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James Joyce and Katherine Mansfield: A Comparative Study of their Short Stories

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Abstract

James Joyce and Katherine Mansfield are two of the biggest names in Modern English Literature, one considered more influential than the other. Neither of them was native to England. Born on separate island nations, they contributed immensely to English Literature. While the latter is a master of the short story, the former is considered the pioneer of the 'stream of consciousness' technique. There are further, more dissimilarities between the two and even certain similarities, like their Realism and their method of description, which inveigled me to look for more such components and begin writing this paper. Here, I have attempted to provide a comparative and ontological critique of their works and the various elements therein. I begin here with the most obvious similarities and then proceed to elaborate on areas such as diction and characters where one beats the other. Though one has produced more short stories, the other is certainly a worthy competitor when it comes to the quality of writing.

Keywords: James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, Short Story, Symbolism, Realism

It is almost customary to read James Joyce as an undergraduate student of English literature no matter where you are in the world or which university you are registered to. I however had come across 'Araby', which I believe is one of Joyce's best works, when I was a young boy. It stuck with me for all the wrong reasons though it is indeed a work that is supposed to stick to the mind, a truly beautiful piece of perhaps autobiographical fiction which brought me great delight both as a teenager and later as an adult. To be more precise, on the one hand, it offers some kind of pleasure to a young boy reading it just for the story, on the other it brings immense intellectual joy to a mature reader who finds at hand the task of uncovering the true meaning of the symbols that are disguised as unimportant words and phrases in Joyce's realistic prose.

On reading 'Silhouettes' (1907), one of Katherine Mansfield's first works, I was immediately transported to "North Richmond Street" in Dublin, to the world of 'Araby'. In 'Silhouettes' Katherine Mansfield writes:

> It is evening and very cold. From my window the laurestinus bush, in this half light looks weighted with snow. It moves languidly, gently, backwards and forwards, and each time I look at it a delicate flower melody fills my brain.
>
> Against the pearl sky the great hills tower, gorse-covered, leonine, magnificently savage. The air is quiet with thin rain, yet, from the karaka tree comes a tremulous sound of birds song.
>
> In the avenue three little boys are crouched under a tree smoking cigarettes. They are quite silent, and though terrified of discovery, their attitudes are full of luxurious abandon.... And the grey smoke floats into the air—their incense, strong and perfumed, to the Great God of the Forbidden.
>
> Two men pass down the avenue talking eagerly.... In the house opposite are four beautiful squares of golden light.... My room is almost in darkness. The bed frightens me—it is so long and white. And the tassel of the window blind moves languidly to and fro. I cannot believe that it is not some living thing...
>
> It is growing very dark. The little boys, laughing shrilly, have left the avenue. (Silhouettes 1)

These lines are bound to remind a reader of the first few paragraphs of 'Araby' where Joyce describes North Richmond Street in a similar fashion. He calls it a "quiet street" (Dubliners 21) much like Mansfield's "quiet" air "with thin rain" (Silhouettes 1). Mansfield's "three little boys" who laugh "shrilly" (Silhouettes 1) could very well be considered similar to Joyce's "boys" of the "Christian Brothers' School" (Dubliners 21) who fill North Richmond Street with noise and activity or even Joyce and his friends who played till their "bodies glowed" (Dubliners 21). The "house opposite" in 'Silhouettes' with "four beautiful squares of golden light" (Silhouettes 1) is indeed a reminder of the houses of North Richmond Street that are "conscious of decent lives

within them" and whose "light" from the "kitchen windows had filled the areas" (Dubliners 22). Mansfield's sky is "pearl" and Joyce's sky "was the colour of ever-changing violet" and while one is decorated with something "magnificently savage" (Silhouettes 1), the other on the contrary is feebly lit up by a component of civilized society- "the lamps of the street" that "lifted their feeble lanterns" (Dubliners 22). There is a play of light and darkness in both the narratives. While light shows from the windows of the house opposite, we see Katherine sitting in darkness, and then again in the last paragraph she leans out of a window and pears into the "gloom", waiting for night to come and lead her "to the place of the white gardenia", "through an amethyst twilight" (Silhouettes 1). In 'Araby' likewise, we see the narrator hiding in the shadow waiting for his uncle to enter the house or for Mangan's sister to come out on the doorstep to call her brother. The chiaroscuro reaches its peak when we see Mangan's sister's figure "defined by the light from the half-opened door" (Dubliners 22), creating a fine silhouette, one that would make any young lover lose his sleep.

