CHAPTER III

SITUATIONS AND EVENTS
Situations and Events

PLOT, we might say, is the structure of an action as presented in a piece of fiction. It is not the structure of an action as it is found in the world but the pattern within a story—a series of events, a movement through time which also possesses unity and significance. This kind of plot as a network of inter-related events belongs properly to the full length drama or novel. The short story, by its very nature, is unable to have a plot in this sense. It is very often an account of a single episode, a crucial or, at least, a fairly illuminating one; and we find this most of the time in Katherine Mansfield’s stories. The skill, then, lies not in the weaving of a web, but in the devising of what may be called a plot-situation—a given situation in which the characters find themselves, and to which they react. We then have a revelation of the character's mental reactions or even a revelation of life itself. The end product then becomes what was apparently intended, the theme of the story—an idea of the way people are or the way life is lived. The tendency in Katherine Mansfield’s stories is to reveal overtly or at least by inference, a view of human psychology. At the same time, her work is full of comments about life in general.
It is generally accepted that Katherine Mansfield was influenced by Chekov. Most of her stories are the outpourings of a lonely sensitive woman, and the form she owed mainly to Chekov. Earlier, stories were written to a very simple pattern.

A. Setting;
B. Introduction of characters;
C. What they did and what was done to them;
D. The outcome or denouement — a solution of the conflict.

Chekov did not follow this pattern, and, very often, he omitted A, from his stories, and brought us immediately into the midst of things. Quite often, he even left the ending D to the imagination of the readers. This design suited Katherine Mansfield quite well, and she felt it would lend a dramatic quality to her stories apart from being intriguing.

Maugham felt that her stories were mainly stories of atmosphere. He has remarked that Katherine Mansfield had a remarkable gift of observation and that she could describe with rare delicacy the scents of the country, wind and rain, sea and sky, trees, fruits and flowers. He has commented further:

"Not the least of her gifts was that which enabled her to give you the heartbreak that lay behind what to all appearances was a
casual conversation over, say, a cup of tea. 1

This is, indeed, a well-deserved tribute. In Katherine Mansfield's stories, there are rarely any plots, in the traditional sense. Her stories do have actions, internal movement and changes, if not external ones, and yet they might not reveal a regular plot structure.

Some of her stories may be called *vignettes of life*, rather than stories, since what she presents is a condition of existence, the state of mind of a character rather than a movement either from one situation to another or from one state of mind or mood to another.

"What happens", that is point D (which we mentioned earlier) is omitted, for example, as in *Something Childish But Very Natural*, *The Wind Blows*, and *Revelations*.

Plot as a well-knit pattern of actions and happenings is scarcely possible in short stories. What we generally have in Katherine Mansfield's stories is a circumstance or a set of circumstances in which the protagonist is placed and the surroundings produce or provoke certain reactions from the character.

There are some stories of Katherine Mansfield in which we have internal changes, often a change to depression and despair from cheerfulness. Examples of this kind are *Bliss*.

Miss Brill, Her First Ball, Psychology, the last a narrative full of irony, pathos, bitterness and unhappiness.

Katherine Mansfield, as a rule, used a simple plotless structure, with the action of the story centering on events or incidents which, by themselves, are relatively inconsequential or even trivial. Yet, at the same time, these episodes provide the means for illuminating character and revealing the theme of the story. She invariably plunges the reader into the story situation with few preliminaries, sketching in the expository information with quick strokes, and then leaves it to the reader to watch the mixture of circumstance and temperament react. She develops her story at a fast tempo in a vivid style, and very often her endings are more of a pause rather than a conclusion.

