

# 80° of Separation: Landscapes in Literature

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Two writers in the early 1900s, Katherine Mansfield in New Zealand and Willa Cather in the United States tallgrass prairie, chronicled both the cultural and physical nuances of their frontiers. Their stories are set in rich textural backdrops, made vivid with their descriptions of natural environments. These descriptions provide the context for this paper's exploration. The dense and evocative imagery of these two writers provides a point of departure for a comparison of the two landscapes.

The agricultural settlement patterns and natural systems of the New Zealand bush and farmland and those of the United States tallgrass prairie invite comparison. Mansfield's and Cather's narratives provide the guide for this study, capturing the subtle differences and underlying similarities of the textures and patterns of these two landscapes, while emphasising the differences in colour and scale. The degrees of separation are not as distinct as the 80 degrees of latitude that lie between them. Instead there is a myriad of subtle, rather than singular, differentiations.

This visual analysis is not intended to address the significant cultural differences of these two places. Rather, it is a study of visual distinctions and similarities guided by the environmental qualities identified by a native author from each locale: Mansfield (New Zealand bush and farmland), and Cather (United States tallgrass prairie). Guided by their words, my own investigation of place is a graphic exploration of the physical environment: the line, form, pattern, texture, colour, light and spatial qualities of each landscape.

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## INTRODUCTION

**M**Y FIRST GLIMPSE OF NEW ZEALAND came from the air. Flying over the North Island toward Wellington on a grey misty morning, lines of hedgerows revealing patterns of agriculture and land division that spurred my curiosity. Although separated by 80 degrees of latitude, the country seemed so familiar, yet different from my home on the prairie of the central United States. I looked, beyond the obvious differences in climate and geomorphology of the tallgrass prairie and the bush and farmland, through the eyes of authors native to these landscapes to discover a common experience that transcends the physical dissimilarities (Figure 1).

## KEY WORDS

*Prairie*

*Bush*

*Native*

*Authors*

*Landscape*

## UNDERSTANDING PLACE THROUGH LITERATURE

Analysis of physical systems and features is central to a landscape architect's understanding of place. Sporn (1998) suggests that relationships between the cultural and natural environments are revealed in our interpretation of the patterns and processes of the deep context unique to each location. The physical sciences provide ways to document the natural environment, and the social sciences offer ways to understand the cultural environment. Seeking out the particular, the emotional and the ephem-

eral cannot be done through scientific means and must rely on other ways of knowing and understanding. Art and literature provide us with keen personal observations of place that recognise qualities of a landscape that defy scientific categorisation.

Authors native to a place offer us a qualitative, personal perspective that is founded in both the intuitive and the learned knowledge. In *Characters and their Landscapes*, Ronald Blythe identifies “two states of local landscape consciousness. The first I would call instinctive and unlettered, a mindfulness of my own territory which has been artlessly and sensuously imbibed” (1984: 4–5). He describes the second as one discovered through study, both scientific and cultural. Landscape architects tend to focus on the second, perhaps rejecting the first in order to maintain a professional, objective position. In contrast, the perspective of native authors unavoidably captures both states of consciousness, and their observations offer us the synthesis of physical and emotional readings of landscape that escape the scientific approach.

## THE AUTHORS

The New Zealand-born author Katherine Mansfield wrote almost 30 short stories set in her homeland. Known for her sharp critique of the provincialism of New Zealand, her accounts of middle-class life at the beginning of the twentieth century are set in richly detailed descriptions of both social life and physical setting. Born in 1888, she grew up in Wellington and the surrounding countryside, leaving New Zealand in 1908 to live abroad. Her memories of the land and its people figure prominently in the stories she wrote between 1905 and 1922. Time and distance tempered her

