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« Short Stories : le choix des histoires courtes »

**Frédéric Boyer (FR),
Geneviève Brisac (FR),
Kirsty Gunn (Écosse),
Thomas McGuane (USA),
David Means (USA)**

Mardi 28 novembre à 19H30
à l'Institution des Chartreux
(58 rue Pierre Dupont - 69001)

Version anglaise (VO)

Kirsty Gunn Scotland

« At Home »

The Domestic World of the Short Story

« I will be talking about the domestic world of the short story - drawing particularly on the rooms and houses and gardens in the work of Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf, comparing the two writers' approaches and sensibilities, but also referring to the wider concerns of the short story home expressed by other practitioners of the form, from Chekhov to Raymond Carver. »

KIRSTY GUNN

"In the afternoon, the chairs came..."

So begins the opening of *Sun and Moon*, a short story by the New Zealand born writer Katherine Mansfield, written around the early part of the last century and as bright and modern to us now as the vivid time of day it describes:

"In the afternoon, the chairs came, a whole big cart full of little gold ones with their legs in the air. And then the flowers came. When you stared down from the balcony at the people carrying them the flower pots looked like funny awfully nice hats nodding up the path..."

"There was nobody to look after Sun and Moon" Mansfield writes. "...Mother was running all over the house and telephoning Father to be sure not to forget things. She only had time to say: 'Out of my way children!'... Nearly all the furniture was taken out of the dining room." Mansfield goes on, "The big piano was put in a corner and then came a row of flower pots and then came the goldy chairs. That was for the concert... But of course the place to be was in the kitchen..."

In this gorgeously evocative account of the preparations for a rather grand party, as seen and experienced by a small child, we have, as far as I am concerned, everything we need from a short story – that is, a perfectly rendered self-enclosed world. It is a world where, for a time, we the reader may live and feel and understand and sense... Where everything we need is close... A world in which we can be at home.



In this story, *Sun and Moon*, as in so many of Mansfield's fictions, the house, the home, is the site of all the action. Families, in all their chaotic muddle, frank disclosures and unbidden intimacies, rule here, their cries and arguments and loves filling the pages as dominantly as queens and kings once governed epics and ballads, as heroes and heroines and those larger than life characters that still predominate in our novels, held court between the covers of longer stories.

Here is Mansfield again, another house, another party – and see how quickly, in the first page of her story, in fact, she has us open the door and come right in to sit amongst the Sheridan family as they too get ready for a big occasion:

From *The Garden Party* –

"And after all the weather was ideal. They could not have had a more perfect day for a garden party if they had ordered it. Windless, warm, the sky without a cloud... Breakfast was not yet over before the men came to put up the marquee.

'Where do you want the marquee put, mother?'

'My dear child, it's no use asking me. I'm determined to leave everything to you children this year. Forget I am your mother. Treat me as an honoured guest.'

But Meg could not possibly go and supervise the men. She had washed her hair before breakfast, and she sat drinking her coffee in a green turban, with a dark wet curl stamped on each cheek. Jose, the butterfly, always came down in a silk petticoat and kimono jacket.

'You'll have to go, Laura; you're the artistic one.'

Away Laura flew, still holding her piece of bread and butter. It's so delicious to have an excuse for eating out of doors and besides, she loved having to arrange things..."

There can be no doubting the governing subject of home in these couple of paragraphs – how quickly it is established, how quickly we move in, take our place amongst the sisters and their mother. In a few more lines Mansfield fills in the domestic details around us, mother at her dressing table, the platters of sandwiches in the kitchen. Here is the flat green lawn bordered with its roses "the green bushes bowed down as though they had been visited by archangels". Here the grand trees, the little "path, up the steps, across the veranda"... into the hall.

"All the doors of the house seemed to be open" Mansfield writes. "The house was alive with soft, quick steps and running voices. The green baize door that led to the kitchen swung open and shut with a muffled thud... The front door pealed, and there sounded the rustle of Sadie's print skirt on the stairs..."