It is almost as if, with her first sentence, she raises a curtain on a little drama and with her last, lowers it — or even lets the characters walk away from the stage. The interval between the beginning and the end seems just long enough to give us a view of the life of a character or of several characters while conveying, at the same time, the impression that life is constantly flowing and rearranging itself, existing in manifold patterns. Katherine Mansfield has the knack of picking out significant elements. "Her stories are presentations of life, and they have the force
and immediacy of felt life."¹ As Somerset Maugham aptly comments about her work:

"She could take a situation and wring from it all the irony, bitterness, pathos, unhappiness that were inherent in it."²

Katherine Mansfield once said in her journal:

"The truth is one can get only so much into a story; there is always a sacrifice. One has to leave out what one knows and longs to use... It is always a kind of race to get in as much as one can before it disappears."³

Obviously, it is a balancing between the desire to include as much as possible and the artistic requirement of selection of features in order to impose a form or pattern on life, (She has managed to do this very well in her stories).

Her stories are excellent psychological studies and provide glimpses into the rich inner lives of sensitive characters placed, generally, in situations of distress, for example, Ma Parker, Linda in The Prelude, The Little Governess, Laura in The Garden Party, and the lonely woman missing her pet bird in The Canary.

She also wrote a few stories which are violent and almost cruel — *The Woman At The Store*, *The Child Who Was Tired*, and *Ole Underwood*.

*The Woman At The Store* has been described as a thriller by some and, certainly, has more of the dramatic than her other stories. It is primarily concerned with atmosphere or mood, and its incidents occur outside the boundaries of the story itself. Katherine Mansfield uses an oblique narrative technique, and the thrill, the 'drama', is brought in by the child's drawing. "I done the one she told me she'd shoot me, if I did. Don't care! Don't care!"¹ The kid had drawn the picture of the woman shooting at a man with a rock rifle and then digging a hole to bury him in. The background description, feelings, character of the woman, all merge together and in the end we are told:

"There is no twilight in our New Zealand days, but a curious half-hour when everything appears grotesque it frightens — as though the savage spirit of the country walked abroad and sneered at what it saw."²

Both the beginning and the end of the story are casual, and between the first scene and the last nothing dramatic happens as such. It does not have a tightly constructed plot, and all the critics have noted that the sense of structure comes

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¹ *The Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield*.
³ Ibid. p. 127
mainly from the use of the leitmotif and prolepsis — the structure more like that of a post-impressionist painting. (example of leitmotif — red colour). The use of prolepsis is in the manner the writer prepares us for the final revelation. In the beginning, we see the woman with a gun — it looks like a black stick and then again we are told that there was something odd about the child and that her drawings were repulsive, vulgar. So, in this story we find the interplay, between character and environment.

Ole Underwood is also more of a case study like The Woman At The Store. Here, too, the unnatural action and behaviour of the main character is the result partly of an unnatural environment. This story is about a sailor, and Katherine Mansfield expresses the turmoil in the man's mind in the opening paragraph through the wild landscape. We are then shown how children scatter at his approach, and then his life-history is related by a bystander in a bar:

"Cracked, said one of the men. When he was a young fellow, thirty years ago a man 'ere done 'is a woman, and 'e found out an' killed 'er. Got twenty years in quod up on the 'ill. Came out cracked."¹

Ole Underwood's tension is slowly built up, and the colour red is constantly brought in to give us an idea of the approaching bloodshed and violence. Towards the end, he crushes the red flowers in the bar and ignores the threat of

¹. Ibid. p.136
the prison with its "red walls". The story ends on a note of suspense where we find Ole Underwood coming across a sailor asleep on a bunk and with a picture hanging above him. He is almost mad now with rage and is about to re-enact his tragedy.

_The Child Who Was Tired_ is more 'inward' in structure and less concerned with external forces. Here, Katherine Mansfield constantly lays emphasis on the child's inner feelings. The narrator of the story is involved and often enters the child's thought patterns. The basic story is brought out through a series of contrasts between the small, delicate, vulnerable girl and her cruel, unfeeling employers. She takes us from scene to scene as the young girl is weary due to hard work, longs to sleep and finding the baby a noisy nuisance smothers it. It is clear at the end of the story that the child commits the crime simply because of accumulated despair at her employer's attitude.

"I don't believe that Holy Mary could keep him quiet," she murmured.

She flung the baby on the bed, and stood looking at him with terror...and she suddenly had a beautiful marvellous idea...She brought the pink bolster from the Fran's bed and covered the baby's face with it, pressed with all her might as he struggled.

