

"the daughters of the
late colonel" as a
modernist work



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During the Modern period, writers were concerned with "making it new." People had been disillusioned, largely due to the devastation of the First World War, and they were fed up with the hypocrisy of Victorian society. People's way of looking at themselves and society had changed; they wanted address the issues that Victorians ignored, and ameliorate society. Katherine Mansfield's "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" is undoubtedly a Modernist short story. The characteristics it possesses in both form and content restrict it from belonging to any earlier literary period. The very fact that the author, Katherine Mansfield, is writing shows that this short story belongs to the Modernist period. In the past, writers have traditionally been upper-class, white males from central European cities (namely London). Mansfield, however, is an average middle-class woman from the colonies (New Zealand). Mansfield did not have to write under a man's name in order to be successful. Had this story been written in an earlier period, it would not have been taken seriously unless it was thought to have been written by a man. With the Modern Period came the emergence of feminism. By the 1920s, most women had the vote; but they were still fighting for equality. Writing allowed women to prove they were equal to men. It also gave women a voice, proving they had a point of view and that it was worth listening to. This is a new development that was not achieved until Modernist times. Although this is a Modern story, written by a Modernist writer, the main characters, Constantia and Josephine are not Modern women. At the beginning of the story the way they behave makes them appear to be little girls, it is only later that we find out that they're actually quite a bit older. This is because they have had arrested development. Under the strict tyranny of their father, they have been trained like soldiers to serve him, and

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stay out of his way. They see themselves with a tremendous amount of guilt as extra expenses. They have been infantilized, because everyone expects they'll just get married and their husbands will provide for them. The Colonel symbolizes Victorian society. Now that he is dead, the girls have the freedom to do what they want. However, because of the way they have been raised, Victorianism is so ingrained in them that they do not know how to express anything different. In their father's room, everything is covered in white sheets, representing the false fronts, or hypocrisy of Victorian society. When Josephine pulls up the blind, it "flew up and the cord flew after, rolling round the blind-stick, and the little tassel tapped as if trying to get free (326)." It is trying to get free from the confinements of the Victorian period. Constantia and Josephine subconsciously wish to be free too, but they must first realize that they have been prisoners. The girls are afraid to open anything because they know it will bring about major changes, and really just want to leave everything as is. Likewise, by the end of the story, the girls have not made any progress in their own lives. As Constantia's name suggests, the girls are constant in their ways. They are afraid that their father will be angry that they have buried him; but these girls have been buried all their lives. This short story represents a precipice, after the Victorian period, and just at the very beginning of the Modern period, where there is still so much potential. The girls reach the edge of this precipice when the organ grinder comes around and the sun comes out, like a visual representation of their "light-bulb moment." The epiphany is unfortunately lost in all their civilities of who will speak first; but it does present possibilities for the future. This strong symbolism/ abstraction is another aspect of the story that situates it in the Modern period. In previous periods, literary works tended to have literal

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meanings that were clear and easy to understand. Constantia and Josephine are not Modern women; but neither are they heroines. They are more like antiheroes, seeming to be inadequate in many ways. They have not had the opportunity to do anything heroic because Modernists believed those opportunities are rare in real life. This goes along with the "No more parades" attitude that ensued after WWI. There are no words like "Glory," "Noble," "Honour," or "Heroic" used in this narrative, whereas in earlier periods, these were common words. Modernists were sick of hypocrisy. They wanted everything swept out from under the carpet, so there could be no false fronts; everything was presented as it was. Although these girls seem inadequate, the Modernists believed that it was a more realistic picture, therefore a better one. Instead of finding comfort in religion at the time of their father's death, when Mr. Farolles comes to visit, they describe the scene as "awkward." The Victorians, and even more so, the Romantics had strong faith in God. It is only in Modern times that we get the feeling that "God is dead." When Mr. Farolles asks the girls if they would like to take communion, they liken it to sitting "in torture." Communion is one of the most important and revered aspects of the church, and to refer to it as torture would have been heresy in previous periods! The lack of respect for God goes along with the lack of respect for authority that ensued after the First World War. Not only do the girls not have God, but they also don't have anyone else- they are alienated. As 'old spinsters' they do not see any prospect for marriage, but neither do they see any other way of life. As unmarried women they feel like they do not fit in with the rest of society. For Modernists, however, this was inevitable, something everyone experiences.

It showed that they were not in sync with everyone else, they were

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individuals. In Victorian times, fitting in was one of people's main concerns. The fact that these girls are alienated from the rest of society and do not have faith in God shows this to be a Modernist work. Another aspect that helps to situate this literary work in the Modernist period is the meaninglessness in conversations. If you look closely to what characters are saying, very little of it is actually of any importance. In one instance, the girls are discussing Cyril, and how he was not able to come for their father's funeral. Josephine says how it would have been nice if he could have come, and Connie replies "'and he would have enjoyed it so," not thinking what she was saying (328)." Of course Cyril would not have enjoyed a funeral; this reply is just thoughtless nonsense. The "not thinking what she was saying" part is the key, this conversation really doesn't matter to her; she is only half listening. This is because Modernists believed that a large part of life was meaningless. In earlier writing, conversations were flawless. Someone would ask a question, and the other person would have a flawless answer, almost as if it was planned. The Modernists were concerned with things being more realistic, so by including meaninglessness in conversations, they are helping to make it so. Naturalism is another literary device that was not used before the Modern period. It was employed in an attempt to make things seem more realistic, closer to what they'd be like in real life. For example, instead of just saying the girls went into their father's room, it breaks the action down, talking of Josephine "grasping the door-handle and doing her best to turn it." Nurse Andrews's speech is another form of Naturalism used in this story. Not everyone speaks perfect English in real life, so by making Nurse Andrews pronounce words like "buttah (323)" and "bittah (342)" it makes her speech seem more natural. Prior to the Modern period, characters would

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often have perfect English, and even speak with perfect rhythm. This short story is also blatantly Modern in terms of its structure. This story is told from multiple points of view. Perspectives from Connie, Josephine and Cyril are all presented. The difference in perspectives, especially between the perspective of Cyril and his Aunts is very interesting. Cyril makes everything seem so childish and ridiculous, he also makes his Aunts seem much older and more naive. The difference in perspectives reminds us that the narrator is not always reliable, and that different people can have different points of view. Prior to the Modernist period, the main type of narration was the Omniscient narrator, who was all-knowing. In Modern times, this type of narration was seen as completely unrealistic. Not only does the narration have multiple points of view, but it is also non-linear. In pre-Modern times, stories were told from start to finish with no jumping around; but this story contains memories and flashbacks from other periods in the girl's lives. Overall, the many Modernist elements in this short story prove that it could not have been written in any period but the Modern. The female author, the lack of hero, the abstraction and symbolism, lack of respect for God/authority, alienation, Naturalism, the meaninglessness, the multiple narrators and the non-linearity are all devices that were not employed in earlier periods. Some works, especially ones written during a transitional phase, can have elements of more than one period; but Katherine Mansfield's "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" is definitely Modern. Works Cited Mansfield, Katherine. "The Daughters of the Late Colonel." The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women. Ed. S. Gilbert, S. Gubar. New York: W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 2004. Print.