

Chapter I

Introduction

This introductory chapter is divided into three sections. The first section takes a bird's eye view of the general features of the short story as a genre as well as some of its recurring motifs. The second deals briefly with Chekhov vis-a-vis Katherine Mansfield, who regarded herself as his follower. The third and final section highlights the factors that shape Mansfield's individual talent in the tradition of the short story. It would be a challenging task to locate Mansfield honourably somewhere between overpraise and underpraise by a thematic study of her stories.

(1)

The Short Story : Features and Themes

As a detailed study of the origin and growth of the short story would only be a very long story beyond the scope of the present study, it might be convenient to begin with what Edgar Allan Poe has to say about the quintessential features of this genre. Poe can very well be a starting point because it was he who first formulated a complete theory or gave a set of principles of the short story. In his well known critique of Hawthorne's Twice Told Tales, published in Graham's Magazine

in 1892, Poe laid down the following precise requisites: (a) a short story must achieve a predetermined effect; (b) it should mercilessly exclude everything that has nothing to do with the desired effect; and (c) it should be short but not so short that the preconceived design cannot be achieved. Considering the variety of forms and techniques which have characterized the vigorous growth of the short story through the ages, Poe's prescriptions should be enough for the purpose of the present study. However, Poe was stressing action more than character while Turgenev, Chekhov and Mansfield (to take the subject of the present study), put more emphasis on character rather than on action. Thus what we see in Poe is a purity of form, and in the others mentioned the form melting into the plot.

The short story is a product of conscious artistry. It is the unity of impression that sets the short story apart from other kinds of fiction. In this impressionistic prose tale, the author moves slowly towards a moment of crisis through cautious economy and scrupulous inspection of his material. Selection must be effectively done by choosing only the essential. The writer of a short story has to be profound, wise and laconic. In a long story, the reader may be overpowered by brilliant descriptions and witty persiflage, but in a short story he is in full view.

The primary function of a short story writer is to keep intact the unity of impression with his special brand of imaginative magic. Stories grow in his imagination from strong impressions.

They may jut out from anything : a decor, a picture or even a painting. Mansfield's early obsession with the Jugend is well known. She could frame a story around a Jugend picture. Chekhov often claimed that any subject would suffice for the formation of an impression. The success of the story lies in its ability to convince. So the author must, in a profound manner, believe in the direction of his imagination.

The moment of crisis is worked out by short story writers through effective evolution of the initial impression. The nature of the crisis is different in each story, depending largely upon the characteristic and temperamental infusions of the author. A single character in a single episode may be revealed at a particular moment without any discernible character delineation. Tagore's outstanding story "One Night" begins abruptly at a given point. Events of a tempestuous night are the determinant. A threatening firmament and gushing waters obliterate not only ^{the} village but also the social parameter. Amidst the dissonance of a hostile nature, love is explored in all its tenderness and purity. Not a word is exchanged between the lovers as they stand on the embankment in the darkness. The night becomes an eternal night in bringing them close and crystallizing emotions never expressed with a realization of the strength of the bond that unites the two of them.

Generally a character undergoes a decisive change in nature or understanding in the moment of crisis. James Joyce has invented a term for these moments of revelation. "Epiphany", according to Joyce is "the adaptation, near blasphemous, of a theological expression to secular ends" (Walter Allen, The Short Story, 7). The personal crisis point is striking in Anton Chekhov's "The Grasshopper", Mansfield's "Miss Brill", or Turgenev's "Yermolai and the Miller's Wife". Realization comes at a point of no return in "The Grasshopper" and "Miss Brill". Disillusion and futility of one's predicament become explicit in both the stories, but the severe Chekhovian treatment of the theme is strikingly different from Mansfield's stark Dostojvskian infusions. Impressions are instrumental in instilling tales of segregation and waste, bearing authentic, temperamental undertones.

Unity of impression does not necessarily mean brevity. If a prize is awarded for the shortest short story, it should not be taken seriously. The ghost story that Guy N. Pocock cites in his Modern Short Stories (6), is simply written for fun. Condensation is an asset to a short story writer for more serious and artistic considerations. Twenty five years have been unbelievably condensed in Guy de Maupassant's "The Olive Orchard". Chekhov telescopes time with strict economy in "The Bet". The

viciousness that can arise from a simple bet is the subject matter of the story.