And so on. There is nothing Mansfield leaves out to make us feel perfectly familiar in this world she has created. It's there in the way she makes all her short stories – plunging us in *medias res*, straight into the middle of the sensibility of the characters, of the place, so we're immediately familiar, we feel, in that way, at home. But how much more obvious is that love of hers for the intimate,



the cherished place, in her stories like *The Garden Party* and *Sun and Moon* and *At the Bay* and *Prelude* and others that all have families and houses right at their centre, as their theme, their subject. The domestic is the story of Katherine Mansfield's stories, where her writing is at its most relaxed and natural and modern and free. The domestic is the hearth of her literary home.

Is there something, then, in the short story itself that makes it more suitable than other literary forms for describing domestic life? I like to think so. For here in the houses and rooms, in the day to day banality of regular life we have the world writ small – the larger epic concerns of the novel, with its sweep and sense of time and geographical and cultural scale compressed into a day in the life of a busy household. So Katherine Mansfield may be giving us a party, the excited activities of a family all wrapped up in one day, and yet the story has a depth and breadth that extends far beyond the walls of the home. This is surely what Chekhov means when he talks about the universality that is in the particular.

More of Chekhov later, for now let us return to the Sheridan's household, where in the midst of sandwich making and the arranging of flowers Laura hears of the death of a man who lives in one of the little workers cottages, Mansfield writes, "at the very bottom of a steep rise that led up to the house". It is not so close then, where this poor man's family lives, to the festivities taking part on the Sheridan's flat green lawns bordered with their flower beds – but it is not so far away, either. Laura the protagonist of *The Garden Party* feels the proximity acutely. Of the houses she thinks:

"True, they were far too near" – Mansfield writes, capturing perfectly in her prose the ambiguities both of social judgement and the pitiful distinctions of class. Laura is our way in to feeling acutely the human and humane differences in the houses people live in, the way they live. "They were the greatest possible eyesore" she continues in her thoughts, "and they had no right to be in that neighbourhood at all. They were little mean dwellings painted a chocolate brown. In the garden patches there was nothing but cabbage stalks, sick hens and tomato cans. The very smoke coming out of their chimneys was poverty-stricken. Little rags and shreds of smoke, so unlike the great silvery plumes that uncurled from the Sheridan's chimneys."

How we feel here both the ugliness and the tragedy of the differences in domestic lives. Later in the story, when Laura goes to visit the dead man's family, taking with her a basket of leftover food from the lavish tables of her own household, she senses acutely how the rooms of people's houses describe their inhabitants parameters. Next to the sun filled rooms and halls that describe her own life of privilege, her very spaciousness of thought and imagination, we have this wretchedly cramped life of another family, where a tiny kitchen gives straight on to a cramped parlour where the dead man is laid out. Mansfield gives us the terrible intimacy of death in the way Laura comes upon the body by surprise. For you can't help but brush up against death in this sort of house, Mansfield seems to be saying, where one can apparently avoid it in another:



“Here she was going down the hill to somewhere where a man lay dead” Mansfield writes “and she couldn’t realize it. Why couldn’t she? She stopped a minute. And it seemed to her that kisses, voices, tinkling spoons, laughter, the smell of crushed grass were somehow inside her.”

So... Two houses, and, as it were, two stories. And all life and death here - tragedy and bitterness, the world’s sadness and inequalities brilliantly described in the impressions of, on the one hand, a freshly cut lawn, and, on the other, a shallow dug patch with its cabbage stalk. Domestic life, the large white house on one side, the chocolate brown squat on the other, describes the entire world.

I went to school in that large white house Katherine Mansfield describes in *The Garden Party*. I was educated at a small Scottish girls’ school in New Zealand, in Wellington, the town where Katherine Mansfield grew up - and in fact part of our school incorporated the house where she was born. Because of this, because our walk to school every day took us through those streets where Katherine Mansfield herself had walked, because the main part of our building seems to be the house that was the inspiration for the Sheridan’s home – all through my time at Queen Margaret College we were treated to endless tales about Katherine Mansfield’s life and letters. Perhaps it was from that school, that house, after all – emanating from an English Department saturated with the work of one of the best known short story writers in the English language – that I became aware of this association with the short story and the idea of home. That notion of claiming a place as your own, both inventing it and also colouring and shading it with your own sense of the familiar... It must have been then that I formed the understanding that the best of a certain kind of short literature and the concerns of home life have a mutual compatibility that refines itself with each re-reading.

