

How katherine mansfield's writing changed through



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Katherine Mansfield was predominantly a short story writer born in New Zealand in 1888. Although she has often been quoted demonstrating a negative view on New Zealand, she "thanks God she was born in New Zealand". Her father was a successful business man and her mother was a younger woman. It is widely acknowledged that her parents played a major role on her views of men and woman in society and the gender imbalance.

She began writing from a very early age writing for her Wellington high school newsletter. One of her first novels and one which strongly represents her views on the gender imbalance in society was *Frau Brechenmacher Attends a Wedding*. This story represents the Frau very much as the subservient housewife to her more dominant and intimidating husband. The first instance of this is when Frau threatens her daughter with the wrath of her father, to which the daughter immediately responds to the request.

This story was strongly based on what Mansfield had seen in her time living in Germany in the earlier stages of her career and the story is an undisguised satire of the German character, in particular the German housewife who Mansfield saw as unkind and somewhat shallow due to their displeasure of their role in society. The story of *Frau Brechenmacher* continues on and the Frau and her husband attend a wedding. Katherine Mansfield describes the bride as having the 'appearance of an iced cake all ready to be cut and served in neat little pieces to the bridegroom beside her'.

This is a very blatant and obvious piece of writing that outlines the woman's role in a marriage. This shows that the bride is a mere object to the groom and her role in the marriage is to please her husband. Also, the story goes in to detail about the daughter being shown the role of a woman by her mother

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which is encouraging the cycle of woman's servitude and therefore Mansfield puts a negative light on the subject, shown by the quote, "girls have a lot to learn" which carries a negative connotation.

However, the Frau is aware of her situation and does not particularly enjoy it as "everybody laughed at his speech, except the Frau" and "She wanted to go home and never come out again". Katherine Mansfield was opposed to the idea of the traditional role of woman in society and the gender imbalance that was so obvious to her as favourable to the man. Also, she saw and represented men as predatory. This is shown at the very end of *Frau Brechenmacher Attends a Wedding* when it is stated that she lay on her bed "who expected to get hurt as Herr Brechenmacher lurched in". This is the first instance in the story where the Frau and even her daughter are shown to be intimidated by the dominant figure of the relationship in Herr Brechenmacher. This is why Katherine Mansfield intentionally chose to refer to him as 'the father' throughout the story as it is like a title. Titles are given to people who are important figures and by giving him this title and Herr Brechenmacher being referred to as the father by his wife and daughter show that they have a certain respect for him but also gives the sense of distance between the husband and his family.

The idea of distance between the Frau and her husband is most prolifically represented when he "lurches in" which implies the idea of forced sex on his behalf. This shows that even though they are husband and wife, they are extremely distanced and can potentially not even have consenting sex. This enhances Mansfield's view of the woman as an object or accessory to the husband as purely for the pleasure of her partner. Frau Brechenmacher is

also portrayed to be much more comfortable when she is in the house alone without her husband.

Although she is often doing her duties for her husband, she is more relaxed in that environment without the oppressive Herr Brechenmacher. There is a sense of uneasiness when Herr Brechenmacher returns home as she sends her daughter into the bedroom and begins to rush to get everything ready and perfect for her husband. This gives the impression that the house is a sanctuary for all subservient women and that was how Katherine Mansfield viewed it and writes on the matter with such satirical influence.

The short story, *Frau Brechenmacher Attends a Wedding*, is a story that does not carry many subliminal or hidden messages when dealing with the criticism of the women's role in society. It is unlike some of her later works that hide the ideas that are intended to be portrayed. It is a very matter of fact piece of writing that was strongly scrutinized for the views and opinions that it was showcasing, which is potentially why Katherine Mansfield decided to write her later works that had similar themes with more discretion and subtlety.

Another short story by Katherine Mansfield which deals with the same issues that are brought to light in *Frau Brechenmacher Attends a Wedding* is 'The Woman at the Store' written two years after *Frau Brechenmacher* in 1912. Similarly with *Frau Brechenmacher*, 'The Woman at the Store' deals with the issues of gender imbalance and the oppressive male figure in relationships in a very unsubtle and obvious way. However, unlike *Frau Brechenmacher*, Mansfield deals with these issues in a much more violent and twisted manner in 'The Woman at the Store' which ends in a melodramatic twist.

