Modern Short Stories with reference to Katherine Mansfield, Bessie Head and Edith Wharton.

Modernist short stories have often been described as psychological sketches. The expression underlines two things of paramount importance in modernist short stories and modernist fiction at large. First, modernist writers aimed to do away with plot and action, with a conventional narrative form, whether in the novels or in the shorts stories. Second, they wanted to convey a character's "impressions" through the use of narrative voice, what became known as the stream of consciousness. Formally speaking, this translated into an extensive use of free indirect speech as well as a superimposition of different narrative frames structuring the text in lieu of the traditional plot structure. Another distinctive feature of the modernist text, which is the consequence or maybe the cause of this focus on a character's inner life, is how it consistently lays bare the social semblances. Modernist stories are most often set in highly coded realist social contexts. “*The Fly*,” by Katherine Mansfield, is a short story which can be understood best as social criticism. It has long been a staple of literature for authors to veil social criticism with allegory and symbolism in subtle ways, thus forcing the reader to determine for himself what a story may actually mean. For example, the act of the boss dropping ink onto the fly repeatedly to see what it will do makes little sense if taken at face value, but the scene begins to make sense once it is acknowledged that the boss and the fly, as well as the situation itself, are symbols best understood in the context of World War One. In fact, it can be demonstrated that the use of symbolism and allegory is carefully employed in “*The Fly*” in order to criticize the British military leaders and the elder generation of the early twentieth century who supported the first World War out of unthinking patriotism and a childish desire to win at all costs, themselves remaining willfully ignorant of the horrors of modern warfare into which they sent their nation’s sons. The fly, first and foremost, is a symbol of the young men who went to war not knowing what horrors awaited them. We are given a glimpse into the fly’s point of view in the line which reads, “The horrible danger was over; it had escaped; it was ready for life again”. No young men who are sent off to war believe that they are going to die. Just as the fly escapes one close scrape with death only to find itself doused with one blot of ink, then another, and another, many of the young soldiers in World War One were thrust forward into battle again and again until they, like the fly, were killed. As the fly is the boss’s plaything, able to live or die based on the latter’s whim, the soldiers were little more than pawns in a game waged by old men who knew nothing of what the war was truly like on the frontline. The boss can be seen as a symbol of the elder class of British who blindly supported the war for the sake of war regardless of the fate of their sons and grandsons. This question must first be asked: Does the boss truly grieve for his son? It may be inferred from the following references that his attempt to mourn is done in order to prove to himself and everyone else that he is very patriotic and has more reason to grieve than anyone. His attitude concerning the death of his son seems very emotional on the face of it, but he seems to mourn in a very calculated way, as evidenced in the line which goes, “He wanted, he intended, he had arranged to weep”. The boss is thus also symbolic of the inept military leaders who never saw the war firsthand but planned the battles from well behind the front and who did not care as much about the fate of the young soldiers who fought their battles as much as winning the war. The boss treats the fly as a plaything, just as the British military leaders treated their soldiers in the “game of war.” He pushes the fly to its limit and, once he sees that the fly is beginning to recover from the last blot of ink, he drops just one more which, of course, ends up killing the fly. This short story is an excellent example of social criticism through symbolism and allegory. Furthermore, it holds a lesson within it which is as important today as it was when it was originally published in 1923: War is not a game. Sadly, the war‐torn history of the world, since the end of the 1st World War has proven that mankind has yet to learn the ultimate folly of war.

There is also a characteristic theatricality to Mansfield's texts that may also be found in other modernist texts as well , that is played out is that of the collapse of a society's ideals that is transcribed into a character's social inadequacy to conventions or his/her utter failure to play by the rules hence the defeat of his/her preconceptions. This corresponds to what the modernists themselves have theorized as a moment of epiphany. Joyce made the term popular and each of the short stories in his collection *Dubliners* was designed to contain such a moment of revelation experienced either by the character or by the reader.

Bessie Head another modern writer has her own personal circumstances placing her in a unique position from which to gain deep insight into mind of African women. She tried to understand and care about the experiences and fates of women in society. Some critics argue that Bessie Head's writings are feminist. Bessie Head frequently had to refute the label of feminist. She argued, “I do not have to be a feminist. The world of the intellect is impersonal, sexless.” She portrays women because they are key figures in the social fabric of the country Bessie Head’s main collection of short stories which were published in 1977 under the title *The Collector of Treasures,* came out of the author's own experience of life . Though a South African by birth, the name of Bessie Head is inextricably linked with the country she writes, Botswana, and although her initial contact with the country and its peoples was as a virtual refugee and, ethnically, as a complete outsider, she has become through her writings as much a part of Botswana. Throughout her fiction Bessie Head deals with the situation of women in traditional African society. She takes for her subjects ritual murder, witchcraft, the clash between Christianity and Setswana custom, Bessie Head recognized the impermanence of women's creativity and labour. Bessie Head is South Africa's first Black woman writer. Although she wished especially not to be perceived in terms of color or sex, these two factors, together with her South Africanness, were elements she had to contend with and which shaped her life.

