

COMPARISON BETWEEN THEMES IN O'HENRY AND CATHERINE MANSFIELD'S SHORT STORIES.

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Abstract: This thesis explores the thematic similarities and differences between the short stories of O'Henry and Katherine Mansfield, two renowned authors known for their distinctive narrative styles and exploration of human emotions. By analyzing key works from both authors, the study highlights how they address common themes such as irony, human vulnerability, social class, and the complexity of relationships. O'Henry, known for his surprise endings and focus on urban life, often emphasizes the contrast between appearances and reality, using irony to reveal deeper truths about human nature. In contrast, Mansfield, through her modernist approach, delves into the inner lives of her characters, focusing on moments of epiphany and the emotional undercurrents in seemingly mundane interactions. This thesis examines how both authors portray the human condition, the impact of societal expectations, and the role of fate and chance in shaping individual lives. Through comparative analysis, this study aims to shed light on the unique narrative techniques and thematic preoccupations of O'Henry and Mansfield, ultimately revealing how their short stories reflect a shared understanding of life's unpredictability and the complexity of human experience.

Key words: Irony, Social class, human nature, modernism, narrative style, character development, literary comparison

Introduction: Short stories have long been a powerful literary form, offering a condensed yet impactful exploration of human experiences and emotions. Two prominent authors known for their mastery of this genre are O'Henry and Katherine Mansfield. Although their works are separated by both geography and literary tradition, with O'Henry representing American realism and Mansfield emerging from the modernist movement in New Zealand and England, both writers offer profound insights into the complexities of life. This thesis seeks to compare and contrast the themes found in their short stories, focusing on how they depict human vulnerability, social class, relationships, and the role of irony.

Analysis: O'Henry, best known for his surprising endings and wit, often explores themes related to the unpredictability of life, the tension between societal expectations and individual desires, and the interplay of fate and irony. His stories, often set in urban settings, are imbued with a sense of realism that reflects the harshness and humor of everyday life, where characters' lives are dramatically altered by seemingly small decisions or coincidences.

On the other hand, Katherine Mansfield, a key figure in modernism, uses her short stories to delve deeply into the psychological landscapes of her characters. Mansfield's work is marked by introspection, focusing on moments of epiphany, emotional complexity, and the subtle interplay between personal desires and societal pressures. Unlike O'Henry's often plot-driven narratives, Mansfield's stories are more concerned with capturing fleeting moments of emotional realization and understanding, often set against a backdrop of social norms and cultural expectations.

While O'Henry and Mansfield differ in narrative style and approach, both authors engage with similar thematic concerns. This study explores how their respective works reveal insights into the human condition, addressing universal themes such as love, loss, social disparity, and the intricacies of human relationships. Through a comparative analysis, this thesis will examine how the authors' treatment of these themes reflects the cultural contexts of their time and how their stories continue to resonate with readers today.

Discussion: The thematic exploration in the works of O'Henry and Katherine Mansfield reveals significant contrasts in how they depict human nature, social class, and relationships. Despite these differences, both authors share an interest in irony, fate, and emotional complexity, using these themes to highlight the unpredictable nature of life. This discussion will analyze key themes in their works, with examples from selected stories, to explore how each author portrays the nuances of human experience.

1. Irony and Fate

One of the most prominent themes in O'Henry's short stories is the use of irony, particularly situational irony, where the outcomes of events are in stark contrast to the expectations of the characters. O'Henry's stories often hinge on unexpected twists that force the reader to reconsider the characters' actions and motivations. For example, in *The Gift of the Magi*, a young couple, Jim and Della, sacrifice their most prized possessions to buy gifts for each other. Jim sells his watch to buy Della a set of combs for her long hair, while Della sells her hair to buy Jim a chain for his watch. In the end, their sacrifices nullify the value of their gifts, but the story's ironic conclusion underscores the theme of love and selflessness. O'Henry uses irony to highlight the unpredictability of life, suggesting that even the best intentions can be thwarted by fate.

In contrast, Katherine Mansfield often explores irony in more subtle ways, especially in her modernist stories. Mansfield's characters experience emotional revelations that are more introspective, focusing on the inner turmoil and psychological states of the individuals. In *The Garden Party*, the protagonist, Laura, is initially preoccupied with the excitement of a family garden party. However, upon hearing of the death of a working-class neighbor, she experiences a profound shift in perspective. While her family remains detached and unaffected by the news, Laura's encounter with the reality of death disrupts her previously carefree worldview. The irony in *The Garden Party* lies in the contrast between Laura's momentary enlightenment and her inability to change the attitudes of those around her. Mansfield's irony, though less overt than O'Henry's, similarly reveals the discrepancy between expectation and reality, particularly in terms of class and personal growth.