Their descriptions therefore cater to all the senses of a human being- sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch. Sight, as both Joyce and Mansfield create such tangible and lifelike images that the reader feels as if he is immediately watching everything unfold in front of his very eyes. Smell, as the reader can almost inhale the "odours" that arise from the "ashpits", the "dark odorous stables" (Araby 2) and the "heavy odour" of the flowers in the room where James Flynn lay dead in his coffin (The Sisters 7) or the "incense, strong and perfumed" (Silhouettes 1) and "the smell of paint coming from that doll's house" (The Doll's House 1). Hearing, as the reader can almost hear the "drunken men and bargaining women", 'the curses of labourers, the shrill litanies of shop-boys who stood on guard by the barrels of pigs' cheeks, the nasal chanting of street-singers, who sang a *come-all-you* about O'Donovan Rossa, or a ballad about the troubles in our native land" (Araby 2,3) and the "tremulous sound" of the song of the birds from the Karaka tree, the sound of the men who pass down the avenue "talking eagerly" and the shrill laughter of the boys (Silhouettes 1) or the "chock-chock of wooden hammers" (The Garden Party 2). Taste, as the reader can almost taste the "leg mutton" and "the sherry" (The Sisters 1, 7) or Godber's "cream puffs" (The Garden Party 6). Touch, as the reader is so connected to the characters that he feels it is he who "felt against his shirt the agitation" of Polly's bosom or "on the third landing" kissed her and exchanged "reluctant good-nights" (The Boarding House 5, 6) or it is she who "swung on to the step of the Atlas bus, grabbed her skirt with one hand and clung to the railing with the other" (The Tiredness of Rosabel 1).

Both Joyce and Mansfield, therefore, evidently describe things, places and people in such a remarkable way that readers become one with the text and the text itself transcends the bounds of fiction and assumes a living quality. However, Joyce in this regard, seems to come out on top on certain occasions because of lines like:

> It was not altogether his fault that it had happened. He remembered well, with the curious patient memory of the celibate, the first casual caresses her dress, her breath, her fingers had given him. Then late one night as he was undressing for bed she had tapped at his door, timidly. She wanted to relight her candle at his for hers had been blown out by a gust. It was her bath night. She wore a loose open combing-jacket of printed flannel. Her white instep shone in the opening of her furry slippers and the blood glowed warmly behind her perfumed skin. From her hands and wrists too as she lit and steadied her candle a faint perfume arose.
>
> On nights when he came in very late it was she who warmed up his dinner. He scarcely knew what he was eating, feeling her beside him alone, at night, in the sleeping house. And her thoughtfulness! If the night was anyway cold or wet or windy there was sure to be a little tumbler of punch ready for him. Perhaps they could be happy together....
>
> They used to go upstairs together on tiptoe, each with a candle, and on the third landing exchange reluctant good-nights. They used to kiss. He remembered well her eyes, the touch of her hand and his delirium.... (Dubliners 58, 59)

Or,

> "July 1st, 1895The Rev. James Flynn (formerly of S. Catherine's Church, Meath Street), aged sixty-five years. *R. I. P.*
>
> The reading of the card persuaded me that he was dead and I was disturbed to find myself at check. Had he not been dead I would have gone into the little dark room behind the shop to find him sitting in his arm-chair by the fire, nearly smothered in his great-coat. Perhaps my aunt would have given me a packet of High Toast for him and this present would have roused him from his stupefied doze. It was always I who emptied the packet into his black snuff-box for his hands trembled too much to allow him to do this without spilling half the snuff about the floor. Even as he raised his large trembling hand to his nose little clouds of smoke dribbled through his fingers over the front of his coat. It may have been these constant showers of snuff which gave his ancient priestly garments their

> green faded look for the red handkerchief, blackened, as it always was, with the snuff-stains of a week, with which he tried to brush away the fallen grains, was quite inefficacious. (Dubliners 5)

Or,

> She stood among the swaying crowd in the station at the North Wall. He held her hand and she knew that he was speaking to her, saying something about the passage over and over again. The station was full of soldiers with brown baggages. Through the wide doors of the sheds she caught a glimpse of the black mass of the boat, lying in beside the quay wall, with illumined portholes. She answered nothing. She felt her cheek pale and cold and, out of a maze of distress, she prayed to God to direct her, to show her what was her duty. The boat blew a long mournful whistle into the mist. If she went, tomorrow she would be on the sea with Frank, steaming towards Buenos Ayres. Their passage had been booked. Could she still draw back after all he had done for her? Her distress awoke a nausea in her body and she kept moving her lips in silent fervent prayer.
>
> A bell clanged upon her heart. She felt him seize her hand:
>
> "Come!"
>
> All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart. He was drawing her into them: he would drown her. She gripped with both hands at the iron railing.
>
> "Come!"
>
> No! No! No! It was impossible. Her hands clutched the iron in frenzy. Amid the seas she sent a cry of anguish!
>
> "Eveline! Evvy!"
>
> He rushed beyond the barrier and called to her to follow. He was shouted at to go on but he still called to her. She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition. (Dubliners 32, 33)

No one perhaps in all of literature can describe human beings and human interactions in such an intricate manner within the narrow confines of the short story. For this, Joyce certainly receives more credit than Katherine Mansfield as well as Anton Chekov.