_Critics have compared Katherine Mansfield's art to that of Chekov and this story is said to be closely related to_
Chekov's 'Sleepy' (1888) but there are differences in emphasis between the two. The Child Who Was Tired is a psychological sketch and is different in this aspect from Chekov's 'Sleepy':

"Though Chekov's story contains a central symbol - that of the green light which is associated with death - it remains like the rest of his work, essentially realistic and metonymic in its narrative profession.

Katherine Mansfield's story is to a far greater degree structured according to perceptions of metaphoric similarity or contrast."\(^1\)

Katherine Mansfield's approach to the story is different in that she borrows from the technique of poetry. In this story she links each action with another, slowly building up to its violent climax.

We may now take up a few examples of stories in which there is, in traditional terms, an action involving either an external or an internal movement.

In A Cup Of Tea we have the young and pretty wife of a rich man who takes a fancy to playing fairy Godmother to a poor girl. In this story we are put immediately into the midst of things and while this spoilt wife is enjoying her role, she discovers that her husband has a genuine admiration for the poor girl. This results in arousing her emotional insecurity

\(^1\) Hanson, Clare and Gurr Andrew: Katherine Mansfield. Macmillan Commonwealth Series (London 1981), p. 33
with regard to her own 'looks', and her capacity for retaining her husband's love. The whole purpose of the story is to place Rosemary Fell in a particular situation which brings out her hidden insecurity. The first line of the story "Rosemary Fell was not exactly beautiful", makes one understand why in the end, she finds her husband's appreciation of the poor girl intolerable. It is when Philip finds the girl pretty that "her heart beats like a heavy bell" and she seeks reassurance from her husband. The whole story is an episode which could take place in any ordinary person's life.

Bliss is about Bertha, a woman immature and outrageously happy in the beginning of the story. She has a husband who adores her and a lovely baby girl. Her feeling of bliss makes her dance on the pavement:

"as though you'd suddenly swallowed a bright piece of the late afternoon sun and it burned in your bosom, sending out a little shower of sparks into every particle, into every finger and toe."

Nothing more unusual than a party "happens" in the story. But its end finds Bertha in the very depths of despair as she sees her husband fixing up an assignation with a woman whom Bertha had introduced to him. It is an ironical situation as Bertha herself had felt an almost mystic affinity with Miss Fulton.

"What was there in the touch of that cool arm that could fan - fan - start blazing - blazing - the fire of bliss that Bertha did not know what to do with."

1. The Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield.

2. Ibid. p.344.
The story is written in free indirect form and the narrator's voice merges with the very tone and mode of perception of the central character. In the end, Bertha exclaims, "Oh, what is going to happen now?... "But the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still."

It is through the internal structure of the story, that is, imagery, wordplay and parallellism that we conclude that there will be no change for Bertha - that, unlike the pear tree, she might never be in full bloom.

Miss Brill is a story in which a shift of feeling in one character is conveyed in a single scene. Here, as in many of her stories, the events and images function dramatically and the narrator provides objective information.

Miss Brill's inner monologue enables us to understand how happy she was sitting in the park, imagining herself and the people in the park to be actors in a play. She was contented because she felt they were like a big family and as she went to the park every Sunday, "No doubt somebody would have noticed if she hadn't been there."

This world of fancy is abruptly shattered one day by the cruel remark made by a young man in the park: "Why does she come here at all - who wants her."

The story has a poetic intensity and is shaped somewhat like a lament. Miss Brill is constructed around a series of
contrasts and parallels which expose with great clarity the inner state of the old lady. In the beginning of the story we are given characters who act as parallels and energetic young children playing, and the young couple, as contrasts to Miss Brill. The central character lacks love and it is her imagination which had filled up this void. With her Allusions shattered, she is left on her own. Hers is genuinely tragic experience. Once again, we have a character here reacting to circumstances, and the changes are more internal rather than external.

Katherine Mansfield feels that human beings are all ultimately solitary and it is only love that can transform or at least alleviate such a situation and bring comfort.

