Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923)

Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923) The Garden Party New Zealander Modernism Best known for her modernist short stories, Katherine Mansfield was born into a prominent New Zealand family in Wellington in 1888. At 19, she moved to London, where she eventually became part of the Bloomsbury group that included Virginia Woolf and Leonard Woolf; the two later published Mansfield's short stories through their Hogarth Press. Mansfield struggled to balance her ambitions as a writer with a tumultuous love life; she had numerous love affairs with both men and women, and two brief marriages; at the time of her death, she was married to the prominent editor and critic John Middleton Murry, whom she met in 1911 and married in 1918. The last five years of Mansfield's life were dominated by her efforts to find a successful treatment for the tuberculosis that would end her life at the age of 34. Mansfield began writing short stories as a teenager in New Zealand. Her early efforts were marked by a sympathetic presentation of the Maori minority, who were often oppressed by the white colonialists. While she travelled back to New Zealand once as a young adult, most of her adult life was spent in London or travelling on the continent, where she pursued her ambition to write professionally. An accomplished cellist, she acknowledged the influence of music on her writing process. Like other modernist writers, Mansfield is less interested in plot than in the psychology of her characters, who are often frustrated, alienated, and isolated. Depicting the rich inner lives of her characters through interior monologues, she also makes use of free indirect discourse. Also a poet, Mansfield's style is characterized by her use of imagery. In the tightly constructed form of the short story, she is also notable for her frequent use, like Joyce and Woolf, of the epiphany, what Woolf refers to as "a moment of being." Along with "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" and "Miss Brill," "The Garden Party" (1922) is one of Mansfield's best-known short stories. The story is set in Mansfield's home town, Wellington; Laura Sheridan, the protagonist, is preoccupied with all of the details of planning a garden party, including her pleasure in wearing a new hat, when tragedy intervenes in the death of a local tradesman. Even as she considers the poverty in which the carter's wife and family will be left, Sheridan cannot bring herself to cancel the party. Her epiphany at the story's end suggests that she will someday grow more critical of the middle class colonial values that she and her family embody. Consider while reading:

1. How does Mansfield characterize Laura?
2. How would you describe the relationship between Laura and her mother?
3. How is death portrayed in the story?
4. What does Mansfield seem to be suggesting about class distinctions during this period?

Written by Anita Turlington