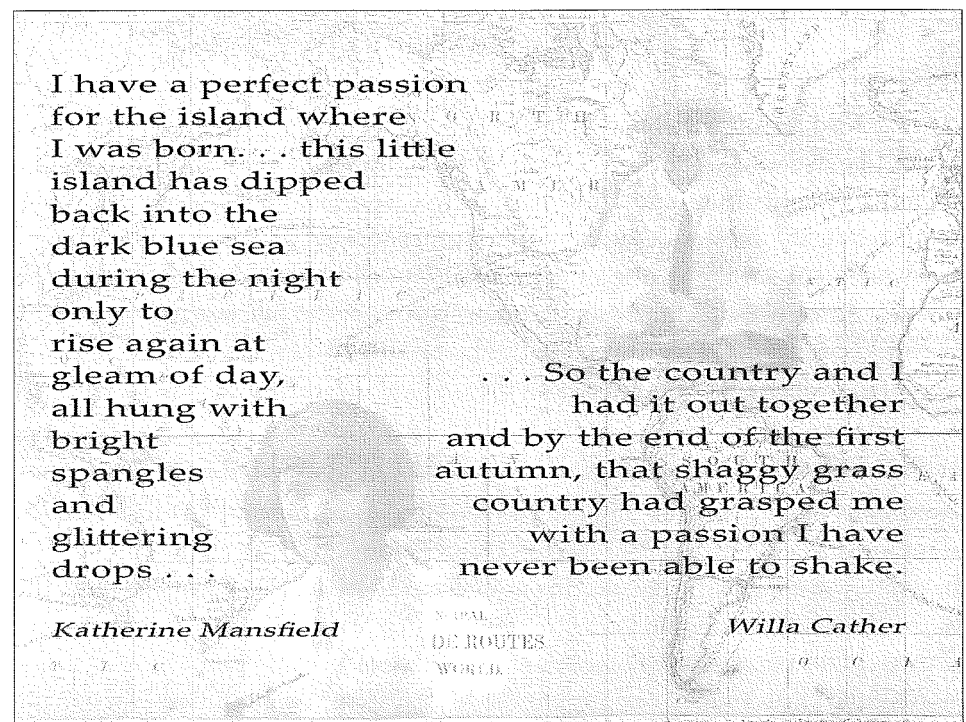


Figure 1: The authors.

view of home, and in the 1910 poem, *To Stanislaw Wyspiansky*, she acknowledged this ambivalence toward her native land:

I, a woman, with the taint of the pioneer in my blood,  
Full of a youthful strength that wars with itself and is lawless,  
I sing your praises, magnificent warrior . . . (as cited in Berkman, 1971:35)

Contemporaneous with Mansfield, American-born author Willa Cather began writing about life on the central United States prairies, like Mansfield, from a new home removed from the setting of so many of her novels. Strong memories of place similarly permeated her writing. In Cather's case, the prairie was not her first home. Born in 1873, she moved to the vast landscape of Nebraska at the age of nine and described her arrival from densely wooded Virginia as "a kind of erasure of personality" (Grumbach's introduction in Cather, 1988: viii). Eventually she left home to write from New York City, where her memory of the prairie was woven throughout her work, so much so that one literary critic noted that landscape became "not merely . . . a backdrop against which her characters struggle but also . . . a dynamic presence and a character in her fiction" (Winters, 1993: 3).

## DEGREES OF SEPARATION

Willa Cather's novels capture the beauty and harshness that I find in my own life on the prairie. In the habit of seeking out literature native to the places I visit, I discovered a collection of Katherine Mansfield's short stories while in New Zealand and was captivated by her rich descriptions of place and culture. The work of these authors served as a catalyst for inquiry. Their descriptions of the ordinary and commonplace helped me visualise their pioneer landscapes, while considering the subtle distinctions and underlying similarities. Considerable differences in the landscapes could be expected, given the distance between the two places. Instead, as framed by Mansfield and Cather, I found gradients of colour, rhythm and scale.

The colours of the landscape are more brilliant in New Zealand. Nurtured by moisture and temperate climate, the jungle-green vegetation is spotted with vividly coloured flowers. Mansfield describes the landscape as fresh and new, perhaps reflecting her homeland's youth as much as its climatic conditions. Even the tussock grasslands seem brighter than the tallgrass prairie. Prairie colours diluted by sun and wind are faded versions of their New Zealand counterparts. Fields of crops and pastures are common to both places, but our perceptions of them on the prairie are bleached by their sheer expanse, as well as by the elements.

