

## Writing on short stories



A comprehensive answer on a short story collection will show awareness of where each story sits in the collection as a whole, and how it is representative of a writer's body of work.

Go to [www.insightpublications.com.au](http://www.insightpublications.com.au) for three annotated passages from Raymond Carver's short stories, as well as a sample response on them.

## Sample answer on Mansfield's short stories

The following response is based on passages from three stories in Katherine Mansfield's *The Collected Stories*:

- in 'Prelude', from 'Lovely, lovely hair' to 'Kezia came in' (pp.58–9)
- in 'Miss Brill', from 'Oh, how fascinating it was!' to 'Yes, I have been an actress for a long time' (p.334)
- in 'Frau Fischer', from 'I like empty beds' to 'somewhere off Cape Horn' (pp.702–3).

Note that **paragraph commentaries** precede each paragraph of this essay. These comments outline the writer's approach so that the generic qualities of the answer are identified. This provides general guidelines for you to use with different short story collections that you might be studying.

The ways in which the assessment criteria are addressed are indicated in the comments preceding each paragraph of the response; italicised words and phrases are key terms in the examination criteria (pp.201–2).

## Introduction

The introduction begins with a broad statement about views and values explored in Mansfield's fiction. This is one way to begin, but ensure that the discussion moves on quickly to a specific example, and signpost how the broad statement is relevant to the set passages. In this case, Passage 2 is used to provide a textual example and introduce the key idea of playing a part or role. Mansfield's historical context is referred to briefly, to enable a wider *views and values* comment which follows logically from the discussion of Miss Brill.

Introduces a key idea for the discussion to explore in relation to each of the passages.

Katherine Mansfield's short stories often explore the lives of women whose limited opportunities and often mundane circumstances contrast sharply with their lively and creative minds. Miss Brill longs for a life full of drama and incident, but the only place she can achieve this is in her own imagination. Her energy and inventiveness are abundantly clear in Passage 2, in which she imagines being 'on the stage' as part of an exciting dramatic performance. Such excitement and intensity are, unfortunately, at odds with the tawdry reality of her life. Indeed, the idea of playing a part is a recurring one in Mansfield's stories, and allows her to explore the impact on women of the often limited roles available to them in the early twentieth century – a time when ideas about female agency and independence were becoming more widely debated.

Introduces a textual example from Passage 2 relevant to the opening statement.

## Paragraph 2

This paragraph focuses on Passage 2, continuing the discussion of Miss Brill and the idea of being part of a performance. Flowing smoothly from the introduction into the first body paragraph contributes to the *coherence* of the response. The significance of this *key passage* within the story is considered and linked to our understanding of the central character.

For Miss Brill the idea of being an actress offers a form of escape: it is a way of seeing herself as part of a dynamic world in which everyday incidents have dramatic significance and in which she is not merely a spectator but a participant. This vision even transforms the 'little brown dog' into 'a little "theatre" dog, a little dog that had been drugged' – an ordinary object now seemingly full of dramatic possibilities and intrigue. The repetition of 'on the stage', 'the performance' and 'an actress' conveys how fervently she clings onto these notions, how much she wishes to *make* this vision into her reality. Miss Brill's lively imagination is evident as Mansfield's language represents the intensity of her thoughts and feelings: numerous exclamation marks convey her almost uncontainable excitement; short, sharp sentences mimic

Brief quotations incorporated into the discussion, which explains how language (word choices and repetition) is used to construct character and convey ideas.

the rapid flow of her thoughts. However, this passage captures the high point of her happiness in this story; it is soon followed by the disparaging remarks of the young boy and girl who sit near her, and her subsequent return to her small dark room 'like a cupboard'. The story's conclusion forcefully conveys the reality of Miss Brill's life: far from being 'fascinating', it is limited and dull, with few opportunities for self-expression or social interaction. As her name suggests, Miss Brill stops short of being 'brilliant'; yet her imagination allows her to construct – however temporarily – a positive vision of herself and her place in a world that is essentially indifferent to her.

Explains significance of the passage in the context of the story.

### Paragraph 3

The third paragraph focuses on Passage 1. The response clearly addresses criterion 5 through close attention to *features of the text* (sentence structure, alliteration, narrative voice) and discussion of how they convey ideas and emotions to the reader. The link between Beryl and Miss Brill helps with the *coherence* of the discussion, as does the continued development of ideas about identity and self-image.

Other female characters find that role-playing is more fraught, as they see themselves trapped between two or more conflicting identities. In 'Prelude', Beryl has contrasting visions of herself, one as beautiful, charming and desirable; the other as 'faint and unsubstantial'. Passage 1 begins with Beryl seeing herself in the positive sense. As she contemplates her 'lovely, lovely hair' her thoughts become increasingly glowing and expansive; the sentences, at first brief and incomplete ('such a mass of it'), become longer and more flowing, with alliteration from the repeated 'l' sounds ('leaves', 'yellow', 'loved', 'feel') creating a dreamy tone and evoking Beryl's feelings of pleasure and contentment. However, her thoughts then shift abruptly to the second, more critical vision of her 'real self'. As in many of Mansfield's stories, the first-person limited narrative voice allows the reader to share every nuance of the character's thoughts and feelings; here, Beryl's mood swing from ecstasy to despair is conveyed as the positive adjectives of the first vision – 'lovely', 'fresh' – are succeeded by a series of strongly negative ones: 'miserable', 'silly', 'spiteful', 'vain'. Like Miss Brill, she has few opportunities for social interaction or emotional fulfilment, an emptiness for which she sometimes seeks to compensate by 'acting a part'. Beryl's 'false self' is partly a fantasy, yet it also reflects something true – her longing for romance, her wish to experience a life which is 'rich and mysterious'.

