

Mavis Gallant: A Canadian Short Story Legend

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Abstract

Mavis Gallant was a Canadian short story writer. She had faced a very difficult childhood after her father's demise and her mother's early remarriage. She was raised as an orphan and had attended seventeen different schools to complete her education. Mavis Gallant later on started writing stories in Canada, and publishing them in *Preview*, *The Standard Magazine*, and *Northern Review*. Some of them were rejected as well but, she was determined to write stories as a full time writer, and therefore she courageously decided to depart from Canada, and settled in Paris until her last breath. This paper is an attempt to show light on her life, the struggles she came across, her writing style and moreover the issues that she cover in her fictional stories for the readers to think and act accordingly in the present times.

Keyword: Canadian, Childhood, Demise, Attended, Courageously, Determined, Struggles

Mavis Gallant, originally named as Mavis de Trafford Young, was born on August 11, 1922, in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. She was a Canadian short story writer, novelist, critic, playwright and essayist. She was regarded as one of the important contemporary fictional writer, and was specifically admired and noticed for her academic creativity. She innovatively crafted and perfectly drafted her short stories. A large number of beautifully written, stories got published in the *New Yorker* magazine, which gave her worldwide recognition. Mavis Gallant originally belonged to Canada, but had spent most of her life outside the country. After completing her education she went to Europe, the country which fascinates her a lot, and therefore she had spent her elderly days of life in France.

Mavis Gallant's childhood days were not easy and full of happiness. She had gone through a very difficult and unpromising childhood. She doesn't hold lot of beautiful loving

memories of her childhood days that she had spend with her mother and father. The one thing she regrets about in her whole life was that she was very early bereft from the love of her parents. She missed her father a lot and that she had expressed in her *Linnet Muir* stories as well, which is a part of her collection known as *Home Truths*. Her father's early death left her all in pain and misery, which made her sympathetic towards the plight of such children who were frightened, alone or not pampered by their parents. In one of her interview with *New York Times* about her childhood experiences, she said "I think it's that in many, many of the things I write, someone has vanished. And it's often the father. And there is often a sense that nothing is safe, and you're often walking on a very thin crust." (Martin)

Mavis Gallant was equally angry with her mother and hates her. She hated her from the age of four, when she was sent to a boarding school. In an interview with *The Guardian* conducted in 2004 she said, "The only thing I remember is my mother putting me on a chair and saying, 'I'll be back in ten minutes.' She just didn't come back." (Martin)

Mavis Gallant was a born writer. She was fond of playing with words and sentences, when other small kids use to play with toys. In the preface to her *Selected Stories*, she wrote, "I invented rhymes and stories when I could not get to sleep and in the morning when I was told it was too early to get up, and I uttered dialogue for a large colony of paper dolls." (Martin) That was the incident which later on created further interest in her towards writing. She was a bilingual. She once told that she knew both English and French language, and also dream in both the languages, but whenever it's about writing, French has no place in her fiction. She can only write in English, "I dream in both [languages], but nothing ever comes to me in the way of fiction in French. Even if the characters are French and live in Paris, I write in English, but I know that they are speaking French and I know what they are saying." (Martin)

Mavis Gallant had a very acute observation and sharp eye over everything that had been happening around her. She was a very keen observer and took notice of every minute details happening around. Even she was quite sympathetic after looking at the conditions of the alienated people, who were living in a very unfamiliar, and in a different sort of environment. She had depicted the plight of such people in her short stories. Her stories carry different themes such as, they are written on topics related to family issues, unsuccessful marriages, alienation, identity crisis, exile, disheartened lonely souls. While reading her

stories, a reader comes across a lot of insightful experiences through which the people of Europe and Canada had gone through. Judith Farr in her essay says:

The fictional world Gallant creates has recognizable characteristics that have remained the same throughout six decades. Her characters mostly inhabit European or Canadian cities, where they are for various reasons not quite at home and where perils, great and small, await them—in a false lover's smile, from a parent's treachery, with the disillusionments caused by the bright expectations of Christmas or vacation time or changes in state such as marriage.