Bessie Head writes about women in Botswana with deep understanding and concern. Her own personal circumstances placed her in a unique position from which to gain deep insight into mind of African women. That she emerged from all her experiences to write is testimony to her creative spirit. s. Her female characters are given the respect and praise they deserve; they are not presented as being either better or worse than their male counterparts, and yet they are shown clearly to continue to suffer from sexual discrimination. However, instead of focusing on the grievances of the women in Botswana, Bessie Head simply gives them the emphasis and central position which corresponds to them. She portrays women because they are key figures in the social fabric of the country. No more justification is required and that is why Bessie Head's characters have an international appeal; her perception of the role of women in society extends far beyond the borders of Botswana and even of the African continent, a characteristic which renders her works relevant and interesting to a world-wide, universal readership. In *Heaven is not Closed* by Bessie Head we have the theme of faith, acceptance, fear, power, alienation, ignorance, love, tradition and contentment. Taken from her The Collector of Treasures collection the story is narrated in the third person by an unnamed narrator and from the beginning of the story the reader realizes that Head may be exploring the theme of contentment, faith and acceptance. Though Galethebege has passed away there is a sense that she was content prior to dying. Her death was peaceful with no anxiety for either Galethebege or those who visited her. So content was Galenthebege that she was able to sit up in bed when visitors came to visit her. She had no feelings of remorse or self-pity. If anything the reader does not feel as though Galenthebege was struggling in any way with acceptance for the position she found herself in. This suggests that Galenthebege had peace of mind (or contentment) at the time she was dying. There is also a sense that Galenthebege had a faith in something bigger than herself (God) which was leading her and reassuring her at the time she died. Where many may fear dying Galenthebege didn’t. It is also noticeable that Galenthebege, throughout the story and not only at the time of her death, accepts what might happen to her particularly when it comes to the Christian missionary who excommunicates her from the Church. Rather than fight the missionary Galenthebege because of her love for Ralokae accepts the position she finds herself in. It might also be important that Galenthebege never stops praying to God despite having been excommunicated as this would again suggest that Galenthebege has a strong faith. She may be ostracized from the Church but she is not ostracized from God. The missionary is also a pivotal character. As readers we notice that he does not accept or respect Setswana traditions and if anything he may view the customs and traditions as being archaic and of no use. In essence he is not welcoming of those who practice Setswana customs and alienates them from the Church. It is also noticeable that the missionary acts more like a conqueror than he does a Christian. He Views those who practice Setswana traditions as being unworthy of being allowed into Heaven. Throughout the story there is a sense that the missionary is ignorant of others. Something that is noticeable when it comes to the struggles that Galenthebege encounters when she wishes to get married. At no stage is the missionary flexible nor does he leave the door of the Church open to Galenthebege. In the missionary’s eyes Galenthebege is not married nor is she able to ascend to Heaven because she is choosing to marry Ralokae outside of the Church and in the Setswana tradition. The end of the story is also interesting as Head appears to be exploring the theme of fear. Through the narrator we learn that Galenthebege may have continued to pray because she was afraid that Ralokae may not get into Heaven. Throughout the story the missionary has shown himself to be prejudicial to others who do not have the same beliefs as him. Yet Galenthebege has lived her life communicating with God even though she has been excommunicated by the missionary. Even without the assistance of the Church Galenthebege has shown herself to be a believer in God. The writer wants to comment on missionary work done universally. She wants to show that missionaries destroyed Setswana custom by not allowing it. They enforced Christian (Western) customs on the people Ralokae represents the traditional customs of the Setswana people. Missionaries misused their message to destroy traditional communities. Missionaries should have been more considerate towards strange customs. All missionaries were not good, the one in the story is a bad missionary. The missionary used the word of God to control the people, not help them. In this story the missionary decides who will go to heaven and who not. The writer wants to say that if there had been more tolerance from missionaries, the Setswana people would not have been divided. Missionaries did not understand the Setswana people and their customs. The missionary was wrong when he said heaven is closed to the unbeliever. Heaven will always be open to everybody

The other short story under discussion is Edith Wharton’s Roman Fever. Wharton was the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for literature. Wharton was awarded an honorary doctorate degree from Yale University in 1923. She was the first woman to claim that distinction. Her major literary model was [Henry James](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henry-James-American-writer), whom she knew, and her work reveals James’s concern for artistic form and [ethical](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethical) issues.

