

# Analysis of the voyage by katherine mansfield essay sample



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This analysis is about a short story called "The Voyage" which is written by Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923). The writer was born in Wellington, New Zealand then she got part of her education at Queen's College, London, and returned to live there from 1908. This short story from 1922 is one of her late stories and was posthumously published in the collection *The Garden Party* in 1923.

Reading her writings you can often recognize that the main dramatic event is completely suggested and it is replaced by a less remarkable occurrence. "The Voyage" is one of the best examples of this writing method. The theme is that Fenella's mother died, and his father does not take it upon himself to bring up the child alone, so he leaves the little girl with grandparents who live in another island. But it is not explained in the story; we have to fit together the pieces of information from short dialogues like in a jigsaw puzzle. So at the heart of the matter is the mourning, the loss of mother which is not written in the short story, but you can make it out in an indirect way.

The title refers to the focus of the narration, which is the voyage from Fenella's home to her grandparents' house. This is the writer's means to cover the pain caused by the mourning, so the title identifies the event on the surface.

The plot's aim is to support and help the explanation of the theme. The short story is about the voyage itself but in the previous paragraphs I wrote that it is not the main message. How can it work? During the reading you can see everything with Fenella's eyes, and from her point of view the voyage is full

of strangeness. It is not told in a direct way but the detailed descriptions give you the impression of the mourning.

At the beginning of the story we can see a man, an old lady and a little girl being in a hurry in order to get on board the Picton boat. After a short and tearful farewell the ship leaves the harbour with the grandma and grandchild, and they spend the night together in a small cabin. As they get up in the morning, the boat puts into port and the two ladies go home where grandpa waits for them.

What can this voyage in the night represent? A possible answer is that this is a transition from the little girl's mournful past to her hopeful future. This is well illustrated by the structure of the short story. The story has a frame: Fenella and her grandpa get out from a cab at home, and then they go to grandpa by a cart. Additionally the voyage itself has an own frame: the boat leaves from a landing-stage at the beginning and arrives at another at the last part, and what is more, the strongest symbol of separating past and future is the coil of rope. When the little girl has to leave her father and her home " a huge coil of dark rope went flying through the air and fell ' thump' on the wharf", and when she reaches her new life " the rope came flying through the air, and ' smack' it fell on the deck".

You can distinguish the two periods of life by the descriptions, too.

Everything on the " Old Wharf" is dark, and the one lantern with its timid light only seems to underline that sensation. This is what the main character, the girl Fenella, sees. The sense of darkness may illustrate both her uncertainty and sadness because of her mother's death. Of course she

cannot leave this part of her life easily: " Fenella strained to see with all her might" but after a little time " it was no good looking any longer". As I mentioned the voyage is equal with the transition, and the little child can feel it when she catches sight of the land: " Oh, it had all been so sad lately. Was it going to change?". The answer is yes. The boat docks and they get on the cart: " the hooves of the little horse drummed over the wooden piles, then sank softly into the sandy road". The transition finishes and the new life starts: arriving at her grandparents home Fenella looks at " Grandma's delicate white picotees", which refer to a shiny and cheerful life. Entering the house she meets a white cat and buries her " cold little hand in the white, warm white fur", and smiles " timidly", and Grandpa is still warmly in bed, with only " his head with a white tuft" showing. Symbolically, these images may signify that a difficult period in Fenella's life is now behind her, now she has arrived in a new, stable home.

It is evident that the main character in the short story is the little girl, Fenella. She is about 6-8 years old, and the reader can follow during the story what she sees, hears, or thinks. The story is narrated in the third person singular by a narrator who is not a character but through the eyes of Fenella. As she is so young nobody tells her what is going on, but she feels that something unpleasant will happen. You cannot see her thinking about big things or having deep feelings, but if you are careful, you can understand her.

She watches when Grandma and Father says goodbye in tears, and " this was so awful that Fenella quickly turned her back on them". Why? Maybe her mother was ill for a long time, for ages, and because of her death everybody

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in the girl's milieu must have been crying. It can be the reason for her refusal to Grandma's praying, because despite of it, her mother died. So these are the manifestation of a deep pain.

She does not say anything only that is necessary: " Yes, Grandma", " Shall I...?" and so on. Maybe she is too young for such a big tragedy, she cannot pour her heart out, so she chooses the way not saying anything. But the little girl is very observant: she takes a long look at everything which is new to her.

Fenella's father is Frank who plays an important role in the first part of the story. The writer suggests that he is not a sentimental man but now he is in a difficult emotional situation: ' he sounded stern, but Fenella, eagerly watching him, saw that he looked tired and sad'. There happened something in the recent past (it turns out at the end that his wife is dead) which is the reason of the decision to leave his daughter with his parents. And this parting is very complicated: ' he clasped Grandma in his arms and pressed her to him' which is not a surprising action, but he does not know how to say goodbye, maybe for ever, to his daughter. ' He wouldn't look at her', but presses a shilling into her palm and goes away with Fenella's past.

Grandma is the person who is always with Fenella, she takes over the task from her son to bring the little girl up. It is obvious that they, grandchild and grandma, are in a close relationship. The old lady has really big problems: her daughter-in-law has just died, she has to say goodbye to her son for a long time, and she has to take care of Fenella. Despite of these, Grandma (Mrs Crane) can push her difficulties into the background by the help of God

and pay full attention to her grandchild. She wants to divert Fenella's thoughts from her mother's death by giving her an important task: the girl always has to look after an umbrella which has a handle shaping a swan's head. As the time goes by you can catch on some pieces of information about her, for example she is an experienced traveller. That is a funny event when Grandma insists on taking the upper berth, surely to save the little girl from falling down. But you also know that she does not usually give herself a cabin so she does not know how to get up there.

The old lady also is the person who helps you to clear up the mystery: who has died. In her first speech with the stewardess you only know that Fenella and Mrs Craine wears mourning because 'it was God's will'. The short story takes nine pages in our book and the writer brings it to light only on the seventh page that Fenella's mother is the dead by this sentence: 'poor little motherless mite'.

This kind of mystery dominates the short story. At the beginning of the narration there is nothing you could know about the three people: you do not know why they say goodbye or where they go to or what happened in the past. But according to little scraps of conversations, looking at the characters' faces, following the descriptions of Fenella, 'meditating' on the words she uses and impressions she has, the 'white mist' rises a bit. It is wondering that Katherine Mansfield was able to write about ordinary events filled with unspoken dramas without writing down feelings or the main message.

## Bibliography

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