Mavis Gallant had tried to expose the ironical nature of human beings putting forth an altogether a different flavor of storytelling, by maintaining a great balance between her unique techniques of storytelling. Her stories comprise of such elements which often bears a sense of ambiguity in the readers mind about the past, and its effects on the present, and in later life. Mavis Gallant's style of storytelling is quite different from her other contemporary short story writers, like Alice Munro, Catherine Mansfield, James Joyce, etc.. The stories possess a subject of behavioral changes in humans, search of peace and solace, a well dignified place to live after facing exile, and conflict aroused among the people that reflect the prevalent attitudes of the society after the Second World War. According to Niel Kalman Besner, "Gallant's fiction invites readers to return to its surfaces, to attend first of Gallant's style. And style, Gallant suggests, is married to the whole, to fictional form". Gallant comments on the way she sees fiction as:

Style is inseparable from structure, part of the confirmation of whatever the author has to say. What he says—this is what fiction is about—is that something taking place and that nothing lasts. Against the sustained tick of a watch, fiction takes the measure of a life, a season, a look exchanged, the turning point, desire as brief as a dream, the grief and terror that after childhood we cease to express. The life, the look, the grief are without permanence. The watch continues to tick when the story stops. (Besner)

Another very prevalent and common theme of identity crisis can also be examined in her short stories apart from exile. Gallant's fiction involves exploring the individuality of the Canadian fictional characters, who were found to be residing with one another in a confusing state, in a world which seems to be a bit challenging as well. Similarly, her another famous collection *Home Truths* concludes with a sequence of six "Montreal Stories." these stories

project the upheaval, and rejection which Gallant experienced as a small child, and in the adolescent age in Montreal between World War I and World War II. These stories draws our attention towards the lives of young Canadians at home, and abroad facing different types of problems and emotions, and also dealing with different unforgettable moments of the twentieth century. Another beautiful collection of stories *In Transit* (1988), is also divided into three sections that focuses on the lives of parents and children, on adolescent or the youngsters and the pre adolescents. *Across the Bridge* (1993) comprises of moments in the lives of one of the fictional family during the prewar and postwar Montreal. Some of the stories also traces the expatriates in Paris dealing with their poor fortune. *The Collected Stories of Mavis Gallant* (1996) encompasses a vast section of her stories covering her entire career. Bernice Schrank in the article *Mavis Gallant: Overview* wrote:

In Gallant's fiction the realities of domestic life, whether it is the relationship between parents and children, or between husbands and wives, are emotionally confused and psychologically poisoned because the parties expect as their due the illusions of countless movies and novels: romance, love, happiness, excitement, loyalty. When they discover inattention, ambivalence, debt, boredom, and betrayal instead, they break down, they run away, they fantasize, they deny. With the sole exception of Linnet Muir, no Gallant character successfully transcends the limitations of his or her cultural mythology.

Mavis Gallant in her lifetime published eight volumes of short stories some of them carried sub headings too, to connect them together. The collection of stories that she had written are *The Other Paris* (1953), *My Heart Is Broken* (1964), *The Pognitz Junction* (1973), *The End of The World and Other Stories* (1974), *Across the Bridge* (1976), *From the Fifteenth District* (1978), *Home Truths: Selected Stories* (1981), *Overhead in a Balloon: Stories of Paris* (1985), and *In Transit* (1988). Mavis Gallant didn't wanted her readers to consider these eight volumes separate, rather than consider them as a cumulative work, where all the stories are interconnected, and does not hold any individual meaning. Apart from these short story collections Gallant also wrote two novels, *Green Water, Green Sky* (1959) and *A Fairly Good Time* (1970), in which also similar issues have been discussed to evoke the inner sensibility of the reader.

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The theme of alienation and loneliness can also be experienced quite often as they surface frequently in her stories. Gallant as a kid had gone through a very difficult time, and faced lot of difficulties alone which are majority of times quite difficult for any mature person to handle them with ease. When she was hardly four years old she lost her father which left her teary eyed, and right after that in no less time she got another shock from her mother, when she decided to go for second marriage. After facing these heart wrenching incidents at such a tender age, left Gallant speechless and heartbroken. And this family separation had lead her to spend her rest of the days away from home and other family members and relatives. Thereafter, Mavis Gallant was sent abroad, and where she attended seventeen different schools, and completed her education at New York city. She lived there in a boarding school and later on with a local guardian. After completing her education she returned back to her hometown, Montreal during the time of World War II. She started working at the National Film Board. She lived a life of a journalist as well. Before joining the National Film Board she became a part time reporter for the *Montreal Standard* in 1944. During this time while working with the Standard magazine, Gallant started working on her passion of story writing. During her free time she was writing multiple number of stories, and was struggling to get them published in various other popular literary magazines of Canada. Initially, many of her stories were rejected by the publishers, left with a remark that they don't posses anything new in them, which always left her depressed and defeated in her ambition. To survive alone, she was in sheer need of money, and therefore wanted her stories to get published somehow so that financially she would be able to manage her house rent, and other daily requirements. Still, without losing hope she managed to send her stories second time to the publishers, and again got rejected. But in spite of these disheartening constant refusals and insult, she didn't lose hope, and decided to move forward in the path she has chosen. In 1950, she moved to Paris and decided to become a full-time writer, proving everyone wrong, and showing them the power of her mightier pen, she took all the insults as challenge, and proved everyone wrong in putting forth some of her best masterpieces before her readers. All through the while she resided in Paris but retained her Canadian citizenship. After that, her stories began appearing in the New Yorker, which continuously published her stories since 1951. For more than two decades, she had published several collections of these stories, such as *The Other Paris* (1956), *My Heart is Broken* (1964), *The Pegnitz Junction*

