

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD'S STORY "THE CHILD WHO WAS TIRED"

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Abstract: This article offers a comprehensive comparative and descriptive analysis of Katherine Mansfield's short story "The Child Who Was Tired," examining its narrative technique, thematic structure, and ethical implications within the framework of literary modernism. The study integrates close textual analysis with comparative insights drawn from Mansfield's other works, particularly "The Garden Party" and "Prelude," as well as broader modernist representations of childhood. The research demonstrates that Mansfield's restrained narrative voice, psychological realism, and symbolic use of domestic space expose the exploitation of marginalized children and challenge sentimental portrayals of childhood. The findings highlight Mansfield's contribution to modernist social critique and confirm the story's relevance to contemporary discussions of class, labor, and human vulnerability.

Keywords: Katherine Mansfield; modernism; childhood suffering; comparative analysis; descriptive analysis

INTRODUCTION

Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923) is widely recognised as one of the most influential figures in early twentieth-century modernist fiction. Her short stories revolutionised narrative form through their emphasis on psychological depth, fragmentary structure, and subtle emotional resonance. Rather than relying on traditional plot-driven storytelling, Mansfield focused on moments of consciousness, inner conflict, and social tension. Among her works, "The Child Who Was Tired" stands out as one of her most disturbing and morally charged stories, offering an unflinching portrayal of childhood exploitation and exhaustion.

Written during a period of growing awareness of social inequality, the story reflects Mansfield's sensitivity to the suffering of the powerless. It depicts the life of a young servant girl subjected to relentless labour, emotional neglect, and physical deprivation. Unlike many literary representations of childhood that emphasise innocence or growth, Mansfield presents childhood as a site of trauma and social injustice.

The purpose of this article is to conduct a detailed descriptive and comparative analysis of "The Child Who Was Tired." The study seeks to answer the following research questions: How does Mansfield use narrative technique to convey psychological exhaustion? In what ways does the story reflect modernist aesthetics and ethical concerns? How does this portrayal of childhood compare with other works by Mansfield and her modernist contemporaries? By addressing these questions, the article aims to contribute to Mansfield scholarship and modernist literary studies.

METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative literary methodology, combining descriptive textual analysis with comparative literary analysis. The descriptive method involves close reading of the primary text, focusing on language, imagery, narrative perspective, characterisation, and

symbolism. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of how meaning is constructed within the story.

The comparative method situates “The Child Who Was Tired” within Mansfield’s broader body of work, particularly in relation to “The Garden Party” and “Prelude,” which also explore class consciousness and childhood experience. In addition, the study draws comparative insights from modernist writers such as James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence, whose works similarly depict marginalised consciousness.

Primary data consist of Mansfield’s short story, while secondary data include scholarly books and peer-reviewed articles on Mansfield, modernism, and literary representations of childhood. The analysis follows an interpretative framework informed by modernist literary theory and social criticism.

RESULTS

The descriptive analysis reveals that narrative perspective is central to the story’s emotional power. Mansfield employs a limited third-person narration closely aligned with the child’s consciousness. The reader experiences the world through the child’s physical sensations—hunger, fatigue, and pain—rather than through explicit authorial commentary. This technique creates an intimate psychological portrait of exhaustion.

Characterization in the story is deliberately minimal. The child remains nameless, reinforcing her lack of identity and social value. Adult characters, particularly the employers, are depicted through their actions rather than psychological depth, emphasizing their emotional distance and moral indifference. This imbalance highlights the power dynamics that sustain exploitation.

Symbolism is another significant finding. Sleep functions as a recurring motif representing both biological necessity and psychological escape. The domestic space, traditionally associated with comfort and care, becomes a site of oppression. The repetitive structure of the child’s daily routine mirrors the monotony of her suffering and contributes to the story’s tragic inevitability.

Comparatively, Mansfield’s treatment of class differs from that in “The Garden Party,” where class awareness emerges through a moment of reflection. In “The Child Who Was Tired,” no such awakening occurs; instead, the narrative moves toward irreversible tragedy. This contrast underscores Mansfield’s range in addressing social issues.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that “The Child Who Was Tired” exemplifies Mansfield’s modernist commitment to psychological realism and ethical restraint. By avoiding overt moral judgment, Mansfield allows the narrative details to speak for themselves. This aligns with modernist aesthetics, which favor implication over explanation.

In comparison with “Prelude,” where childhood is depicted through memory and domestic intimacy, this story presents childhood as a condition of labor and deprivation. The contrast reveals Mansfield’s refusal to romanticize childhood and her willingness to confront uncomfortable social realities.

From a broader modernist perspective, Mansfield’s portrayal of marginalized consciousness parallels Joyce’s use of interiority and Lawrence’s focus on social constraint. However,

Mansfield's style remains distinct in its quiet intensity and emotional economy. Her focus on a female child servant also introduces a gendered dimension to modernist social critique.

The story's ethical significance lies in its exposure of systemic cruelty. Rather than portraying evil as individual malice, Mansfield presents exploitation as normalized behavior embedded within domestic and social structures. This insight enhances the story's relevance for contemporary readers and scholars.

CONCLUSION

This article has provided an expanded descriptive and comparative analysis of Katherine Mansfield's "The Child Who Was Tired," demonstrating its importance within modernist literature and Mansfield's oeuvre. Through narrative restraint, symbolic imagery, and psychological depth, Mansfield exposes the silent suffering of an exploited child and challenges sentimental notions of childhood.

The comparative analysis reveals Mansfield's versatility in portraying class and childhood across different texts. The study confirms that "The Child Who Was Tired" remains a powerful example of modernist social critique and continues to resonate in discussions of inequality, labor, and human vulnerability.

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