", notes that the beautiful 'line' is how Mansfield reaches 'life' (p. 85).

of experience makes recognition of any definitive moment impossible: objects remain caught in the flux of time rather than acquiring a distinctive life force of their own. As she says, 'life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end',<sup>7</sup> the larger pattern eludes definition because of our participation in the flow: 'behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are part of the work of art'.<sup>8</sup> This difficulty in deciphering the distinctive moment, - meaning that it springs out like a shock or revelation—suggests a view of life / art as more suited to the longer form of the novel which conveys the flux of time than the short story form with its emphasis on slices of life, or moments in time.<sup>9</sup>

In conclusion- both writers treated the short story as a fictional artefact, and rewrote its literary conventions into a feminist modernist idiom – for example, they introduced forms of structural fragmentation (which I have not been able to talk about here) finding a more fluid expression of subjectivity than their predecessors. - Woolf shows dissonance from the earlier short story tradition in subverting fictional convention in her search for new form; But Mansfield is more at home in the genre and exploits its techniques of economy with what Woolf called 'the quick flick at the thing seen' and her idea of glimpses of reality: both theatrical and dramatic, she uses props (like the fox fur), the telling gesture (putting it into and pulling it out of a box), techniques of animation and impersonation, cinematic devices like montage, cutting and flashback to shape and make the story come to life. By late 1920 the relationship was over, Mansfield was either too ill or too disaffected to see Woolf any more; and she died tragically early in 1923 in Fontainebleau in Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man; in her short life she managed to 'raise up' the standard of the short story and is now seen as one of its greatest modernist practitioners -- later Woolf confessed: 'I was jealous of her writing, the only writing I have been jealous of'.

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<sup>7</sup> Woolf, 'Modern Fiction' in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, Vol. 4 (London: Hogarth Press, 1994), pp. 157-65

<sup>8</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', in *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (New York: Harcourt, Brace Janovitch, 1985), p. 72.

<sup>9</sup> Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, p. 63.