Differences in colour palettes are influenced by the quality of light in each place. Fueled by dust in the dry air, the rising and setting sun over the prairie creates a fiery light. Once the sun is overhead, the often blue sky is pure and large, illuminating the landscape with broad, omnipresent light. In Cather's novels the sun is a constant, its heat beating down upon the landscape and its inhabitants. In contrast, the bush and farmland described by Mansfield seems to be lit by a deeper light, one with undertones of rich grey-blue and "broad beams of light" that "cover the whole sky", against which the bush is outlined "dark and brilliant like metal"

(Mansfield, 1997, *At the Bay*: 206). The bush provides cover and the sun illuminates only the landscape it can reach.

Each place has its own rhythm and scale of natural features. On the prairie, rows of trees in windbreaks anchor homes in their farmsteads. Thousands of acres are bound by thin lines of fence without a tree in sight. Cather's landscape was one "where the furrows of a single field often lie a mile in length" (2004: 59). A woman could be overwhelmed by this setting, or, as was the case with many of her characters, gain inner strength as she found her place in the landscape. In the New Zealand farmland, the orderly arrangement of paddocks is repeated in the regular pattern of hedgerows. The distances between hedgerows can be measured in metres, their manicured form a clean, green line between the bush and the gardens where Mansfield's characters held parties.

The scale of each landscape and the relative size of a woman within it are further emphasised by the trees in each. Trees punctuate each landscape with their own rhythm, marking boundaries and measuring distances. So few and far between, on the tallgrass prairie, were trees that:

we used to . . . visit [them] as if they were persons. It must have been the scarcity of detail in that tawny landscape that made detail so precious. (Cather, 1988: 21)

In contrast, space in the New Zealand farmland is shaped by "big trees on both sides of the road – and nothing to be seen except big trees" (Mansfield, 1997, *How Pearl Button Was Kidnapped*: 53). Trees provide spatial order, framing the landscape and its inhabitants.

The authors describe similar textures and patterns in the landscape that are not surprising given the agrarian foundations of each place. During Mansfield's and Cather's lives, domestication of their homelands resulted in a patchwork of fields, similar in pattern but differing in scale. Division of the tallgrass into fields and farms was central to Cather's writing, and she bemoaned the changes as "the red grass was disappearing, and the whole face of the country was changing" (Cather, 1988: 197). She wrote about the checkerboard of wheat and corn just as Mansfield described the pattern of paddock and willows in several of her stories. Mansfield's subtly repeated suggestion of pattern is a setting for her characters' lives rather than a statement about the countryside's development.

## A VISUAL EXPLORATION

Mansfield and Cather evoked a palette of colours, textures and patterns specific to each place. The ordinary and commonplace that they painted with words gave shape to my visual interpretations created by overlaying and juxtaposing two- and three-dimensional images. Responding to selected passages detailing specific environmental features, I used a synthesis of maps, photographs and drawings to develop a series of studies that attempt to capture the qualities of their landscapes. James Corner's (1996) map-notation drawings, Edward Tufte's (1990) multi-dimensional drawings and diagrams and Richard Hanson's (1998) memory drawings suggested methodologies.

## CONCLUSION

These authors embraced their native landscapes in different ways. Mansfield provided textural backdrops for narrations of her characters' lives. Her language and descriptions evoke images of vignettes, snapshots of people in their everyday context. Through her eyes, I saw the residents of a young country absorbed in their own social dynamics, carving their domestic landscape out of the bush. In contrast, Cather brought the prairie landscape into her novels in full force. Her descriptions paint big landscapes with overwhelming qualities that take on a life of their own. The nuances of each woman's writing reveal her attitudes toward the land and capture the distinctive qualities of her landscape, weaving a context that is "a fabric whose strands are narratives of landscape elements and features, both the persistent and the fleeting" (Spirn, 1998: 160).

Both provided a way for me to see inside their homelands and become an insider rather than merely an observer. Authors native to a place paint a picture that is unrestricted by scientific methodologies. Whether introducing us to a new place or casting a fresh light on one well known, they offer us a different type of knowledge. Through reading the novels and stories of a place, we are given a window to the particular, the emotional and the ephemeral, opening our instinctive and informed understanding of the intertwined universal and personal, cultural and physical aspects of a landscape.

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