The theme of a short story is its indispensable ingredient; characters or actions cannot be assessed without any reference to it. The theme is not merely the topic of a story. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren have made an earnest attempt to define the theme in their remarkable study Understanding Fiction. The theme, they declare, is what is made of the topic. It is a larger concept than the topic. "The theme is", they continue, "what a piece of fiction stacks up to" (177). "It is the idea, the significance, the interpretations of persons and events, the pervasive and unifying view of life embodied in the total narrative" (177), they concede. The topic of two stories may be identical but the thematic treatment in each case depends on the author's orientation. In other words, the treatment of a particular theme is impregnated with the author's personality.

Short story writers have been inordinately fond of death as a theme. Sherwood Anderson's "Death in the Woods" is a remarkable story. It was written a long time after the actual event i.e. the uncanny death of a woman in a forest on an icy night. The initial impression lay latent in the author's mind. "The whole thing, the story of the old woman's death was to me as I grew older like music heard far off. The notes had to be

picked up, slowly one at a time. Something had to be understood" (Brooks & Penn Warren, 210). Thus the notes were picked up in the tale of the woman to whom happiness seemed an illusion all her life. She fed men and cattle in life, and in death dogs do not spare her. In a strange metamorphosis, dogs become savage wolves. The macabre running of the dogs is due to another impression which has been joined to the initial one. Death becomes intriguing as the split seconds before death are portrayed with accuracy and adroitness. "She wouldn't be very cold now, just drowsy. Life hangs on a long time. Perhaps the old woman was out of her head. She may have dreamed of her girlhood at the German's and before that, when she was a child and before her mother lit out and left her" (Brooks & Penn Warren, 207). In spite of Anderson's modest effort, death remains a mystery and the moment of death a puzzle.

Death, again the theme in D. H. Lawrence's "Odour of Chrysanthemums", brings out the buried life of turbulent feelings. The miner lies in the naive dignity of death whom his wife finds unapproachable. "She saw him, how utterly inviolable he lay in himself. She had nothing to do with him" (Arthur Mizener, Modern Short Stories, 448). The dead man's mother cannot remain quiet in her jealous mother love. She joins her daughter-in-law in washing and cleaning the body of her son. The wife is more perturbed than sad. The proximity of her relationship with her

husband perplexes her. Each time he had taken her, they had been two separate beings, far apart as now. He was no more responsible than she. Hurriedly finishing the frightful job of laying the body, she turns to life. She cannot face death in fear and shame. The treatment of the death theme is quinessentially Lawrentian. Lawrence's life-long obsession with the conflict of the sexes and his delving deep into unknown depths of feeling find expression in the story.

Exoticism marks out a subgenre of the short story. What is unfamiliar is often mysterious. Mansfield's Worishofen stories portray a society remote from the average English home, with ruddy housewives and arrogant men. Her Karori tales are remnants of a pristine past. The Karakas and the aloe and the human drama enacted around them are within the purview of Colonial New Zealand. Remoteness becomes the preponderant quality of Mansfield's topographical stories. Joseph Conrad's torrid ravings in the tropical jungles become striking in their foreignness. Heart of Darkness ensures a journey into the primeval ; "We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were travelling in the night of the first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign and no memories" (Mizener, 43). The encounter between African darkness and European enlightenment is the encounter between the unconscious and conscious poles of the human psyche. The antinomy between them is the staple of modern literature as such.

A regional writer's vision remains anchored in local clay. Mansfield's bay is an allocated Murital. If it becomes apocalyptic at any moment, it must do so in response to some deep-seated urge. Eudora Welty in her informative piece "How I Write", emphasizes the role of place in the short story. Place is one of the simple, obvious and direct sources of the short story, she declares. An author is organically a part of his native soil. D.H. Lawrence's sooty Eastwood miners are the projections of his altruistic attachment to their lot. Katherine Anne Porter is preoccupied with the Southerners from Texas. Rudyard Kipling prefers adventures on Indian soil. The genius loci has spawned many good short stories.