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This is similar to other short stories written in the same era of Mansfield including 'Ole Underwood' and 'Millie'. 'The Woman at the Store' is a story of two men and a girl travelling by horseback through a desolate environment in the North Island of New Zealand. They come across a house in which lives a woman and her daughter and one of the travelling men knows her from previous journeys. However, the woman is not what she used to be or how she is previously described to be "certainly her eyes were blue, and what hair she had was yellow, but ugly".

This comes to a surprise by all the travellers as they had been promised wondrous things by a character named Hin "Don't forget there's a woman too, Jo, with blue eyes and yellow hair, who'll promise you something else before she shakes hands with you". It is revealed to us as the reader that the woman was once a beautiful woman and a barmaid but that had all changed once she became wed and bore children. This is also another common theme that is seen throughout Mansfield's writings, particularly the ones that have a strong feminist base and represent men as oppressive and somewhat ruining their female counterparts.

The idea of child-birth being the bane of a woman's existence is shown in some of Mansfield's works where she writes about the role of woman as objects for giving birth to children for the male in the relationships sake. This is shown in 'The Woman at the Store' when the woman is abusive to her only child, yelling at her and speaking down to her. Also, later in the story when all the characters are drinking whiskey around a table, the woman becomes upset and starts to talk about her life when she says "It's six years since I was married, and four miscarriages".

This quote has a negative tone to it and gives the impression that the woman is not happy about her situation that her husband has left her in. The woman is also extremely bitter towards her husband for the life that he has given to her which is the way that Mansfield represents her ideas of the female in relationships being displeased by marriage and the new role they have had to take on as the generic housewife. The bitterness of the woman towards her husband is best shown by the quote "Over and over I tell 'im - you've broken my spirit and ruined my looks, and wot for".

The idea of men as predatory which is so often used in Mansfield's works is also briefly alluded to in 'The Woman at the Store', however, in this story it is much less obvious. Jo, the oldest of the three travellers is pleased to learn that the woman at the store has been left alone by her husband and uses this as a window of opportunity to potentially sleep with the woman. This is made known to the reader when Jo cleans himself up before returning to the house to spend the evening drinking with the woman and the three travellers.

Also, it is noted that "they were kissing feet under the table". Jo and the woman end up sleeping together that night and although it may not seem to be predatory on Jo's behalf, it can be interpreted this way. The reasoning for this is because Jo showed more interest in the woman once learning that her husband goes away and often and how much she dislikes this. Also, Jo often encourages the woman to continue drinking whiskey which could be interpreted as him coaxing her in.

The message that Katherine Mansfield is trying to convey in 'The Woman at the Store' is the criticism of women's dependence on men during the time

that the story was being written and it also criticises women for perpetuating the cycle of womanhood that they are subjected to. The fate of the woman's husband is later revealed by her strange child who is known to draw everything she says instead of vocally delivering her messages. The child is also referred to by one of the travellers as having a "diseased mind". This along with the repetition of the references to her drawings subconsciously prepares the reader for what is to come.

The daughter, in spite of her mother, draws a picture of woman shooting a man and digging a hole to bury him in. Katherine Mansfield chose this ending to the story because it carries a shock-factor. Throughout the story, negative references had been made about the father of the child by the woman and how she despised him for what he had done to her. By ending the story like this, Mansfield has demonstrated that murder is the only answer to oppression and subjection imposed by the male role in society. However, this is only a satirical view by Mansfield.

She uses such little sophistication in this story and ends it with such a melodramatic ending so that the idea woman do not have to put up with such degrading behaviour from their husbands becomes so clear and obvious. Another reference to the lack of sophistication in 'The Woman at the Store', one of Mansfield's earlier short stories, is the juxtaposition of the weather and the tone or mood of the story. For example, when the weather is sunny, the mood of the story is light-hearted and as the weather turns more unpleasant, the mood of the story becomes more sinister.

Between her short stories from the collection 'A German Pension' which included Frau Brechenmacher and 'The Woman at the Store' and her short

story 'The Garden Party', many things had changed in the life of Katherine Mansfield. She had continued to write solidly through this time period but she had since moved from Germany and moved to London where she would meet her future husband, John Middleton Murray. They had spent some time in Paris and she also spent a few months in Paris, behind enemy lines, once war had broken out.