_Prelude_ is the story which really established Katherine Mansfield as a writer and she gave this work greater depth by uniting her divided personality while writing about her past.

This was written four years before _Ulysses_ and _Jacob's Room_, were published. In this story, Katherine Mansfield was able to introduce a revolution in the realm of the short story compared to that achieved by Joyce in the novel.

The whole story is developed more by suggestion and implication than 'descriptive analysis'. Here her characters are more revealed than explained. The story has an easy flow and one feels one has known the Burnells for a long time.
They seem so real—the characters ranging from grandmother to Stanley, Linda and the children. There is no plot as such. Katherine Mansfield sets out to show mainly by suggestion how the people of a household think and feel, how they behave while adjusting to their new home. There is a change in their lives as we pass from episode to episode and there is a particular charm in the way Katherine Mansfield shifts from person to person. We can see something of the "reflector" method of Henry James here—different mirrors reflecting the same situation from different angles.

The opening paragraph of the story almost drops us into the middle of a scene—we have Linda Burnell sitting on the buggy. This is the same method as we find employed in The Tiredness of Rosabel, that of oblique movement from a person to a group. We are shown Linda's mind and then the children's pattern of thinking. We notice also the writer's own detached attitude as an observer.

Many critics have felt that the Prelude is loose in structure, but it is not anything that can be called random. Each event or episode is played off against the next to give us a complex pattern of parallels and contrasts. There are sections where the differences between Mrs. Fairfield—Linda and Beryl are explored and Linda's position as an insecure married woman is indicated through her relationship with her mother and her sister. The co-presence of the three generations is a device which has enabled Katherine Mansfield
to add a temporal density to her feeling for the light texture of immediate life. Walsh has very rightly made this point in his Commonwealth Literature: "The images of Prelude merge perfectly with the narrative structure." 1

The whole story seems to be conveyed through dramatic action, stylised interior monologue, scene and imagery.

The last paragraph of the story is not really a conclusion, and the scene seems simply to fade out gradually.

At the Bay was written in 1921. The story is a linked sequence of twelve episodes and here Katherine Mansfield once again uses the free indirect form to explore the consciousness of the characters. The images in this story are drawn together and everything is shown to occur in the course of a single day from dawn to dusk.

The technique employed in At The Bay - the whole story taking place in a single day - is almost like Jonathan's pondering over the meaning of his life:

"The shortness of life! The shortness of life!
I've only one night or one day, and there's this vast dangerous garden, waiting out there, undiscovered, unexplored." 2

In At The Bay we have only two episodes relating to children, and the rest of the story tells us about the

1. Walsh, William: Commonwealth Literature.
   Oxford University Press (London 1973)

2. The Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield.
   Alfred A. Knopf (London 1935). p. 293
experiences of adults. There is hardly any plot and the adults are mainly trying to make adjustments to one another and to their circumstances and to achieve something in life which constantly proves elusive. All the characters seem to feel that they have been denied something and the antithesis between male and female worlds is shown in Stanley Burnell's rushing the women in search of his stick.

We also have a distinction between Mrs. Stubb's mechanical memory which is revived constantly by the innumerable photographs she has before her husband. Linda, and her mother's ability to plunge into the past and bounce back into the present again, to recreate the very texture of experience.

At The Bay is mainly a design of relationships as the thoughts of the characters are shown to play against each other. Katherine Mansfield is able to show the opacity of human beings and their lack of communication. For example, Jonathan Trout and Stanley Burnell have a misunderstanding in the morning bathing scene. Beryl, too, seems to be in conflict with the maid, Alice. It is only Linda and perhaps, Jonathan Trout who are able to perceive best the conflicts and discord and are also able to explore verbally their fundamental problems. Here again, in this story, Katherine Mansfield develops the episodes through a structure of analogy and contrast. Linda is unable to communicate with
her husband in the scene which follows the one where she and
Jonathan seem to think along the same lines.

Both birth and death are interwoven and, thus, after
the scene where Linda tenderly gasses at her son, we have Kesia
asking her grandmother about death.