A short story writer's power of association and imaginative cognition are important qualities. A short story affirms a vision, manifesting a logic and meaning of its own and creating a believable atmosphere. Each author has his individual convincibility. To convey a certain experience Maugham may go to Fiji but Chekhov will crystallize it in the life of a poor clerk. Maupassant's "Marocca" and Balzac's "A Passion in the Desert" both explore violence of love. Maupassant's suggestive symbol is a woman while Balzac prefers a tigress. One may choose a snake even. The importance of the symbol is paramount as it expresses an experience without action or explanation. Symbols become instinctive instillations of story writers. A simple locker might stand for a protective shelter in a John Updike

story, imprisoning a boy for life. Mansfield's temperamental leanings select an aloe with its protective thorns for the epiphanical moment. The emotional experience in each case remains an indispensable element. It may begin at any given point that will "start the imagination on its characteristic job of putting things concretely in a moment toward meaning ..." (Brooks & Penn Warren, 296).

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The Master as She knew Him

Guy de Maupassant and Anton Chekhov have been the greatest formative influences in the domain of the short story. Maupassant's caustic irony and unsparing pointing finger represent the apotheosis of the short story as much as Chekhov's grim mood stories do. Mansfield, on her part, was consciously following the Chekhovian path. Chekhov's obsession with the vision, regardless of circumstances and his dreary subjectivity were like a luminous indication to her. To S. S. Koteliansky Mansfield wrote in early August 1919: "Tchekhov has said the last word that has been said, so far, and more than that he has given us a sign of the way we should go" (Vincent O'Sullivan & Margaret Scott, The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield, II, 345). If the short story is exposure for Maupassant, it is revelation for Chekhov. Art is

completely subjective with the Russian master.

A Chekhov story may have any subject matter. Every negligible object or action is imbued with a meaning. Casting aside the great imponderables of love and power, Chekhov prefers to plot a story around a sneeze ("The Death of a Clerk") or the ownership of a dog ("The General's Brother's Dog"). Harsh truth is often extracted from ludicrous and silly matters. Intemperate criticism during the conversation of a couple may misfire, exposing their damnable secret life and nerve-shattering submission ("She Left Him"). What primarily interested Mansfield must have been Chekhov's subjectivity and preoccupation with so-called small things. "I like always to have a great grip of life", she had written to Garnet Trowell as early as 1908, "so that I can intensify the so-called small things — so that truly everything is significant" (O'Sullivan & Scott, I, 88).

A strong aversion to mediocrity lends a personal stamp to Mansfield's vision. Mediocrity possibly means to her the superficiality that often kills art. Her objective is a total involvement in which a silent garden would be sufficient for the formation of an impression. She luxuriates in suggestiveness, she savours loneliness. Outward action means very little to Mansfield and drab settings often excite a frisson of delight or fear. It is often said that a story of hers can be summed up only by the story itself. Like Chekhov Mansfield seldom

strays beyond her personal experience and competence. Authenticity is the hallmark of her art.

If a story has any merit, it should represent experience at several levels. The emotional experience underlying an anecdote is as important as its truth value. Chekhov's stories were important to Mansfield in both respects. After reading "The Steppe" she wrote to Koteliansky about her intense realization of Chekhov's enclosing "something which had been there forever" (O'Sullivan & Scott, II, 353). She thoroughly supported Chekhov's conviction that a writer's job was not to solve a question but only to put it, to make the reader aware of possibilities that already existed.