2. Social Class and Human Nature

Both O'Henry and Mansfield engage with the theme of social class, though they approach it from different angles. O'Henry often highlights the struggles of the working class, particularly in the context of urban life. His characters frequently find themselves in situations where economic hardship shapes their decisions and actions. In *The Ransom of Red Chief*, O'Henry humorously explores class disparity through the story of two kidnappers who abduct a wealthy child, only to find that the child is mischievous and violent. The irony in this story—where the kidnappers end up paying the child's father to take him back—underscores the unpredictability of human behavior and exposes the social divide between the criminals and the wealthy family.

In Mansfield's works, the focus on social class is often more introspective and psychological. In *Miss Brill*, for instance, the protagonist is an aging woman who enjoys watching the lives of others from her bench in a park. She believes herself to be an important part of the social fabric, imagining that others notice her as much as she observes them. However, when a young couple mocks her, it becomes clear that Miss Brill is an outsider, invisible to the very people she observes. Mansfield's portrayal of class is subtle, emphasizing personal isolation and societal detachment rather than overt economic disparities. The story suggests that class, while a significant factor in societal structure, also shapes the individual's internal perception of their worth.

3. Relationships and Emotional Complexity

O'Henry's portrayal of relationships is often shaped by external circumstances, such as economic struggles or societal expectations. His characters, while deeply caring for one another, are frequently caught in situations where they must navigate the challenges of love and sacrifice. In *The Last Leaf*, O'Henry explores themes of selflessness and devotion through the relationship between two women, Johnsy and Sue. Johnsy falls ill with pneumonia and loses the will to live, believing that she will die when the last leaf

falls from a vine outside her window. Sue asks their neighbor, an elderly artist, to paint a leaf on the vine so that Johnsy believes she is not going to die. The artist sacrifices his own health to complete the painting, demonstrating the profound bond between the characters. The story's poignant ending, where the artist dies as a result of his efforts, emphasizes the sacrifices people make for those they love, highlighting the complexity of human relationships.

Mansfield, meanwhile, often portrays relationships in a more fragmented way, focusing on moments of emotional tension or realization. In *The Daughters of the Late Colonel*, Mansfield explores the strained relationship between two sisters, Josephine and Constantia, who are mourning the death of their father. Throughout the story, the sisters struggle to assert their independence, bound by societal expectations and the lingering presence of their overbearing father. Their inability to communicate openly with one another reflects the emotional distance and repression that defines their relationship. Mansfield's stories often capture the complexity of relationships in a way that feels both intimate and unsettling, as characters grapple with unspoken emotions and societal constraints.

4. The Role of the Individual and Society

Both O'Henry and Mansfield examine how the individual interacts with societal structures, though they highlight different aspects of this relationship. O'Henry's characters often find themselves in situations where their individual desires conflict with societal expectations. His stories suggest that society, while shaping individual actions, cannot fully determine the outcomes of personal decisions. In *A Retrieved Reformation*, the story of a former criminal named Jimmy Valentine who seeks redemption through love and self-sacrifice, O'Henry portrays the individual's struggle for freedom against the constraints of their past. The story's resolution, where Jimmy's criminal background is revealed but ultimately forgiven, reflects O'Henry's belief in the possibility of personal transformation, despite societal judgments.

Mansfield's stories, on the other hand, often emphasize the emotional consequences of societal expectations. In *The Stranger*, the arrival of a mysterious stranger at a dinner party disrupts the guests' comfortable lives, exposing the fragility of their social personas. Mansfield's characters are frequently confronted with moments that reveal their vulnerability and the tension between their private selves and the public roles they are expected to perform.

Conclusion: Both O'Henry and Katherine Mansfield address complex themes such as irony, fate, social class, and human relationships. While O'Henry's stories often rely on external events and humor to highlight the contradictions of life, Mansfield's works delve deeper into the psychological and emotional lives of her characters, reflecting a more introspective approach. Despite their differences, both authors shed light on the

unpredictability of human nature and the ways in which individuals navigate the constraints of society.

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