There is a constant effort on the part of the characters
to understand the "discontinuities present in life.

Katherine Mansfield wrote about the Sheridans of The
Garden Party in March 1922. These stories deal with human
relationships and the influence of the environment on the
developing personality.

The Garden Party is the best of the Sheridan stories.
Here, Katherine Mansfield has adopted a more conventional
structure, because the subject matter was such—an
adolescent's encounter with death. It is a single character's
story told in a straightforward sequential narrative. This
story has a tighter unity, and all the events that take place
throughout the day are seen through Laura's consciousness.
There are no separate scenes or sections.

The opening paragraph slowly builds up the mood of the
story and the first sentence, "And, after all the weather was
ideal. They could not have had a more perfect day for a
garden party..." seems to mislead the reader into thinking

1. Ibid. p. 534
there is no more to the story than a planned entertainment, and yet, the events in the story move so smoothly, that the news about the carter's death is almost anticipated. Laura's journey down the dark lane is an adventure on which she embarks on her own, and it is a voyage of discovery. She gains knowledge of death, and of reality. The element of social class is also brought into the story, a point which is said to be overstated. There are several contrasts in the story, for example, the description of the Sheridans' garden and the bleak picture that is portrayed when Katherine Mansfield describes the cottages of the workmen. Then there is the contrast between the glorious arrangements for the party and the miserable condition of the dead man's family.

The transition from the beautiful morning to an evening which is dark and tragic is essential to Laura's process of discovery. She makes a journey through the day, and the events seem to lead her into maturity. The Garden Party is thus a cycle of growth.

Laura was able to return from the cottage with the magical awakening that nothing can harm the dead man and that death is a part of reality.

The Man Without A Temperament is a simple story about a man who is away from home, in exile because his wife who is an invalid needs to stay in a warmer climate. Katherine Mansfield shows him as a person without a will or an ego of
his own, nursing his wife. He feels alienated from the whole place, and the writer builds up his nature as a lonely man missing his home in England.

All the others staying in the hotel seem alien to him - the guests at the pension, the local children, the women washing their clothes and the servants.

We have flashbacks to England to increase the husband's sense of loneliness. England during winter, the English countryside, his friends and also the scene where the doctor asks his wife to go to the warm south. In the end, it is his wife's devotion which deepens his feeling of being trapped and thus, when she enquires,

'Do you mind awfully being out here with me?' He replies, 'Rot!'

Thus, the situation remains the same and we are simply given a glimpse of his unhappiness in the midst of his new surroundings. Once again, there is one main character and we see how he reacts to his external environment.

Katherine Mansfield was interested deeply in the world of children and also in the life of children and adults linked together. Thus, we have stories like *Sun and Moon*, *The Little Girl*, *Sixpence*, *How Pearl Button was Kidnapped*, and *The Doll's House*, and each of these becomes interesting because of the author's keen observation of children, their reactions to their environment, and their relationship with
adults. It is these stories which made William Walsh, a critic, remark that just as she was alert to the continuity of childhood, she was equally sensitive to its uniqueness and autonomy.¹

_The Little Girl and Sixpence_ explore the relationship of a child with its parents. The former is merely four to five pages long and Katherine Mansfield links the first sentence of the story to its last, — thus giving a sense of continuity. We are immediately brought into awareness of the workings of the mind of the little girl who fears her father. Her feelings regarding his size are slowly built up as she stutters only before him:

"He said his prayers so loudly she was certain God heard him above the clergyman." Then again, "He was so big — his hands and neck, especially his mouth when he yawned, Thinking about him alone in the nursery was like thinking about a giant."²

The little girl, Kezia, makes a cushion for her father, as a present for his birthday, filling it with paper that later turns out to be "father's great speech for the port authority," and she is punished with a ruler. At this point, the mother and grandmother leave her alone in the house with her father for one night. She has a nightmare and wakes

up to find her father standing nearby, and he tucks her into his own bed and sleeps by her side.

