

# Definitions of place: katherine mansfield and virginia woolf



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Modernists writers have held the view that public and private spaces play a central role in the formation of culture publicly and privately. The issue of public and private spaces transects areas of class, gender, social and racial forms [1]. After all, the term “ space” can be defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “ A continuous area or expanse which is free, available, or unoccupied” [2]. However, the definition of space by a French philosopher Michel de Certeau states “ In The Practice of Everyday Life, a place is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence”; a place is thus “ an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability.” [3] Thus, by reading, it generates some sort of textual space. This textual space is shown in the works of both Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf, which portray the interaction between a described setting and the imagination itself.

It can be said from the definition of De Certeau that space and place have a similar meaning. In fact, place is a form of stability associated with women and their place at home. Furthermore, the idea of space and place can be directly related to the gender and gender relations. Gender relations today are completely different to that of the twentieth century. However, during the modernist period, this idea seemed to have changed. This was the time of the industrialisation, which changed the relations of individuals in terms of class, gender, race and culture. “ The industrialisation gave women new job opportunities and new possibilities for acquiring knowledge and the freedom to move in certain public spaces” [4]. The division between the public and private spaces corresponds to a male dominated world of work and female domestic spheres resulting in separation of the work place. Women’s place

was in the private sphere of home, that consists of the house and the garden, and she had a moral duty as a wife and a mother. This essay will explore the character's interactions in both public and private spaces in Katherine Mansfield's short stories and Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own." Katherine Mansfield is also known as the master of the modernist short stories. Most of her short stories portray a major theme about the domestic sphere and the marital relationship between men and women.

Another important textual element, which is included throughout her stories is space. Both public and private space seem to be of great importance to her. Elisanda Masgrau-peya mentions that place is not just a setting for the characters but also somewhere, which influences their lives "confining or empowering their prospects for freedom, movement and moulding their identities" [5]. One of the main element that Mansfield uses in most of her stories is the Garden. The Garden is not only shown as a setting but is also associated to the white middle class society in existent at that time. In *The Garden Party*, Mansfield introduces the idea of holding a "garden party" [6] (p. 104) immediately in the second line. Although the characters in the story have not yet been spoken of, this automatically gives the reader the knowledge of the current financial background of the characters. Mansfield portrays gender inequality through the use of the public and private spaces in her story. This is shown when "In the hall her father and Laurie were brushing their hats ready to go to the office" [7](p. 111) whereas Laura was busy with the decoration of the garden party. Mansfield segregates the genders in the story. This is further shown through the various character roles in the story. Mansfield emphasises on the idea that women are

supposed to be in the house and prepare for the household entertain whereas the men are responsible for the outer world activities. This is shown through the characters “ Florist’s man”, “ workmen”, “ Mr Sheridan and Laurie”[8], which shows that only men are involved in the outer world and have jobs and women are all in doors, in charge of the indoor activities.

Similarly, in *Life of Ma Parker*, Mansfield further highlights the idea of public and private spaces. The reader is initially introduced to the primary setting being the “ literary gentleman, whose flat old Ma Parker cleaned every Tuesday”[9]. The reader is made aware of the existing gender and class difference in the society. Mansfield shows this through the characterizations- Ma Parker as a working class housekeeper and the literary gentleman belonging to the upper middle class. Although the narration contains a variety of internal monologues, the plot is mostly based in one room, where Ma Parker spends her whole time in. Throughout the story, it is through her internal conflicts that the reader has a chance to see the outer world. It seems like Mansfield shows Ma Parker’s life through her thoughts to emphasise on her entrapment in the house. The idea of public and private spaces is further emphasised in *The Little Governess*. Mansfield shows that when women leave their premises, they need supervision and protection. This is shown in the very beginning of the narration “ You had better take an evening boat and then if you get into a compartment for ‘ Ladies Only’ in the train you will be far safer than sleeping in a foreign hotel. Don’t go out of the carriage; don’t walk about the corridors and be sure to lock the lavatory door if you go there.” [10] (p. 1) This shows that women are not safe in the outer world and need constant supervision even if they are. This also emphasizes

on the idea that despite women in the twentieth century were becoming less “ closeted, domesticated, and desexualized”[11], they were still seen as the “ Angel in the house”, which needed to be protected.

Comparably, Virginia Woolf reveals the relationship between space and the gender inequalities in “ A Room of One’s Own.” The word “ room” in the title is significant; it suggests according to the Oxford English Dictionary a space that can be occupied or where something can be done.[12] Virginia Woolf mentions in her essay that “ a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction”[13] (p. 1), which describes the importance of being financially stable for one to be able to do what they please. She also emphasizes on the fact that for women to be successful, a space is also needed in order for them to obtain the freedom. Woolf shows the inequalities through “ he was a Beadle; I was a woman.”[14] (p. 11) in her story to show that only “ Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me.”[15](p. 11) From this quote, it can be seen that Woolf felt the difference between the people who had an education and the ones that did not. She also witnessed the gender inequality when she was in the library “ he waved me back that ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction.”[16] (p. 16), which emphasizes on the gender inequality in existent at the time Woolf was writing. It shows that women have a special place to be and that they are not meant to be in certain places where other men are.

Woolf tries compare woman to any sort of civilization in society in “ If one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness, <https://assignbuster.com/definitions-of-place-katherine-mansfield-and-virginia-woolf/>

say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inheritor of that civilization, she becomes, on the contrary, alien and critical" [17], which illustrates that for a woman, it is hard for them to feel like a member of one nation, when they are considered inferior. Additionally, during the interruption in the story, Woolf loses her momentum in the narration. This highlights that women, without a private space can not concentrate on a proper work. A cat catches Woolf's attention " The sight of that abrupt and truncated animal padding softly across the quadrangle changed by some fluke of the subconscious intelligence the emotional light for me" [18](p. 28) which further emphasizes on the fact that the lack of a room of their own and time to write, women can not concentrate. Woolf mentions her concern " I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in" [19] (p. 67). From this quote she is trying to parallel between the inner and outer world and the private and public spaces. She is trying to make the reader feel and question themselves how it would be in a public or private space. She makes it seem highly ambiguous with her negative connotations such as " unpleasant" and " worse" to emphasize that either of the places are not suitable for anyone or everyone but in fact only to particular people. Hence, highlighting the fact that an ideal woman is probably better to be in a private space rather than public.

Reading of Mansfield's short stories alongside " A Room of One's Own. makes one realize how the human nature has hardly evolved over time. The struggles of women back in the twentieth century and that of now " modern world" is similar. The whole idea of the patriarchal society still exists within certain religious communities such as Muslims, who still classify women as

second class citizen. The spaces in the stories are associated with gender directly or indirectly. It can be seen that women find different things in a private space, whether it is indoor or outdoor depending on their marital status or age. One example is the garden in most of Katherine Mansfield's short stories. It is mostly used in a way for women to express their sexuality more openly and freely. However, it can be said that although women need private space to be very much productive, they also need complete freedom to think without disturbance.