The title of the story refers to malarial fever, which was prevalent in Rome around the early nineteenth century. This fever was much feared by American tourists. Symbolically, the title also refers to the fever pitch of the passions that were engendered in the two women when they visited Rome as nubile young girls. The surface serenity and static nature of the plot provide ironic contrast to the gradual revelation of the intense emotions that the two women experienced when they were in Rome before. The first lines of the story create a picture of opulence. Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley are notable in being “well-cared for,” a description that hints at their wealth and leisurely lifestyles. The backdrop of the story evokes a nostalgic image of Rome at the height of its power, reflecting the characters’ own nostalgia for their younger days. Mrs. Slade begins to reminisce about the time she and Mrs. Ansleyspent in Rome when they were young. Mrs. Ansley is distracted, though Mrs. Ansley appears passive and mild in the early pages of the story, her comments during this part of the conversation reveal the first hint of a sharper edge to her character. Mrs. Slade invites Mrs. Ansley to reminiscence about their younger days, Mrs. Ansley refuses to express nostalgia and instead speaks frankly about two uncomfortable truths: that she and Mrs. Slade may not really know their daughters, and that, despite their long history, they have never really known one another, either. That Mrs. Ansley is willing to acknowledge these things suggests that she is more complex than those around her are willing to recognize. Mrs. Ansley’s comment prompts [Mrs. Slade](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/roman-fever/characters/alida-slade) to reflect silently on their long friendship. She remembers how stunningly beautiful Mrs. Ansley was as a young woman. Mrs. Slade thinks that Mrs. Ansley was much more beautiful than her daughter, though [Barbara](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/roman-fever/characters/barbara-ansley) is more charming and “effective” than her mother was. Mrs. Slade wonders how Barbara developed such a compelling personality, given how stodgy and dull Mrs. Ansley and her husband, [Horace](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/roman-fever/characters/horace-ansley), were. Mrs. Slade is clearly invested in maintaining a particular image of Mrs. Ansley, which she has held onto through much of their relationship. She feels superior to Mrs. Ansley, insofar as she senses that she has a rich and dynamic life—both a social life and an inner life—that Mrs. Ansley does not. However, she is not secure in that sense of superiority.  Just as Mrs. Ansley’s hidden strength has begun to emerge, Mrs. Slade’s hidden vulnerability is becoming visible as well. Mrs. Slade’s boldness and sense of entitlement mask deep insecurities and anxieties. She had always been envious of Mrs.Ansley. A great deal of her sense of self-worth seems to come from feeling superior to others, Mrs. Ansley included. The vast majority of the events in “Roman Fever” are told from Mrs. Slade’s perspective. Here, Mrs. Ansley’s thoughts become briefly accessible to readers. It is surprising, given that Mrs. Slade has just been reflecting on the pleasures and successes of her life with Delphin, that Mrs. Ansley should feel sorry for her friend. This moment highlights the tension between the way people see themselves and the way others see them.