(1973), and *From the Fifteenth District* (1979). Gallant also received an award namely Governor General's Award in the year 1981, for her another very interesting published work. This award is considered to be as Canada's most prestigious literary prize. In the same following year her play *What is to be done?* also premiered at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre. Later on, Gallant decided to stay in Canada for some time and accepted the proposal of an appointment as writer-in-residence at the University of Toronto in 1983 and 1984, but eventually after that due to some reason she returned to Paris. In the year 2002, Mavis Gallant had also received the Literary Grand Prix Award at the Blue Metropolis International Literary Festival in Montreal. Most of her short stories were initially published in the New Yorker magazine, and later on they got published in the book form too.

Her first collections of stories, *The Other Paris*, explores the theme of dislocation, particularly which was experienced by the people of America and Canada who were residing in Europe. The collection also emphasizes on the ways in which society affects the individuals. In the similar way her another anthology of several stories and a novella namely *My Heart Is Broken*, also based on the similar scenarios, and examines the same kind of despair but in the form of variety of exiles.. Just like the above two story collections *From the Fifteenth District*, also draws the attention of the reader on a group of North American expatriates in World War II, Europe.

Mavis Gallant didn't get famous as a writer in one night. She had to go through lot of hardships to earn her name and recognition in Canada in her early years of her career. She was initially neglected by the literary academicians. But after doing a tremendous amount of hard work, and staying in a state of trauma for a longer duration, facing a critical neglect, she became successful in gaining her reputation in Canada as one of the best short story writers. Janice Kulyk Keefer writes in her book that she had a "more practical application: she has always dependent on the American market in order to survive as a writer, having had no interest in supporting herself by teaching creative writing or by culling grants when these two means of eking out a living became available to Canadian writers."(02) After earning the credit of her hard work and patience, much critical attention was paid to her work by the celebrated and renowned critics of the world. The literary authorities began to recognize her technique of story writing, use of phrases skillfully and the method of narration along with her good command of the English language. Mavis Gallant's fiction had been compared to

Henry James, Virginia Woolf, Anton Chekhov, Katherine Anne Porter and Joseph Conrad. Though some of the critics did not like her writing, and have also given their opinion in negative, complaining that her stories possess too much of pessimism because almost every collection of story bears the theme of abandonment, loss. Alienation, exile etc. such themes only make their readers feel unhappy who had close acquaintance and experience about these sadly issues. George Woodcock an eminent critic of Gallant's work comments on her writing style:

If I had to define her short fictions – novellas and short stories – setting aside obvious matters of theme and narrative construction, I would – and shall – talk about the impeccable verbal texture and the marvelous painterly surface of the scene imagined through the translucent veil of words, the kind of surface that derives from a close and highly visual sense of the interrelationship of sharply observed details.

Gallant was expert in writing elaborate stories. She was a specialist describing each and every minute detail of everyday life. Russell Banks also gave his comments on her stories:

Many of Gallant's stories are "Canadian," not by virtue of where they are set, but only because their protagonists happen to hail from that country, regardless of where they turn up in the world of the story. Gallant is fond of revisiting characters, viewing them at different times and places and from different points of view, producing sequences of three or four or more stories about the same individual and his or her family members and giving an almost novelistic take on their individual and familial histories, all the while remaining faithful to the short story form". Keefer also pointed out what Gallant had to say about short story writing as, "Gallant has insisted, a story is art, not 'the photography of life'."

In the year 2014, February 18, Mavis Gallant took her last breath and bid goodbye to the Canadian world of Literature for, forever, at the age of ninety one. She suffered from too many diseases in her last days, but irrespective of any pain or ailment she had set an example for all her readers, and Canadian laureates to remain hopeful, brave and stay strong enough to embrace the beauty of the world.

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