Topic sentence signals how a different aspect of identity and role-playing will be considered in this paragraph.

Works closely with language and sentence structure to explain how tone and mood are conveyed.

Shows understanding of a key narrative technique.

Links back to Passage 2 and paragraph 2 – giving the response coherence and plausibility.

## Paragraph 4

This paragraph moves on to Passage 3, continuing the discussion of identity in a *coherent and detailed interpretation* of Mansfield's stories (criterion 6). Note that each passage is used to illustrate a different aspect of identity and role-playing, adding to the *detail* of the interpretation and avoiding repetition of exactly the same point in each paragraph. A wide vocabulary ('interlocutor', 'hyperbole') contributes to the *expressive* quality of the writing (criterion 2). There is a strong analysis of how characterisation suggests *views and values* (criterion 3).

The narrator of 'Frau Fischer' is potentially a more resilient and resourceful female character. In Passage 3, she presents the idea of herself as happily married to her interlocutor, Frau Fischer, who in turn outlines a conventional, conservative role for a respectable woman at that time: happily married, a child 'at your breast' (or eagerly awaiting one), her rightful place 'by her husband's side'. The confidence with which Frau Fischer presents this vision as self-evidently correct ('That cannot be true', 'It is plain to see') makes her appear dominant over the relatively timid narrator, who 'protest[s] sleepily' and 'creates' a husband to reassure Frau Fischer and avoid an even more critical judgement. Yet the narrator appears at ease with her own decisions and preferences; she calmly asserts that 'child-bearing [is] the most ignominious of all professions' despite the unconventionality of this viewpoint. Predictably, Frau Fischer is shocked, yet the hyperbole of her response – 'suffer so terribly', 'terrible temptations ... inflammable' – renders her a comically ridiculous figure who is unreasonably attached to an old-fashioned concept of women's roles and female identity. Mansfield thus ensures that our sympathies lie with the narrator rather than Frau Fischer, and leads us to admire the narrator's view of herself as an independent woman able to fashion her own identity and destiny.

Explains how Mansfield uses language to make the reader laugh at Frau Fischer and reject her views.

Brief quotes used to support the point that a conservative view of female identity is presented and endorsed by the character Frau Fischer.

## Paragraph 5

Another of the set stories, 'The Garden-Party', is used to illustrate a contrasting character type. The comparison between Laura, Beryl and Miss Brill ensures the discussion remains coherent while acknowledging the range of character types in Mansfield's fiction, including stories other than those from which the set passages are chosen.

Not all of Mansfield's female characters experience this dichotomy between inner (private) and outer (public) selves. In 'The Garden-Party', Laura's excitement is both genuine and fully expressed in her interactions with others. She is shocked by the death of a carter whose family lives nearby, and passionately conveys her feelings to her family; she is confident in her own identity and optimistic about what this day holds in store, which in

Topic sentence signposts that a different view of female identity presented in the stories will be considered. Shows wider knowledge and understanding of the stories.

Links back to paragraph 3 and uses a quotation from Passage 1 to strengthen the contrast between characters.

turn reflects the fulfilling life (familial and social) she has always led. Whereas Beryl (in Passage 1) can think of few moments in which she has felt that 'life is rich and mysterious and good', Laura seems to have this feeling in almost *every* moment. What sets Laura apart from so many of Mansfield's female characters, though, is class: unlike Beryl and Miss Brill, Laura looks forward to an adult life full of the opportunities that wealth and class connections make possible. In contrast, Miss Brill lives a modest and lonely life as a schoolteacher, while Beryl depends on her sister's family for a home. Beryl rebukes herself for being 'despicable' and 'false'; yet Mansfield leads us to see her not as flawed, but as complex, mercurial, sensual – and deeply frustrated.

### Paragraph 6: conclusion

The final paragraph sums up the discussion and finishes with concise statements of the interpretation developed throughout. The three passages are drawn together in a compare/contrast fashion, allowing for general concluding remarks to be made and contributing to the *coherence* of the response. Strong links to the stories discussed (brief quotations, direct references) combined with views and values comments ensure that a *strong understanding of the stories is demonstrated in a relevant and plausible interpretation* (criterion 1).

In her short stories, Katherine Mansfield explores the idea that people can have more than one identity or self-image, due to a tension between how they would like to be and the roles society expects them to play. This duality is most apparent in the middle-aged female characters: it is they who most clearly perceive the limitations of their lives and the difficulties of overcoming them, and who find themselves 'acting a part'. Sometimes this 'performance' creates a fantasy space for pleasure and excitement; at other times (as for the narrator of 'Frau Fischer'), it defers criticism and scrutiny. In a moment of insight, Beryl thinks 'if she had been happy and leading her own life, her false self would cease to be'. Yet few of Mansfield's female characters succeed in 'leading their own life'; this is the particular challenge their society poses to them. Nevertheless, their desires for a life full of incident and emotion, for independence and agency, are strongly present, refusing to be suppressed, and in this way Mansfield shows the injustice of social conventions that cause not merely unhappiness, but a waste of human potential. (1228 words)

Quotation from Passage 1 provides an appropriate textual example and locates the characters in a wider social context.

Brief quotations link the summary of main ideas back to the earlier discussion of individual stories.

Finishes with a strong views and values comment that is a logical extension of the discussion.