Her brother had died in the war which was a huge blow to Katherine, and during this time her health had also declined and she was diagnosed with tuberculosis. All these events in Mansfield's life had altered the way in which she wrote, with her stories having more focus on characters and inter-character relations. It brought about a whole new sophistication to Mansfield's works; however her views on men had still not changed, even after having a somewhat contented marriage and other relations with men.

This is shown in a letter to John Middleton Murray in 1919 - "Someone came to me and said Forget, forget that you've been wed. Who's your man to leave you be ill and cold in a far country? Who's the husband - who's the stone Could leave a child like you alone" This letter or poem if you will, shows that Mansfield has turned in to the woman who is dependent on her male counterpart which she had prolifically wrote against in her earlier stories. However, she later acknowledged this and wrote about it in resentment.

Also, during the time between her 'German Pension' collection and her later stories, including 'The Garden Party' she had developed her characters, often reflecting her own life and life experiences in them. This is what is seen to be her sophistication in her later works. Mansfield's later works such as <https://assignbuster.com/how-katherine-mansfields-writing-changed-through/>

the ' Garden Party' have been known to focus less on the plotline of the story and more on specific events in the story, and more importantly, the relationships between her characters. It is through these relationships that her motives for writing her stories come through. For example, the way Laura in ' The Garden Party' tries to imitate her mother's actions " " Good morning," she said copying her mother's voice. ' This is a perfect example of Mansfield's view on woman allowing the cycle of domestication to continue and when looked at in greater depth shows how the older woman influence their daughters to do so. Again, this is just one of Katherine Mansfield's views on the role of woman in society that is shown throughout her short stories, but this time it is alluded to in a more subtle way. The Garden Party' was written in 1922, more than 10 years after ' The Woman at the Store' and ' Frau Brechenmacher' but her views had not changed in this time. However, some of the ways in which she presents her views in ' The Garden Party' are much more sophisticated than previous stories. For example, workmen are preparing to set up a marquee for the garden party and suggest that it should go in front of some karaka trees. Laura contemplates whether this should be done and comments on the beauty of the trees and how solitary they were.

But in the end she decides that ' they must' be covered by the marquee. This could be seen as a metaphor for the beauty of woman being covered and hidden by men, being the marquee. And the fact that Laura uses the words ' they must' shows how she has been brought up to think that woman should be squandered by men. Laura from ' The Garden Party' is also often left

admiring the workmen in the story and commenting on how wonderful they were. At first glance, any reader may take it at face value.

But with prior knowledge of Mansfield's other stories and her views, you would be able to pick up on the underlying satire that is rampant throughout the story. Satire is one of the ways in which Mansfield expresses her views and opinions on different matters, quite often concerning gender imbalance. The idea of the woman being the domestic person around the house and the father being the oppressive figure just like in 'Frau Brechenmacher Attends a Wedding' is also evident in 'The Garden Party'. In the lead up to the party, Mrs Sheridan orders her children to do all different tasks while she does her own, and the children respond immediately as they look up to their mother. But however in one instance where she is in a rush she threatens them, "Do you hear me, children, or shall I have to tell your father when he comes home to-night?" "The Garden Party' is very closely related to Katherine Mansfield herself, with the story being set in a grand house in New Zealand. When she was younger she lived in lavish houses with her parents and siblings just like in the story.

Also, the main character Laura, can possibly be seen as Mansfield herself or having aspects and qualities like her. This is why this story is often regarded as her best short story as it incorporates many themes and because she is writing somewhat from her own life experiences, she is able to portray these themes and ideas extremely well. For example, Laura is the one character who shows respect for their neighbours who had just had a death in the family and she is shown as a character with a set of morals, just like Mansfield herself.

The ways in which Mansfield relates herself directly to her situations and characters in her later works such as 'The Garden Party' are what are seen as to be her sophistication and maturing in her writing style. She moved away from very obvious and simplistic ways of getting her ideas across to her audience, to a more subtle and underlying way of getting the ideas through to her readers. And because of her maturing in her writing and her skill in her craft, she has become to be known as New Zealand's, and one of the world's, best short story writers of her time.