CHAPTER VI

SUMMING UP AND EVALUATION
"Every artist has a basic premise pervading his whole life, and the premise can provide the impulse to everything he creates. For me the dominating premise has been the need for understanding and tenderness and fortitude among individuals trapped by circumstances." Tennessee Williams quoted in Lincoln Barnett: *Life* XXIV, February 16, 1948).

These lines may well apply to Katherine Mansfield's work as they do to the writing of many others. It may be improper to expect from a writer a philosophy of life or a blue-print for living, but such is human nature that there is always this curiosity or an anxiety to discover something of an author's view of life and view of man. The content, overt or underlying, is of interest to us for it is to this that we attach importance, apart from the technical excellence. The difference between "good" literature and "great" literature, is, in fact, determined by the presence or the absence of what we may call the philosophical content of the work, even as an assumption or an undercurrent.

As Max Schérer comments, the history of art is to be conceived as a "series of expeditions against the intuitable world within and without, to subdue it to our comprehension." And we see this being done in Katherine Mansfield's work.

Katherine Mansfield has given us through her stories a number of fine vignettes of life. She is able to engage our interest in the people and the situations she has presented, and reading a Katherine Mansfield story is a very rewarding experience in itself. It will be difficult to claim for her themes any sort of conventional ' profundity'. The stories are mainly character-oriented in the sense that we know more about people and how their minds work than about life as such. The most serious point she makes in her stories is the injustice in society's treatment of women — a point worth making but it is one concerning man's justice rather than God's. What we get finally in her stories may be called clarifications of life, and that is what she seems to have modestly intended. The reader has no right to blame her for not being a helpful philosopher and perhaps no right either, even to be disappointed. And indeed the absence of a message or an announcement of some discovered "truth" has been to her advantage — too often a story has been crushed under the weight of an idea. Her stories are not ponderous and yet at the same time they are not frivolous, either. She may not have delved deep into the heart of things, but she has certainly looked deep enough into the minds of people. She also has the tragic sense, though not that of high tragedy, and this emerges as the cumulative impression from the body of her work.

This study of Katherine Mansfield's work, her short stories, has, it must be hoped, given a descriptive account
which brings out the themes she has written about and the skill with which she has done so. Her themes are not melodramatic but deal with life as it is generally lived, but there is an intensity there which gives weight and significance to her fiction. Sensitive people abound in her stories — young children, vulnerable and even defenceless, adolescents struggling to come to terms with life; sensitive adults, usually women, who are unhappy because their dreams are shattered. The common domestic round provides most of the material for her fiction, which sounds for the most part like an experience. Her stories are almost a plea for recognition of the sensitiveness of others. Imagination or observation can bring home to us the fact that so little can make a person ecstatically happy or excruciatingly unhappy. No one who has read her stories can be comfortably obtuse, and it is to her credit that she has made us aware of the enormous potential we have of making those around us — children or wives or husbands or even neighbours — happy or unhappy by our sensitive recognition of their need for love and emotional security. In this sense, her stories have, like all good literature, a value —— that of promoting our understanding of life by enhancing our understanding of people.

We have also noticed in the course of our study, how effectively these themes have been externalized through an imaginative manipulation of the aspects of technique. We have been shown how under the mask that everyone wears —— preparing
a face to meet other faces, as T.S. Eliot would put it —— there is a seething cauldron of feeling, a quivering sensitiveness that we ignore to our own cost and to the cost of those around us. It is one of her triumphs that her fictional world has such a large number of children and adolescents living in worlds of their own, which a word can shatter.

We may see that she has great skill in putting her characters in situations — crucial situations, as it were — which bring out their essential vulnerability, as for example, in **Miss Brill** and the woman in **A Cup Of Tea**.

It may not possibly be highly relevant to this study, but we may note in passing that all accounts of Katherine Mansfield's life indicate that she was a frustrated idealist, possibly even a confused rebel. And possibly, because of the kind of person she was, she knew what it was to be disillusioned, to be shattered and to be lonely. Herbert Reed says in **Obscurity in Poetry** in his **Collected Literary Essays, 1938** —— "...conceivably my poetry makes life tolerable to me..." And the poet who suffers cannot be altogether separate from the artist who creates, though we cannot confuse the two. Whether it was merely from her observation and experience of life, or as the fruit of her imagination, we have such vignettes of life as would deepen our understanding of that complex phenomenon and make us more sensitive and, thereby, more considerate human beings.
The foregoing account of Katherine Mansfield's work, of what she has attempted to do and how she has done it, should indicate both the worth of the content and the level of her skill. Her stories are a moving and convincing report on life, though her canvas is by no means vast. The work, as a whole, has the quality of "felt life."

Does she have a philosophy, a view of life? From the occasional statement of her characters (Prelude, the wife in The Honeymoon) insofar as they may be presumed to reflect the author's views, all that we can gather is that life has inevitably an undercurrent of sadness and is not a very happy affair at best. The drift of her stories confirms that, for her, life holds more of suffering than joy. As for recommendations for a way of life, there are none that emerge directly. But her presentation of the psychology of people and of the essential loneliness of the individual may, perhaps, suggest to us that we may do well to recognise that other people too have feelings and that if we hurt them by thoughtless acts of commission or omission, it increases the sufferings and unhappiness in the world. Such a realisation on our part could be one of the salutary effects of a reading of Katherine Mansfield's stories — a broadening of our sympathies resulting from a deepening of our understanding of our fellow human beings. There is, thus, a positive value in the glimpses of humanity and of life that we get from her work. As Doctor
Johnson has said, "The only end of writing is to enable the readers better to enjoy life or better to endure it". This could just as well be true in relation to the writer also. It is not surprising that some of her stories (The Tiredness Of Rosabel, Her First Ball, Miss Brill, The Doll's House, The Garden Party) should have become very popular and been frequently anthologized in a very competitive situation indeed. They have a germ of truth in them along with their beauty, which makes them irresistible. Her output is by no means inconsiderable and the quality of her work is uniformly high, with some of it of indisputable excellence.

It is pointless to debate on the applicability of epithets like "major" and "minor" to anyone's work or any form of literature. It is enough for us to recognize that the short story is both an attractive and a worthy form of literature in its own right, and that Katherine Mansfield has a place of honour among the practitioners of that art.