She then finds that he is after all loving, and not something to be feared. Each event brings about a gradual change from fear to love in the child's heart. It is a situation which is common enough but Katherine Mansfield is able to provide a delightful study of a little girl's reactions. It is this quality that made one of her printers exclaim, "But her kids are real."

We have very little external action apart from the scene where she gets beaten with the ruler. She realises her father's love for her as well as her own love for him when he comforts her and tucks her into his bed, when she has her nightmare. Sixpence mainly explores the attitude of a boy towards his father and the father's behaviour towards his son. We are told in the very beginning of the story that Dicky is an unaccountable boy who, as a rule, is sensitive and affectionate—'good as gold as a rule', yet suddenly going "mad dog" when nothing could be done with him.

He would dash around leaping up and down like a wild Indian. One day, he breaks a plate and his mother is advised by a neighbour to give him a whipping. "It's such a mistake to be weak with children when they are little," Mrs. Bendall, a weak woman, gets impressed easily and asks her husband as
soon as he returns from office to beat the child. It is from this stage that the main idea of the story is developed as Mr. Bendall is reluctant to punish the child; and his is an odd situation as his wife continues to nag him about their poverty, about how he doesn't understand and how he still had his cycling clips on in the drawing room. He feels trapped, "like a man in a dark net", and goes up to punish the boy.

The child gets three slaps and remains standing by the bed. He only says, "I haven't done my teeth, Daddy."

His father leaves him and is full of remorse because he remembers how his son never cried even when he was hurt and "that was the little hero he had just whipped." He gives Dicky a sixpence and asks him to buy something with it.

The last line of the story, "But could even that could even a whole sixpence - blot out what had been" is an apt conclusion because after all Dicky was a sensitive though naughty child and a child's suffering cannot easily be wiped out with a gift or even many gifts. In a few pages Katherine Mansfield gives us a picture of how easily parents can inflict pain on children without realizing the consequences. This story presents just one "incident" and we are able to see how a child might react in such a situation. Sun and Moon describes a child's imaginative world which is very different from that of adults, and presents a picture of the sort of melodramatic universe which children inhabit and of their
need to turn objective events into personal crises. The story makes its point by simply juxtaposing the thoughts and feelings of the adults and the children. A dinner party is described through the eyes of two children – Sun and Moon in the story – and nothing really "happens."

*The Voyage* is a slim story, just an account of a trip made by a little girl, most probably to live with her grandmother as her mother has died. There is a spontaneity in the style and a natural approach. Katherine Mansfield describes with dramatic clarity the dockyard, the embarkation as they arrive, the landfall. Fenella’s grandmother is old and withered and yet full of life and energy.

The ship is described as almost an extension of the home and there are bunks instead of beds and a cabin for a room.

Here we have no more than a series of events. There is no bitterness or pathos. Its charm lies in the graphic description of the voyage.

There are sharp visual impressions. For example, Fenella saw dark figures standing against the rails and:

"in the glow of the pipes a nose shone out, or the peak of a cap, or a pair of surprised looking eyebrows."

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1. *Ibid.* p. 528
The domestic scene is given in all its fullness and value in grandmother’s undressing and Fenella’s washing at the basin.

The writer has the ability to capture a child’s reactions. Fenella observes: “The ship rocked ever so little and she thought the stars rocked too.”

“How hard it was to turn down those stiff sheets. You simply had to tear your way in.”

On the surface, the author simply describes the voyage but there is more to the story. The child is desolate as her mother has died, and each paragraph is quick with the implications of the rhythm of life. The desolation surrounding the child is there but it is part of an encompassing movement, that includes promise and comfort.

The Doll’s House is a story where Katherine Mansfield describes with great clarity as to how three girls acquire a doll’s house and have a lovely time showing it off. The strong element of class consciousness seems to make this story almost an extension of The Garden Party. The Doll’s House is again a story of resistance as Kesia struggles against her mother’s values. She has an affinity with Laura Sheridan:

1. Ibid. p. 528
2. Ibid. p. 530
"Mother", said Kesia; "can't I ask the Kelveys just once?"

"Certainly not Kesia," "But why not."

"Run away, Kesia; you know quite well why not."

