



INSPIRATIONAL WEB BASED SOCIAL SCIENCE ACTIVITIES

nzedge.com/heroes/mansfield.html (Print out for students)

New Zealand Edge is a website that promotes a new and optimistic way of thinking about New Zealand's identity, people, stories, achievements, and place in the world. In this social sciences unit we look at a very unlikely and probably reluctant hero – Katherine Mansfield. Even though she spent most of her tragically short life away from New Zealand, she is revered by most in New Zealand literary circles as our greatest ever writer. But Katherine Mansfield is and was divisive. While her international reputation as a writer is unquestionable and she was regarded in this country for many years as our only writer of note, some people in the literary world have questioned her contribution to New Zealand literature. The probable reason for this was her extended absence. Katherine Mansfield in real life was also divisive in the way people perceived her and the same can be said about how people receive her stories. There is no middle ground – they either express total admiration for her brilliance or fail to find merit in her writing. In this unit we explore the life and times of the troubled genius that was Katherine Mansfield. **Levels 4-6**

TUNING IN TO KATHERINE MANSFIELD

- What do the students know about Katherine Mansfield? (*KM*) Do they know of or have read any of her short stories? Do they know that she is famous for changing the way that short stories were written? How important do they think a plot is to a short story? Do students think that almost dispensing with a plot would be possible? What could a writer substitute instead?
- To help answer this, have students read the brief biography at: www.biography.com (type her name into the search box). Have students note that there is a reference to famous Russian short story writer Anton Chekhov whose writings *KM* admired. Find out what Chekhov substituted for a complex plot. Tell students that she expanded on this and changed the 'rules' of how a short story could be written.

CASTING OFF CONVENTION

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- Before distributing the article, read out the quote from her letter to husband John Middleton Murry. Have students speculate on the type of personality who would live life based on this philosophy. Compare the speculations with the many descriptors of *KM* given in the first two paragraphs of the story.
- What do students think being conventional or following convention means? What evidence can they find that *KM* was not the type of person to follow convention? How did this affect her relationships with other people – particularly other writers?
- Introduce the idea of a conventional plot as a series of events in a story that follow a definite sequence. Tell students that famous writers before *KM* such as Rudyard Kipling, H. G. Wells and Edgar Allan Poe always used highly structured plots. Develop the idea that *KM* threw out this convention and simply focused on just a moment or one event in people's everyday lives. How would abandoning a structured plot help a writer to produce writing that is vivid and strong – the style that *KM* is famous for?

DISCUSSION TOPICS AND ACTIVITIES

- To help students organise their thinking about the life and times of *KM*, have them work through the article and construct a ...

... timeline of significant dates and events in her life.

- What reasons can students find to justify her real reluctance to return to Wellington after her schooling in London? How different do they think that life in Wellington in 1903 was from life in London at that time? Discuss the career options for women in New Zealand in the early 1900s and the attitudes the young *KM* observed in 'a great many girls'.
- Discuss and paraphrase the ideas that she expresses in her 'abandoned' novel. What do students think is meant by 'the frenzied exhortation to live'? Have students locate examples of this in her everyday life.
- Introduce the idea that London, at the time of her return was alive with artists, painters, writers and even economists who were questioning convention in their chosen fields and the way that life should be lived. It was a time of experimentation and great vibrancy. How did this fit in with *KM's* philosophy? Can they find examples of how the (Bloomsbury) group she associated with and the Post Impressionist art movement influenced her writing? In what way?
- Discuss the idea of *KM* using a mask or several layers of masks when associating with her literary friends. Why would she do this? Can students find any evidence of her not fitting in well and of being regarded as an outsider?
- Have students trace the changes in *KM's* relationship with New Zealand from a schoolgirl up to the time she wrote *Prelude* – believed by many critics to be a work of genius. Although she never returned to New Zealand, why do they think she developed a special affection for it? How did this enhance her writing?
- What impression did her estranged husband John Middleton Murry try to convey to the world after her tragic death? Why would he want to turn her into a 'saintly creature'? Speculate on how Katherine Mansfield would have reacted to this and why?
- Prior to reading and printing out sufficient copies of *Prelude* at: <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/mansfield/bliss/prelude.html> have students revisit the Primer for Infants section and suggest why she made the defiant statement about intellectuals.