Talking about humans and human interactions brings us to the characters of these short stories. What one must agree upon is how human the characters of Joyce and Mansfield are. The limited length of the short story does not allow a writer to fully

describe his character or present all his traits but shockingly enough we have two writers here who have done it ingeniously, that is without making their characters mechanical or types. Their characters, at least and mostly the lead characters, are distinct individuals and have their thoughts and characteristics. This is more pronounced in James Joyce. I can say without any doubt that 'Araby' is a mini-bildungsroman of sorts. Though the space is limited, Joyce shows incredibly how the child sheds the misgivings of his boyhood days, becomes disillusioned and enters adulthood. Eveline too, in 'Eveline' realizes the weight of responsibilities and commitments and gets stuck in the bounds of reality. Both the protagonists attempt to find a romantic escape but are soon forced to accept their realities and the reality of life. In both cases, by using the stream-of-consciousness technique, Joyce exposes us to their thoughts and psyche and that provides us with important insights into the characters. As Katherine Mansfield does not have this trick up her sleeve, her characters, though human, fail to attain such levels of familiarity with the readers and likewise generate only limited sympathy or empathy for themselves. For instance, William in 'Marriage À LA MODE' is the poor, passive victim of a bad marriage, but he fails to generate much sympathy from the audience for his condition. The character becomes powerless and passive and it is the events in the story that reveal his condition to the readers and it is his wife's actions and behavior that make us feel bad for him. Had he been a character conceived by Joyce, we would be made aware of everything using William's thoughts and dialogue. Similarly, in 'Bliss', Bertha Young, the female lead, comes across as a very weak personality. She is on the receiving end of a cheating, lecherous husband and she is not vocal about it at all. It is again the events that present her condition while there are no inputs from her side.

Katherine Mansfield's motive however is served. Though the characters are not very vocal or as alive or free-thinking as Joyce's, they certainly do the job of showing how the common folk of that day and age were. Joyce does something similar with his characters. He shows the contemporary state of his beloved Dublin with the help of his characters who are accurate representations of the people of Dublin in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, the stream-of-consciousness motif gives Joyce and his characters the edge over Katherine Mansfield. Take nothing away from Mansfield though as her characters put up a strong fight in exposing the frailties of twentieth-century England. Furthermore, both Joyce and Mansfield have undoubtedly written stories of character and not stories of incident. According to M.H. Abrams, "Stories of character' focus instead on the state of mind and motivation, or on the psychological and moral qualities, of the protagonists" (M.H Abrams, *A*

Glossary of Literary Terms 364). This statement can be rightly applied to almost all the works of the writers in question as not a lot happens in their stories, there is no story to be told as such, and sometimes when something is seen developing, it is brought to an end without a proper conclusion, supplied sometimes with an open ending of sorts for the readers to draw their conclusions.

One clear similarity between Joyce and Mansfield is the extensive and functional use of symbols. While the symbols are various and serve varied purposes, certain symbols are employed identically by the two. The first symbol of this kind is the window. The window for both Mansfield and James Joyce functions as a film between one's private thoughts and one's public life. It also assumes the role of a magical projector that projects the thoughts of the character behind it and colours the visible world in the frame accordingly. The projection is magical because unlike cinema, which is there for everyone to watch, this screening is private, only visible to the eyes of the character who decides or dares to look out of the window. Rosabel, a milliner in Katherine Mansfield's 'The Tiredness of Rosabel', is visibly tired of her odious, uneventful life and comically of climbing four flights of stairs every day to reach her room. We see her kneeling on the floor as if in defeat but then at the same moment she does something brave, she looks out of the window which Mansfield calls, "just one little sheet of glass between her and the great wet world outside" (The Tiredness of Rosabel 2). She then begins to dream of a different kind of life and the hero of this romantic dream is the boyfriend of a customer she encountered that day. This fantastic dream allows her to penetrate the glass barrier and escape into the world outside where she otherwise has no place.