Mrs. Ansley makes a comment about the ways in which each generation of women visiting Rome has a different experience of the city. Their grandmothers were preoccupied with anxieties about [Roman Fever](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/roman-fever/symbols/roman-fever) that was common in those days, and fear of the disease kept their mothers from going out at night. When they were young women, she says, there was no threat of Roman Fever, and they were willing to disobey their mothers by going out at night. In fact, they relished the danger inherent in doing so, and readily disobeyed their parents. Mrs. Slade describes the thrill of going out at night without mentioning explicitly the romantic and sexual exploits that those excursions made possible, but her references to disobedience—coupled with her earlier comments about moonlight and its role in the lives of young lovers—make her meaning clear. The threat of Roman Fever (a particularly deadly strain of malaria) stands in for the dangers of unrestricted sexual passion. [Mrs. Slade](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/roman-fever/characters/alida-slade) asks [Mrs. Ansley](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/roman-fever/characters/grace-ansley) whether she is afraid of catching [Roman Fever](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/roman-fever/symbols/roman-fever) or pneumonia, recalling that Mrs. Ansley has always had a sensitive throat. At this point in the conversation, Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley are engaged in a battle for control over the situation: Mrs. Ansley is attempting to avoid discussing that time in their lives, and Mrs. Slade is pushing the subject vigorously despite her friend’s efforts to end the discussion. Suddenly Mrs. Slade accuses Mrs. Ansley of going to the Colosseum in one of their earlier visits during their youth in response to a letter from [Delphin](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/roman-fever/characters/delphin-slade) Slade , in which he expressed his love for her and urged her to meet him there in secret. This revelation—that Mrs. Slade knows intimate details about a secret Mrs. Ansley has kept for decades—eliminates all pretense of politeness, and reveals the conversation as the power struggle it has been since its beginning. Mrs. Slade initiates this change, but Mrs. Ansley has no choice except to change her conduct in response. Her knitting—the mask of feminine politeness that has protected Mrs. Ansley throughout the story—has fallen away. Mrs. Ansley has no choice but to face her friend honestly. She said that she burned the letter about which Mrs. Slade is speaking, and that she does not know how Mrs. Slade can know what the letter said. Sneering, Mrs. Slade reveals that it was she, not [Delphin](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/roman-fever/characters/delphin-slade), who wrote and sent the letter. Mrs. Ansley responds with a shocked silence, covering her face with her hands. She feels suddenly guilty at the thought that she has caused [Mrs. Ansley](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/roman-fever/characters/grace-ansley) pain over something that happened so long ago. Eager to justify her actions, Mrs. Slade explains that she knew Mrs. Ansley had been in love with [Delphin](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/roman-fever/characters/delphin-slade), and that she wanted Mrs. Ansley “out of the way”—sick and bedridden—so that she could not steal him away from her before they were married. Then Mrs. Ansley reveals that Delphin did, in fact, meet her at the Colosseum that night, the tenor of the conversation shifts instantly and dramatically. Throughout their conversation, Mrs. Slade has seemed to be the more powerful one: confident, aggressive, and knowledgeable. Now, Mrs. Ansley reveals significant secrets of her own. Mrs. Ansley reveals that she sent Delphin a letter in response to the once she received, confirming that she would meet him as he had asked. When she arrived, he was waiting for her. Mrs. Slade is stunned, and says she had never expected that Mrs. Ansley might write back. Throughout their friendship, Mrs. Slade has perceived Mrs. Ansley as being passive and ineffectual. In responding to Delphin’s letter, Mrs. Ansley took an active role that Mrs. Slade—in her very limited perspective on her friend—was not able even to imagine. Suddenly Mrs. Ansley is no longer mild mannered and deferring lady. She is able to tell Mrs. Slade that she feels sorry for her, a condescending remark unlike anything she has said up to this point. Mrs. Slade clearly wants to grab this power back, and she attempts to do so when she compares her long marriage with Delphin to Mrs. Ansley’s experience with him, which she assumes was short-lived and meager. Mrs. Slade says she does not know why Mrs. Ansley should be sorry for her. After all, though her scheme with the letter went wrong, she still had twenty-five years of marriage with [Delphin](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/roman-fever/characters/delphin-slade), while Mrs. Ansley had nothing from him except “that one letter that he didn’t write.” Mrs Ansley faced [Mrs. Slade](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/roman-fever/characters/alida-slade) and said, “I had [Barbara](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/roman-fever/characters/barbara-ansley),” Mrs. Ansley’s revelation—that Barbara is, in fact, Delphin’s daughter—is the final blow both in their conversation, and in a lifetime of competition between Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade.

Though [Mrs. Slade](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/roman-fever/characters/alida-slade) and [Mrs. Ansley](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/roman-fever/characters/grace-ansley) are lifelong friends, their relationship is constrained by mutual feelings of intense jealousy. They see one another as opponents, competing for power and stature—both within their friendship and in society more broadly. Mrs. Slade wishes her daughter, [Jenny](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/roman-fever/characters/jenny-slade), were as vivacious as Mrs. Ansley’s daughter, [Barbara](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/roman-fever/characters/barbara-ansley), and she reveals her insecurity through snide comments that disparage both Barbara and her parents. It is worth noting that, although Mrs. Slade’s behavior was more obviously immoral than Mrs. Ansley’s, both women are guilty of moral wrongdoing. Mrs. Ansley acted selfishly and dishonestly when she decided to meet Delphin at the Colosseum, betraying the trust of her friend. After discovering her pregnancy, Mrs. Ansley rushes into a marriage with [Horace](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/roman-fever/characters/horace-ansley), and goes on to convince him that Barbara is his daughter. This lie becomes the foundation for the rest of her life. The real depth of Mrs. Ansley’s cruelty emerges in the final moments of the story, when she reveals Barbara’s true paternity to Mrs. Slade. She uses the truth as a weapon to wound her friend, to undermine Mrs. Slade’s marriage to Delphin, and to gain the upper hand in their conversation. Though she seems to be the victim of Mrs. Slade’s vindictive behavior, Mrs. Ansley is also guilty.

In the first half of the 20th century the appeal of the short story continued to grow. Literally hundreds of writers—including, as it seems, nearly every major dramatist, poet, and novelist—published thousands of excellent stories. The Short story as a genre was regarded with a seriousness by many writers and readers. This is clearly evident in the amount and kind of critical attention it received. Henry James, Mark Twain, Melville, and Hawthorne all discussed it as an art form, usually offering valuable insights. Modern short stories may seem to have no structure at all, or may appear to have little physical action. But stories of this kind are actually structured around a psychological, rather than physical, conflict. In stories of modernist writers like Katherine Mansfield, Bessie Head and Edith Wharton, Physical action and event are unimportant except insofar as the actions reveal the psychological underpinnings of the story.