The Kelveys are social outcasts.

The lamp in the doll's house seems to be Kesia's prize exhibit. To her it is art. The Kelveys are brought to see it by Kesia but are chased away by an angry Beryl. In the end, Else nudges up close to her sister and says: "I seen the little lamp."

The Tiredness of Rosabel is a story conducted almost entirely through the indirect representation of inner consciousness. Katherine Mansfield does not use the interior monologue proper. Her "interior monologue" is indirect and stylised, and it is seen through past tense and third person narration. There is stress on a woman's subjective experience and we are introduced rapidly to Rosabel's psychology.

"As she swung on to the step of the Atlas Bus, grabbed her skirt with one hand and clung to the railing with the other, Rosabel thought she would have sacrificed her soul for a good dinner."

This story functions on three time levels and has its own psychological dimensions. Here we have Rosabel dwelling on her remembered past in the incident in the millinery shop.

1. Ibid. p. 3
where she is a sales girl - the time when she encounters the rich girl who is her *alter ego*. Rosabel's everyday existence corresponds with the time level of the present. The future is something of a dream. The structure of the story is based on the contrasts between the rich girl and the poor sales girl. Through the power of her imagination Rosabel projects herself into the role of the rich girl.

The very first action is that of Rosabel buying violets and in her dream she has a profusion of them. In the end she is brought out of her dream, realizing that it was only wishful thinking.

*LIFE OF NA PARKER* is once again a story in which after informing the reader that the old lady's grandson has died, Katherine Mansfield gives us an account of the little boy when he was alive. There is again a shifting of the time level as we are brought into the present with Na Parker cleaning the dirty kitchen. She feels it has been a hard life and then there is the introduction of *interior monologue*, with her remembering her past life. She had thirteen little children and had buried seven of them. "If it wasn't the hospital it was the infirmary you might say." Bringing up the children had been a terrible struggle and when her grandson dies, she breaks down, unable to control herself, and she wishes she could vanish rather than go home. But then she realizes, "There was nowhere."
The first paragraph takes us immediately into the story, for the literary gentleman asks Ma Parker about her grandson in the first sentence and is told that Lennie had been buried the day before.

At the time when Katherine Mansfield was writing, there was the trend of the new 'plotless' story which concentrated on inner mood and impression rather than external events. God was dead and man felt that he was insignificant in the world, what with the evolutionary theory and other depressing theories, and the only alternative was to retreat within. This brought a stress on a significant moment, which Joyce called 'epiphany'.

The rest of the story shifts on two time levels which are well balanced. The present with Ma Parker working in the flat, and the past out of which she remembers her married life and the time when she was a girl of sixteen.

Katherine Mansfield was conscious in her use of epiphany and we have stories, for example, like Miss Brill, where it is used to emphasize a point, or an emotion.

Poison, written in 1920, seems to be a different kind of story. It provoked one of Katherine Mansfield's longest commentaries and she wrote:

"I suppose I haven't brought it off in 'Poison'. It wanted a light, light hand —
and then with that newspaper a sudden... let me see, levering of it all—just what happens in promiscuous love after passion. A glimpse of staleness. And the story is told by the man who gives himself away and hides his traces at the same moment.”

The story deals with promiscuous love which is not understood as such by the man though the woman does understand it. She is expecting a letter which will call her away and when it doesn’t come, her low behaviour is displayed. She finds it difficult to hide her dismay. The man, on the other hand, wishes for a large church wedding, a permanent attachment with Beatrice, and he dislikes himself for actually being young and foolish enough to love such a shallow woman.

This story is a first-person narration by a male character, as in Je Ne Parle Pas Francais. Only, here the central character is not so clearly brought out. The narrator is both the teller and the subject, and it is difficult to discriminate between past and present, understand the change, and thus the central idea, the "lament for youthful belief", is lost.

The structure of Poison seems loose, and Katherine Mansfield doesn’t use any one central image, nor is there the technique of repeated imagery.


In the end, the man gradually understands that something is wrong because of her obsession with the letter, and he can guess its contents. He knows that it will reveal her duplicity. In this way, the narrator understands the truth through a particular situation and action rather than speech.