Illness and loneliness bred strange agonies in Mansfield, and Chekhov's cold, still despair seemed to strike a responsive chord in her. Quite revealing in this context is her letter to John Middleton Murry in June 1918: "Chekhov would understand, Dostoiivsky wouldn't. Because he's never been in the same situation" (O'Sullivan & Scott, II, 230). As the physical crisis becomes threatening, Mansfield's indomitable desire for exposing vulgarity gains further momentum. Her quest for honesty demands a severity and daring well beyond Chekhov's sad autumnal mood. She does not hesitate to touch upon things nobody has touched before because nobody has lived her life. A story like "Je ne Parle pas Francais" becomes hallucinating in its inverted reality. Through the story Mansfield has spoken her doom. Chekhov's life-

long repugnance for corruption must have given her direction through the confusion of her life. The fact that she refers to Chekhov as her master in a letter to Koteliansky in early August 1919 is not due to any momentary feeling but a realization that comes through a dreadful ordeal in life. For a writer so subjective as Mansfield, a perspective on her experiences is an absolute necessity. What cannot be borrowed from Chekhov or Dostoiivsky is the writer's individual temperament. A thematic study of Mansfield's stories must encompass her quiddity and its influence on her creative vision. Where art and life interpenetrate, each enlightens the other.

(iii)

The Writer and her Work

Kass Beauchamp (born 14th Nov 1888) was the third child of Harold and Anne Beauchamp of Wellington, New Zealand. Hal Beauchamp — robust, self-reliant and energetic, was the magisterial pa-man with whom Mansfield had a love-hate relationship throughout her life. He steps into her New Zealand stories as Stanley Burnell, man of the house, whose presence exerts a pressure on the nerves of the women. Anne, delicate and weak, was much distanced from her children. Mansfield never spared her mother for her remoteness: "She was broken, made weak, her courage was gone, through child-bearing. And what made it doubly hard to bear was, she did not love her children" (Alpers, The Stories of Katherine Mansfield, 453). The hope for a male child

was fervent in the household and as a sensitive little girl, Kass must have had an inkling of it. In "A Birthday", Mansfield's latent feelings found expression: "A boy? Yes, it was bound to be a boy this time 'What's your family, Binzer?' 'Oh, I've two girls and a boy !' a very nice little number" (Alpers, Stories, 63).

The children were brought up under the care of Mrs. Dyer, Anne's mother, who moved in with the family with her two unmarried daughters. Owing to Anne's ill health, Mrs. Dyer became the mistress of the house. Hal Beauchamp decided for a country childhood for his children with the expansion of his business. The family moved into a large house in an upland valley, surrounded by totara forests. The pastoral, with its entire paraphernalia is condensed into the term Karori. Life in Karori was splendid with its garden and paddocks, fowls, ducks and plenty of fresh air. Baby Kass was particularly attached to grandmother Dyer and the matey sessions between Kezia and her granny in the New Zealand stories are not contrived : " 'Do you want a match, my granny?' 'Why yes child, a match is just what I'm looking for'. The grandmother slowly opened the box and came upon the picture inside" (Alpers, Stories, 239). Kass often invented such surprises and they were most successful. Hal Beauchamp rented a beach house for the summer months at Muritai and the extended family spent their holidays there. Muritai becomes Crescent Bay in Mansfieldian phraseology. When Mansfield felt the urge to create her personal

mythology later in life, she conjured up memories of Karori and Muritai. Crescent Bay conveys a cryptic message, which is an essential feature of Mansfield's fantasy: "The sun had not yet risen and the whole of Crescent Bay was hidden under a white sea-mist. The big bush-covered hills at the back were smothered. You could not see where they ended and the paddocks and the bungalows began" (Alpers, *Stories*, 441).

Baby Kass had an aggressive, agile wit. Her penetrating gaze often disconcerted adults. As she grew up, it remained a natural and permanent feature of her personality. Mansfield's dark, hostile look of discomfiture was noticed by many of her London friends and acquaintances. Leonard Woolf, Lytton Strachey, Clive Bell and Bertrand Russell were all repelled by the unfriendly gaze. As a child she did not have any close friends at school with the only exception of Marion Ruddick. She was a voracious reader and contributed frequently to the school magazines. Kass developed a passion for music and her father bought her a cello. Mansfield's musical acumen is explicit in stories like "The Singing Lesson" on "The Weak Heart". After watching Maud Allen's dancing, ^{she} had written to Garnet Trowell about her strange ambition. She wanted to study tone-effects in voice and not rely on gesture. "The Singing Lesson" is an exercise in this direction, containing a plethora of musical detail.