For these stories, that seem so quiet, so “homely”... How they do shine. Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield’s contemporary, (she was the only writer of whom Woolf confessed she felt jealous), similarly sites the home as the context for some of her best work – and in terms of her short stories shows the domestic world as a perfect setting for aesthetic thought and judgement, and for the struggles and joys of female experience. We go room to room in Woolf’s shorter fiction, sitting with her characters in the lamplight as they dream and remember and seek out the language that will describe the fullness, the random richness of their thoughts. Consider *Green*, the shortest short story of them all, where a whole world comes to inhabit a glass ornament on the mantelpiece. I give it here in its entirety:

“The pointed fingers of glass hang downwards. The light slides down the glass, and drops a pool of green. All day long the ten fingers of the lustre drop green upon the marble. The feathers of parakeets – their harsh cries – sharp blades of palm trees – green too; green needles glittering in the sun. But the hard glass drips on to the marble; the pools hover above the desert sand; the camels lurch



through them; the pools settle on the marble; rushes edge them; weeds clog them; here and there a white blossom; the frog flops over; at night the stars are set there unbroken. Evening comes, and the shadow sweeps the green over the mantelpiece; the ruffled surface of ocean. No ships come; the aimless waves sway beneath the empty sky. It's night; the needles drip blots of blue. The green's out."

Could writing be more quiet and yet so loaded? It's as though, by bringing her world indoors, its varieties, its clangs, its "harsh cries", Woolf has transformed reality into a kind of dreamscape. Her domestic world, and she wrote of this quite explicitly, is the world of the mind – and how we feel that when we read her! That sense of being enclosed by the walls of her story, or, we should say of Woolf more explicitly, by the beautiful structures of her words is to feel that we're inhabiting that mind with her. As the Sheridan's white house is the place where we come to live in Mansfield's writing, so, in Woolf do we reside in the very language of her art. In stories like *A Mark on the Wall*, *Lappin and Lapinova*, *A Haunted House* and *Lady in the looking Glass* – the list goes on – there is a merging of the self into the room around it:

From *The Lady in The Looking Glass*:

"The house was empty, and one felt, since one was the only person in the drawing-room, like one of those naturalists who, covered with grass and leaves, lie watching the shyest animals... Meanwhile, since all the door and windows were open in the heat, there was a perpetual sighing and ceasing sound,, the voice of the transient and the perishing, it seemed, coming and going like human breath, while in the looking-glass things had ceased to breathe and lay still in the trance of immortality "

In the *Mrs Dalloway* stories we feel the same preoccupation as Mansfield describes for the pleasures and intimacies of domestic life, the feeling that the writers have come home to their subject. Can we say then, because these two great practitioners of short fragmentary fiction, Woolf and Mansfield are women, there is a case for arguing that the domestic is a female subject? Certainly because of women's cultural history, there can be no doubt: after all, no one knows our kitchens better than us! And no doubt too that the subtlety, the quietness of the world that exists behind the front door, is far removed from the male dominated one beleaguered by wars and politics and geography and so is bound to be rendered as "alternative" or "other" or... "female"! And there can be no doubt, also, with male concerns headlining our cultural and literary past and championing a kind of fiction that firmly embraces and celebrates what we tend to call "big" subjects that we render as unformed, unfinished, uncertain object, the other kind of, what Woolf called, "frail project". Yet I said before we need to talk about Chekhov in any discussion of the short story and certainly we need to talk about him now. For there is a male writer embarked on the same literary experiment of frailty and uncertainty, who makes of his small everyday subjects the universal and the extraordinary – and he does it mostly within the walls of home.



Chekhov's stories share with the female writers I have mentioned a love for the mysteries, the transformations, that occur while the house stands firm and all is seemingly as it always was. People are torn apart, merged into different sensibilities, their loyalties broken and fresh love pledged – all in the spaces between lunch and tea. His great story *About Love*, also part – told in another story *Gooseberries*, that is narrated in a style beloved by Chekhov: inside a house, after a meal, the sense of domestic arrangements passing about in the background as the tale unfolds. This preoccupation of setting a story within a story could not have better expression than in the home – the most apt place for the telling of, listening to and reading of stories. Here we are tonight, after all, dear readers, in our Villa Gillet! Let us listen to Chekhov for a moment now:

"It seemed that he had a story he wanted to tell. People who live alone always have something or other that they want to get off their chests. . . In the country they usually end up pouring their hearts out to their house guests. Through the window could be seen grey sky and trees wet with rain; since there was nowhere one could go in that kind of weather, there was nothing else to do but tell stories and listen."