> Suppose they changed places. Rosabel would drive home with him, of course they were in love with each other, but not engaged, very nearly, and she would say—"I won't be one moment." He would wait in the brougham while her maid took the hat-box up the stairs, following Rosabel. Then the great, white and pink bedroom with roses everywhere in dull silver vases. She would sit down before the mirror and the little French maid would fasten her hat and find her a thin, fine veil and another pair of white suede gloves—a button had come off the gloves she had worn that morning. She had scented her furs and gloves and handkerchief, taken a big muff and run down stairs. The butler opened the door, Harry was waiting, they drove away together. ...*That* was life, thought Rosabel! On the way to the Carlton

> they stopped at Gerard's, Harry bought her great sprays of Parma violets, filled her hands with them." (The Tiredness of Rosabel 3)

The window acts as a similar barrier in James Joyce's 'Araby'.

> Every morning I lay on the floor in the front parlour watching her door. The blind was pulled down to within an inch of the sash so that I could not be seen. When she came out on the doorstep my heart leaped. I ran to the hall, seized my books and followed her. I kept her brown figure always in my eye and, when we came near the point at which our ways diverged, I quickened my pace and passed her. This happened morning after morning. I had never spoken to her, except for a few casual words, and yet her name was like a summons to all my foolish blood. (Dubliners 22)

The window here becomes a symbol of the perpetual distance between the two. It veils the boy's true feelings for Mangan's sister. He believes going to Araby and getting her something from that place of fantasy would act like a magical token and help him overcome this barrier.

In Joyce's 'An Encounter' we again come across windows but this time they show what happens to those who stay too long in their comfort zone with no desire to go beyond: " . . .and in the windows of the grocers' shops musty biscuits lay bleaching" (Dubliners 16).

One interesting symbol is the garden from Mansfield's 'Bliss'. Most critics choose the pear tree but I find the garden to be more important. It's a garden full of life, the pear tree in full bloom with no faded petals and the garden beds full of red and yellow tulips. It is therefore a symbol of Bertha and Harry's marriage. They are rich, they have a beautiful, healthy baby together, they have a nice house with a garden, and they have fashionable friends. So, we have a picture of post-marital peace, of happiness and tranquillity where everything seems to be just fine, but clearly, it is only a façade. The grey cat, dragging its belly is followed by the black cat, a cat of a darker colour which is hint enough to show that though matter appears light on the surface, something sinister and dark is brewing underneath and that disaster is inevitable.

> The windows of the drawing-room opened on to a balcony overlooking the garden. At the far end, against the wall, there was a tall, slender pear tree in

> fullest, richest bloom; it stood perfect, as though becalmed against the jade-green sky. Bertha couldn't help feeling, even from this distance, that it had not a single bud or a faded petal. Down below, in the garden beds, the red and yellow tulips, heavy with flowers, seemed to lean upon the dusk. A grey cat, dragging its belly, crept across the lawn, and a black one, its shadow, trailed after. (Bliss 4)

In Joyce's 'Araby' too we have a garden which has some symbolic significance. It is a "wild garden" (Dubliners 21) with a central apple tree and a few straggling bushes. The straggling bushes are a symbol of the adolescent mind. It signifies how in adolescence our thoughts are scattered and disoriented. It represents overthinking and even anxiety. The apple tree can be compared to the biblical tree of knowledge. It becomes one of the most important symbols in this short story for when the narrator finally reaches Araby he receives a reality check and gains the knowledge that he is nothing but "a creature driven and derided by vanity" (Dubliners 27) and his eyes burn with anguish and anger. The wild garden itself is a symbol of the wild world we live in which is only apparently civilized but where people live and act like savages practicing no kindness at all.

Such a world can very well be found in Katherine Mansfield's short stories, especially the stories written by her after the passing of her brother. Characters, both central and unimportant, are clearly shown to be unsympathetic towards the misfortunes of other human beings and indifferent to the loss of human life. 'The Garden Party' can be taken as a perfect example of this. We see how Mrs. Sheridan has the brilliant idea of making a basket of all the leftover food and giving it to the family of the dead man,

> Suddenly she looked up. There on the table were all those sandwiches, cakes, puffs, all uneaten, all going to be wasted. She had one of her brilliant ideas.
>
> "I know," she said. "Let's make up a basket. Let's send that poor creature some of this perfectly good food. At any rate, it will be the greatest treat for the children. Don't you agree? And she's sure to have neighbours calling in and so on. What a point to have it all ready prepared. Laura!" She jumped up. "Get me the big basket out of the stairs cupboard." (The Garden Party 10)

Though Mansfield has quite a few collections of short stories to her name and James Joyce only has the Dubliners, Joyce's characters somehow seem to be more

memorable. When it comes to the quality of writing, James Joyce again comes out as the victor but Katherine Mansfield is not too far behind. However, it must be said that Mansfield's prose is a lot more readable than Joyce's. In other words, Joyce's diction, I believe, is more scholarly while Mansfield uses the language of the common reader which is a lot more comprehensible. The use of symbols and the accurate representation of life are the two areas where these two giants truly meet and show equal prowess.

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