Music served as the pretext for two relationships in Mansfield's life. The Garnet Trowell episode is one of them, noted for its profligacy and waste. Nothing places Mansfield so vulnerably as this affair. It marked the end of her girlhood. The ignominy of defeat . . . she suffered due to the failure of this relationship was not negligible. If she purchased her brilliance from experience, the price was dear. Her parents had selected Queen's College, Harley Street, London, for their daughters' higher education. There Mansfield met Ida Constance Baker, who was to become her confidante and aide for life. Through a friend she got a copy of Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray, which swept her off her feet. Wilde became her mentor and she copied out shocking epigrams from his book. Her dangerous leanings were marshalled in Wilde's thoughts. The news of Mansfield's unleashed sensuality and her unsafe edge reached her parents. She was summoned to Wellington, to return later to London, determined on a musical career. The affair with Garnet Trowell was nearing its end, Trowell's parents disapproving the match. In a sudden gesture, Mansfield went to marry Mr. George Bowden, a vocalist, whom she had recently met. What the marriage meant nobody knew. It was wrought with deception and delinquency on Mansfield's part.

Mansfield left Bowden to rush off to Garnet Trowell in Glasgow almost immediately after the marriage. It was a farewell meeting this time. On her return from Glasgow, she discovered

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herself pregnant. Anne Beauchamp, horrified at the news of her daughter's sudden marriage arrived in London to find out the truth. Truth, in this case, was stranger than fiction. Mansfield was taken to Worishofen in Bavaria for recuperation. She suffered a miscarriage there, but came back to London with her "Pension Sketches". The next few weeks were spent with Bowden in London. Bowden, decent and sensitive about women's emancipation, recognised the assiduity in her sketches. At his suggestion, Mansfield went to meet Mr. A. R. Orage, editor of The New Age, with her stories. The meeting ameliorated circumstances. Mansfield moved into London literary circles and established herself as Katherine Mansfield, the professional author. She soon became tired of Bowden and they were living apart.

The New Age had a reading public of its own though the Bloomsburies had nothing to do with it. Chekhov's stories were published and Post-Impressionism was discussed after Roger Fry's exhibition of 1910. Mansfield, after her colonial experience, was captivated by the novelty and charm of her new life. Her passionate conquests continued, followed by depression and occasionally ridiculous plights.

It was not until her meeting John Middleton Murry that Mansfield found the love of her life. Murry was introduced to her by a mutual friend. Erudite and handsome, he impressed her. At her request, he came to stay as her lodger. Within a few days they were living together, and were known in the London circles

as the two tigers. Mansfield now wrote for The Rhythm, which Murry edited, much to the chagrin of Orage and his friend Beatrice Hastings. At Mansfield's encouragement, Murry became a free lance writer. Their friends included Frederick Goodyear, D. H. Lawrence and his wife Frieda, S. S. Kofeliansky, the Campbells, Lady Ottoline Morrell and Dorothy Brett among others. The incessant intellectual prattle is presented with a grimace in some of Mansfield's stories: "Bertha noticed that his socks were white, too — most charming. 'But how dreadful !' she cried. 'Yes, it really was', said Eddie, following her into the drawing-room. 'I saw myself driving through Eternity in a timeless taxi' " (Alpers, Stories, 309). With each friend Mansfield assumed a different personality. Vincent O'Sullivan and Margaret Scott have made an interesting observation in this context. Mansfield, they noticed, was dearest woman friend for Lady Ottoline, fellow artist for Brett, intimate fellow outsider for Beatrice Campbell, Ida Baker was either taken into strict confidence or showered with sharp reproof. There is revelation yet control. *Her* ability lies in the fact that she never sounds false. Each role she takes up is performed with tact and warmth.