How delicious this is for the reader! To be drawn inside this way while the weather beats down and the fire flickers in the grate. Here is Woolf's word within a world, her light shining out from a single room in the darkness, her "bright picture hung" as she writes in *A Woman's College from Outside* "in the heart of the night, the shrine hollowed in the nocturnal blackness." Only Chekhov describes it, not in the rendering of words and images anew, but in the narrative structure of a story. "The next day for lunch" he writes in the opening lines of *About Love* "delicious pies, crayfish, and lamb rissoles were served. . ."

Chekhov of course is known to be a great inspiration to Mansfield in terms of form – as we've just seen, that plunging straight in to the heart of the story, and in what I call "bite" – that sense of rendering sensation and thought all in one go, in vivid, compressed chunks. But I would also suggest that his celebration of houses and rooms as places for the imagination to live was another kind of inspiration for her. Here is the end of *About Love* now and it might be a Mansfield veranda we are standing on as much as a Russian balcony:

"While Alyokhin had been talking the rain had stopped and the sun had come out. Burkin and Ivan Ivanych went out on to the balcony, from where there was a wonderful view onto the garden and the river, which was now gleaming in the sun like a mirror. They enjoyed the view, but they also felt sad that this man with the kind, intelligent eyes, who had told them such a heartfelt story, really was just going round and round here on this huge estate. . ."

So it is with life at home that everything seems to be the same – and yet is different, change shadowing the routines of everyday, dramas enacting while words go unspoken. How I am reminded here of the end of Mansfield's dramatically charged and dead quiet story *Bliss*, which renders treachery and sadness while



maintaining impeccably the surface of domesticity so that no darkness seems to have charged it at all: “Oh what is going to happen now” cries the protagonist in that story, after seeing her husband with another woman. “Bertha simply ran over to the long windows” Mansfield writes. “But the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still.”

Perhaps this is the place to finish our discussion for the evening – standing as we do with Bertha in her dining room at the end of a dinner party in the sight of that tree. How much we have seen, how much we have sensed by staying in this one place of short fiction, enclosed by the form of the short story, in the time that it takes to read it enclosed, where everything we need is here. Of course there are so many stories we could have gone on to tell – short stories by Raymond Carver and Jayne Anne Phillips, by Alice Munro and Richard Ford, by Patricia Grace and Mavis Gallant and Helen Simpson... and many, many more, and all of them showing home as the world within a world, from Richard Ford’s American East Coast CapeCoddors and his single men roaming around inside them to Mavis Gallant’s Parisian apartments trapping unhappy lovers... From Patricia Grace’s maraes with their extended families playing out old family traditions to Helen Simpson’s South London terrace houses with women managing squads of children inside... Once we start looking we see houses, domesticity, children and partners and lovers... We see our home everywhere. As the critic Edward Said, in talking of the writing practice, described as “a house of words” the stories themselves become our home.

If I may, because I am a writer of fiction and no essayist, I would like to close with the words of one of my own short stories, from my collection “This place you return to is home”, a narrator at the bedside of her damaged and broken sister, which I would hope may describe my love and celebration of the domestic as a place of endless possibilities, of wholeness and beauty and richness of resource that finds such apt expression in the short story form more than any words I’ve spoken here tonight, Permit me to return home to it now:

“Bowls of roses stood in the circles of lamplight and at night these gorgeously grown, these pruned and trained blooms were made even more beautiful, the stems held all the more straight, the petals gathered around their centres in even more perfect silken knots, because the furniture around them was shaky and half broken, because the curtains hung without linings down the wall. Our grandmother made it that way, I know that now, the outside made safe by her garden, the outline of trellis and border and hedge. Did it matter that a door didn’t lock between outside and in, that a twig held open the glass? There was no one to keep out. Nothing beyond the garden, beyond the roses and their circles of light.

Do you remember? How we were safe there?

Now you’re in this dark room with only a small yellow light by your bed...

Can I make for you in words that safe place where we can stay?”