

Prelude and At the Bay Short Guide

Prelude and At the Bay by Katherine Mansfield

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Characters

In "Prelude" and "At the Bay," unlike other Mansfield stories, there is no single controlling point of view. Both stories are episodic, and the center of consciousness shifts from character to character. While nearly every character has his or her moment of illumination, the three characters who are developed most fully are Stanley, Linda Burnell, and Beryl Fairfield.

Linda Burnell should be the dominant woman in the household. She is the wife of an important businessman and the mother of his children, but she has left the running of the household and the raising of her children to her mother. Her relationship to Stanley is characterized by remoteness. At times her sister appears to be more Stanley's wife than Linda. Beryl plays cribbage at night with Stanley, and Beryl flirts with him as Linda remains lost in her dreams. Linda is analytical about her emotions and her lack of feelings for her children. Childbearing (both the actual experience and the dread of the next pregnancy) has left her drained, incapable of giving her children any love. When thinking of Stanley, she sees "all her feelings for him sharp and defined, one as true as the other. And there was this other, this hatred, just as real as the rest."

Beryl Fairfield is in a different position. Unlike her sister Linda, Beryl is not married and has no prospects of marriage. Whereas Linda is frustrated by the limitations imposed on her by her role as Stanley's wife, Beryl is frustrated by the uncertainty and ambiguity of her situation as an unmarried woman. Both stories end with episodes in which Beryl is alone in her room, contemplating who she is and who she might become. In "Prelude" she tries to catch a glimpse of her real self in a mirror but always sees Beryl playing a role. In "At the Bay," it is late at night and Beryl imagines herself in the arms of a lover, when Harry Kember (a local seaside Don Juan) calls to her from the garden. She goes out to him only to run away, horrified at the shoddy reality of what she has been imagining.

Stanley Burnell, the main male figure in this female household, is far more limited than the women. His happiness appears to depend on their moods, and his ability to imagine beyond immediate, practical concerns is limited. In "Prelude," when he thinks of joining a church, he hears "himself intoning extremely well: 'When thou didst overcome the Sharpness of Death Thou didst open the Kingdom of Heaven to all Believers.' And he saw the near brass-edged card on the corner of the pew — Mr. Stanley Burnell and family." Obviously the words from the service have made no impression on Stanley's mind or heart.

Social Concerns

Both of these stories present events in the daily life of the Burnells, a New Zealand family that resembles the household in which Mansfield was raised. "Prelude" concerns the family's move from town to country. "At the Bay," which takes place some time after "Prelude," concerns the passing of one day spent at the family's vacation bungalow by the sea. In both stories, the reader observes the complexity of the interrelationships which keep the family together yet apart. While the members of the family are closely joined by emotional bonds, each character remains a separate individual, never fully relating to anyone else, and isolated in the privacy of his or her own thoughts and responses.

Techniques

Mansfield's aim in "Prelude" and "At the Bay" was to recreate the life she knew as a child in New Zealand.

Each story consists of a series of episodes presented sequentially. Characters are not so much introduced or described as discovered within scenes; the reader learns about them and their lives from direct observation. T. O. Beachcroft points out that in this method there is no narrator. Mansfield allows "no comment from any implied narrator"; she makes "the scene and the events of the story reveal themselves." Another critic calls the form "dramatic in character, revealed rather than told." The cumulative effect of these short episodes is greater than the sum, for at the end of each story, the reader feels that he knows these people and their lives intimately, even though he is ignorant of most details of time, place, and class which would conventionally be used to define character in longer works of fiction.

Themes

Women dominate the Burnell household. Even though Stanley Burnell rules when he is at home, there is always the sense that he is an intrusive presence in his own house. When Stanley leaves for work in "At the Bay," all the women heave a collective sigh of relief — "There was no man to disturb them." In "Prelude," the women are responsible for the smooth handling of the move as they try to accommodate Stanley's needs and wishes. While Stanley may appear domineering and managerial, the reader is always aware that he remains subservient to the will of his wife. As one critic notes, in this story Mansfield portrays "four stages of womanhood" in the principal female characters in the household: Linda Burnell, the mistress of the household; Beryl Fairfield, her beautiful unmarried sister, who is in search of an identity; Kezia, one of Linda's children, who is still young enough to experience life naturally and unselfconsciously; and Mrs. Fairfield, Linda and Beryl's mother, who runs the household for her married daughter. In terms of plot, little occurs, but each of these characters is caught in revelatory moments which reflect her sense of identity and her period of life.

An important theme in "At the Bay" is the passage of time. The story opens with "very early morning." Only after the natural setting is discovered in the dawn does the first human being appear. At the end of the story, darkness has fallen, the last person has disappeared from view, and all is still.

Death and the meaning of existence are repeatedly alluded to in the conversations of different characters. In a central episode, Kezia learns about death from her grandmother who is thinking about the early, untimely death of one of her sons. Kezia refuses to accept the inevitability of Mrs. Fairfield's death when her grandmother tells her everyone must die.

Male characters are more important in "At the Bay" than in "Prelude," even though women continue to dominate the life of the household. Ambitious Stanley Burnell is here balanced by his brother-in-law Jonathan Trout who pities Stanley because of "his determination to make a job of everything," but who later reveals himself to be equally pitiable since he can never escape the demands of a job which requires him to sit "on a stool from nine to five, scratching in somebody's ledger." He likens his job to a prison and sees himself as an insect which has "flown into a room of its own accord" but then discovers it cannot get out and spends the rest of its existence ceaselessly "banging and flopping and crawling up the pane." Significantly, Jonathan shares an emotional sympathy with his sister-in-law, Linda, who feels trapped in her role as wife and mother.

Literary Precedents

Two possible antecedents for these stories come from different periods of literature: Theocritus and T. S. Eliot.

Mansfield used the XVth idyll of Theocritus as a model for a piece on the Coronation of George V that appeared in *New Age* in 1911. As T. O. Beachcroft notes in *The Modest Art*, this idyll "comes as near to a modern short story as anything in the world . . . the mime form gets rid of the need to prove the authority of the narrator." Characters are revealed through dialogue with no "comment, explanation, and moralizing" from an intrusive narrator. This form was well-suited to "scenes from everyday life." In both subject and method, "Prelude" and "At the Bay" can be compared with the XVth idyll of Theocritus.

According to Anthony Alpers, when T. S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" first appeared in 1917, Mansfield read it out loud to the guests at Lady Ottoline Morrell's estate in Garsington. Later Mansfield would tell Virginia Woolf that she didn't think of Eliot as a poet, because "Prufrock, is after all a short story." Just as Eliot experimented in poetic form to jettison expository or narrative encumbrances, so Mansfield attempted to achieve the immediacy of a dramatic scene or poem in the form of a short story.

Related Titles

In 1915 Mansfield began "The Aloe," which was to be a novel about New Zealand. On several occasions, Mansfield planned or began work on novels, always to abandon them. She got much further with "The Aloe" than with any other, but eventually she stopped writing it. The work she did on "The Aloe" was later cut and revised, becoming "Prelude," a departure from anything Mansfield had written before. The narrator has been virtually eliminated and the story divided into independent episodes. Mansfield used this episodic technique in only one other completed work, "At the Bay."



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