Murry is the only person to be allowed into Mansfield's fortified private world. Life was terrible to be endured alone in the war years. She was forced to a lone existence due to her health. In her letters to Murry from Cornwall in early June 1918, she is never free from anxiety. With him she can discuss

her work and the work of others, and in his arms she can feel the delicate safety of love. The frightened, frail face of the otherwise professional bold lady is revealed only to Murry. He would never be the strong, solid husband she could rely on, but that drawback is accepted. They kept separate bank accounts, and Mansfield had to earn for her medical expenses besides her father's monthly allowance. The World War was on. Money became a serious problem as literary criticism and journalism were not welcome at the press. Mansfield's deteriorating health made it imperative that she should travel amidst the chaos and uproar. These journeys are portrayed in her lone woman stories. The perpetual wanderings match with the temperamental unrest of the emigrant, in search of her self.

War became a personal crisis with the death of Mansfield's brother, Leslie Beauchamp, in an explosion near Armentiere. The dreadful incident marked a turning point in Mansfield's life and career. Horror of her past and her discreetly hidden nightly adventures, deliberate lies and deception were now confessed in her work. The tremendous self-abuse and waste of "Je ne Parle Pas Francais" are expressed with Dostoiivskian intensity. Mansfield was delving deep with a therapeutic purpose, in a defiant manner. Murry realised the strain of the process and overlooked the reproof against him. Mansfield, as he could apprehend, was satisfying another desire. He was fully convinced of her urgency.

Leslie's death necessitated Mansfield's recreation of her childhood. In memories of Karori and Muritai she found the magic island she was looking for. Her resort and refuge were her own private possession, far away from war-bitten inclemency. Reality is an essential element in Mansfield's fantasy, but it is remade and unmade to suit the artist's necessity. The past is reorganized with a purity and solidity against a ghastly present. The big house with the extended family, servants, poultry and activities, encapsulates a life that animated Mansfield years back in Karori.

Mansfield married Murry on 3rd May, 1918, fully aware of the nature of her consumption and the impossibility of a healthy conjugal life. At the dismal ceremony, she wore Frieda Lawrence's wedding ring of her broken marriage. The happiest time the couple spent together was at the Elephant, a comfortably furnished house at Hampstead. The Campbells, Koteliansky, the Lawrences, ^{and} Mark Gertler were welcome. Virginia Woolf was an occasional but prized visitor with whom Mansfield shared a secret friendship. Glimpses of this relationship are present in her story "Bliss", where Bertha and Miss Fulton move into another world, timeless and inscrutable. Life didnot permit such heavenly pleasures for long. In a coughing fit at the Elephant, Mansfield spat blood which came as a fatal warning. She was advised to rest at the Riviera while Murry worked at the War Office.

Restlessness and agitation soon dominated Mansfield's frequent moods. Only creative work could be her saviour. The attempt of her Catholic cousins to draw her into their faith proved futile. Mansfield's God had to be artistically creative. She struggled with herself to gain moral strength as she wrote "poison", "The Lady's Maid", "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" and "Miss Brill". The appearance of the world had changed. Her wrath was the uncontrolled rage of a consumptive. Lawrence in an identical state had called her a loathsome reptile. Murry accepted his share of inconveniences as he watched her in blank dismay. She threatened to dismiss him as her London agent which put him in an agony of nerves. Ida Baker (Leslie Moore) had to bear with Mansfield through these fits of temper. She received sharp reproof for her life-long subservience. She was the albatross round Mansfield's neck or the mountain obstructing her vision. Mansfield stood up in arms against the abuse of her privacy.

In autumn 1921, Katherine Mansfield was writing "The Fly", a symbolic attempt to discover the truth of her predicament. Dr. Manoukhin's treatment gave temporary relief. In June 1922, Ida Baker was desperately summoned. In spite of her best efforts, she could not keep going. Losing hope in medical science she sought a last chance in occultism. "The Dove's Nest" was typed out in palpitating nervousness as Mansfield realized things were coming to an end. Through Koteliansky and Orage, she had heard

of Gurdjeiff of Fontainebleau and his institute of harmonious development. As science failed her, she hoped for a psychic control of her disease through an oriental community life. She joined Gurdjeiff's institute to live an integrated family life — left long behind in Karori. The cycle was complete. A few days before her death in Fontainebleau, Mansfield was grappling with the eternal question, "Who am I?" (Alpers, *Life*, 380).

This quest — a quest for the self — is always there at the core of her stories.