The story communicates through the underlying design rather than by statement, for the letter is left unread, like the letter in *Something Childish But Very Natural*.

There is also a suggestion in the story that "language is especially unreliable as a medium because it is common currency. It is open to use and abuse for all the purposes of everyday life, and is associated with such sordid activities as, for example, the newspaper reporting of a poison trial."\(^1\)

But quickly she tossed the paper away on to the stone:

"There's nothing in it", said she, "Nothing. There's only some poison trial. Either some man did or didn't murder his wife, and twenty thousand people have sat in court everyday and two million words have been wired all over the world after each proceeding."\(^2\)

In Katherine Mansfield's first - person narratives, it is difficult to distinguish an author - narrator from the


character as narrator, as for example in, *Je Ne Parle Pas Français.*

The **Canary** is presented entirely in spoken monologue and there is no conventional audience. It is almost as if the reader has been invited to overhear the lady's speech and complete the story for himself. This gives the story an immediacy of effect, and the story of the Canary is almost elegiac.

In the **Canary** we are dropped into the middle of the story without any introduction. It is a situation which brings out all the unhappiness and loneliness of an elderly woman. This was the last complete story which Katherine Mansfield wrote, and it opens with the theme of mortality:

"You see that big nail to the right of the front door? I can scarcely look at it even now and yet I could not bear to take it out. I should like to think it was there always even after my time. I sometimes hear the next people saying, 'There must have been a cage hanging from there'. And it comforts me; I feel he is not quite forgotten."

In just a few pages we are given a complete picture of a woman's life, of the pain she has suffered, and this is conveyed through a description of a "cruel" and "dreadful" dream which only the bird could help her to subdue.

Towards the end, the elderly lady asserts the uniqueness of the bird which can never be replaced.

In a letter written a few months before the story, Katherine Mansfield said:

"The woman in the room opposite has a wicker cage full of canaries. How can one possibly express in words the beauty of their quick little song rising, as it were, out of the very stones... and there sits the woman in her cage peering into theirs... It is very strange."¹

This is a story in which only one main perspective is available. The woman understands that she will gradually adjust herself to the death of the canary and becomes aware of the fact that beauty is transitory.

Each paragraph in the story begins with an ellipsis, and this creates the effect that the character is gradually unfolding her thoughts and feelings. Everything in the story leads to the final moments when the lady wonders if everyone feels the same.

In A German Pension was the first collection of her stories to be published and these are set in Germany, and the observer narrator is an estranged, lonely English woman who cannot accept the crude life of the Germans. This forms the basis of these sketches. The observer-narrator also gets characterized by what she sees and says; and there is a subtle irony running through some of these stories, The Luft Bad, Germans At Meat, At Lehmanns, Frau Brechenmacher Attends...

A Wedding. The only story which is included here, that is different, is The Child Who Was Tired.

Katherine Mansfield was a writer with an exquisite sensibility and it is her acuteness of ear and her visual memory, along with her rendering of the observations of a natural world, which lend depth to her stories, and this to a large extent prevents her stories from being recognized as "plotless." There is so much that is interesting, little glimpses and perceptions and revelations that one scarcely notices the absence or paucity of the plot.

We might say, thus, that Katherine Mansfield has not dispensed with plot, but has changed its nature. It is the "situation" or "incident" which supplies the framework of her stories.

As a critic has observed, "The function of technique is to create illusion, not break illusion by poking its nose through it." This, Katherine Mansfield was able to achieve as she was conscious artist. There is a beautiful suggestiveness throughout her stories:

"I find my great difficulty in writing is to learn to submit. Not that one ought to be without resistance - of course I don't mean that. But when I am writing of "another" I want so to lose myself in the soul of the other that I am not..."

We can notice here the familiar effort (if not the gift) of the artist to become one with the object or become the object itself, losing one's personality as it were, to become everyone and everything by becoming no one and nothing in particular. We can recall here the idea of "negative capability" made famous by Keats. This she was able to achieve in her stories.