

Short Story Assignment 16

- Read Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill" and "An Ideal Family." Answer questions on the story "Miss Brill" in the study guide as well as the question below.
- The background pictures are of New Zealand, where Katherine Mansfield grew up.
- Continue working on your speech, using the rhetorical devices and figures of speech that we talked about in class. The Speech is due the first Friday in February.
- Remember that your short story is due on the fourth Friday of January and your critical paper on the last Friday of January.

Long Range Assignments

- Your next book report will be due **third week in March.**

Question on Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill"

Katherine Mansfield is considered to be one of the world's greatest short story writers. The story "Miss Brill" shows her artful adeptness in drawing up a character that a reader is interested in. Most readers, however, would say that there is not much plot to the story. Consider the following remark on plot and character made by Thomas Bailey Aldrich, who quotes both Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope and 20th-century poet and critic T. S. Eliot. Do you agree with his statement? If so, how does one account for the brilliant success of "Miss Brill"?

Henry James, in his paper on Anthony Trollope, says that if Trollope "had taken sides on the rather superficial opposition between novels of character and novels of plot, I can imagine him to have said (except that he never expressed himself in epigram) that he preferred the former class, inasmuch as character in itself is plot, while plot is by no means character." So neat an antithesis would surely never have found itself between Mr. Trollope's lips if Mr. James had not cunningly lent it to him. Whatever theory of novel-writing Mr. Trollope may have preached, his almost invariable practice was to have a plot. He always had a story to tell, and a story involves beginning, middle, and end—in short, a framework of some description.

There have been delightful books filled wholly with character-drawing; but they have not been great novels. The great novel deals with human action as well as with mental portraiture and analysis. That "character in itself is plot" is true only in a limited sense. A plan, a motive with a logical conclusion, is as necessary to a novel or a romance as it is to a drama. A group of skillfully made-up men and women lounging in the greenroom or at the wings is not the play. It is not enough to say that this is Romeo and that Lady Macbeth. It is not enough to inform us that certain passions are supposed to be embodied in such and such persons: these persons should be placed in situations developing those passions. A series of unrelated scenes and dialogues leading to nothing is inadequate.

Mr. James's engaging epigram seems to me vulnerable at both ends—unlike Achilles. "Plot is by no means character." Strictly speaking, it is not. It appears to me, however, that plot approaches nearer to being character than character does to being plot. Plot necessitates action, and it is impossible to describe a man's actions' under whatever conditions, without revealing something of his character, his way of looking at things, his moral and mental pose. What a hero of fiction does paints him better than what he says, and vastly better than anything his creator may say of him. Mr. James asserts that "we care what happens to people only in proportion as we know what people are." I think we care very little what people are (in fiction) when we do not know what happens to them.