

Homecoming, *You* and Genre in “Mlle. Dias de Corta”*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on style and aesthetic risk in a single Mavis Gallant story, “Mlle. Dias de Corta.” It considers the narrative trajectory in this story that is in letter form but is a letter that can never be received because the intended recipient’s whereabouts are unknown. In examining Gallant’s story, I consider the vast emotional terrain the narrator traverses, while also looking at generic considerations, *you*-narrative and the foundations on which the narrator’s apparently sudden change in character are based.

Keywords: Mavis Gallant, genre, short story, *you*-narrative

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The Paris-based Canadian writer Mavis Gallant would have turned 100 on August 11, 2022. This momentous occasion could have been marked by an unveiling of the diaries she kept for most of her life, or a glimpse into her decades-long work on the Dreyfus case. As it happens, the anniversary passed quietly, without pomp, publishing or republishing. Despite her remarkable 116 short stories in *The New Yorker* between 1951 and 1995, and despite the fact that she is praised by such marquee authors as Michael Ondaatje, Russell Banks, and Jhumpa Lahiri, Gallant remains somewhat forgotten. She bears that unfortunate mantle of being “a writer’s writer,” much esteemed, highly influential, but not much read. At least one effort has been made to put things right. Author Bill Richardson, formerly of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, established the online “Oh, MG: My Mavis Gallant Centennial Diaries” in part to tempt “someone with commissioning chops who was as interested as am I in what became of her diaries” to usher those volumes into print (“June 21”). If filmmaker Wes Anderson is reading Richardson’s blog, perhaps he has those chops. Clearly a fan, he lists Mavis Gallant as a dedicatee in the credits for his 2021 film *The French Dispatch*, which contains a reference few viewers will appreciate. The “Revisions to a Manifesto” chapter, starring Frances McDormand as Lucinda Krementz, is based on Gallant, who wrote extensively about the 1968 Paris revolts for *The New Yorker*. Krementz parrots a line from Gallant’s commentary on those heady months: “the touching narcissism of the young” (Wyatt, 2022).¹

My article has a proselytizing aim: to highlight a single Gallant story in hopes that more readers will take up her works, and maybe even to convince a translator to introduce Gallant to the Slovene reader.² In terms of method and research, a consideration of second-person narration is followed by a close reading of “Mlle. Dias de Corta” (1992), in which a seemingly grumpy widowed narrator writes a letter to a young female tenant she knew two decades ago. Along the way, I consider *you*-narration and loneliness as a spur to writing. Finally, I examine questions of genre in this story about a narrator that we come to care about over the ten decades-spanning pages we spend with her. If that seems like a lot, it is. “Mlle.” contains multitudes and any stylistic or close reading merely scratches the surface. This paper is in keeping with Marta Dvořák’s 2019 *The Eye and the Ear*, in which the scholar and friend of Gallant shows the craft that goes into her crystalline prose, shows how her works work.

Mavis Gallant does not make things easy for herself in “Mlle. Dias de Corta.”

1 The line first appeared in “The Events in May: A Paris Notebook” (Gallant 59); see also Gallant 1986, 11.

2 A Cobiss search of the Slovene library systems yields no Gallant in Slovene. However, “The Prodigal Parent” exists in Maja Kraigher’s 2006 translation (“Izgubljene Oče,” (from the anthology *Zgodbe iz Kanade*).

Aesthetic risks abound, from an initially unlikable narrator, to a string of *you's*, to a curious choice of genre. The first paragraphs lead the reader to believe that the unnamed letter writer is fatuous, property obsessed, nasty and bigoted. Students and other readers who breeze through these paragraphs might not see the narrator's drastic change during this story that begins with acerbic accusations and concludes with tenderness and longing.

Before turning to point of view and genre, however, a few words on Gallant's opening page, including the title, will be useful. Titles determine how we read. They may provide information about what is to come, they may indicate genre – such as when a poem is titled "Sonnet" – and they definitely raise expectations. "Mlle." suggests formality, while indicating Frenchness and unmarried status. The narrator sees the last name "de Corta" as definitely not French and for her the "de" represents not nobility but foreignness. She regards young Alda Dias de Corta as being from somewhere else.

The first line reads "You moved into my apartment during the summer of the year before abortion became legal in France; that should fix it in past time for you, dear Mlle. Dias de Corta" (131). The line reads like a letter, down to the "dear Mlle. Dias de Corta" that is shifted to the end of the sentence so that "dear" sounds like it is half letter convention, half sarcasm. If it is rude to begin a letter with "I," it is doubly rude to begin with "you" because accusations begins with that moralizing pronoun. The chiasmic flipping³ of "You" and "my" in "You moved into my apartment..." hints at an fixation on property, ownership and belonging that will be borne out as we continue reading. Rather than writing a specific date, the narrator uses oblique time references throughout. This usage is realistic because many of us remember key events in our lives by placing them in relation to other events (*It was the year before our third child was born... It was the summer Tadej Pogačar won his first Tour...*). We are therefore drawn into the narrative, even if we cannot identify with the widow at the outset. The whiff of accusation established by the moralizing "you" is maintained as the narrator badgers a young woman, the titular Alda Dias de Corta, who lived for a time in the 1970s as an (eventually unpaying) tenant in a Parisian apartment also inhabited by the narrator and her twenty-two-year-old son. Impregnated, probably by the narrator's son, Alda secured a then-illegal abortion before she disappeared from their apartment and their lives. Thus, if "Mlle." is in the form of a letter, it is a letter than cannot be sent. The "you" that is being addressed has long ago left the building.

3 For a concise examination of criss-cross structure of chiasmus in Gallant, see Dvořák, 54, 101.

YOU-NARRATIVE

I'll see you leads many a dad to reply, *Not if I see you first*. This joke hinges on the question of who is seeing, on grammatical subject and object, and is not good for any laughs. It is, however, a neat illustration of how slippery the second-person pronoun can be and how quickly first and second person switch. In spoken discourse the *you* is a participant in the conversation, that is, the addressee can potentially respond to what the sender or addresser has said. But even in person, ambiguity looms. If a lecturer turns to a group and asks, "What do you think?", the members of the group don't know whether the *you* is meant as singular, male, female, plural, or generic. Who is the lecturer talking to specifically? Jonathan Hope and Laura Wright point out that "the reference of *you* in actual usage can be surprising" (34), even in seemingly straightforward written texts. When Uncle Sam's visage and index finger point at us and proclaim "I want you for the U.S. Army," we may feel like we are in the crosshairs, even if we are too old or too non-American to head to the "nearest recruiting station."

Francine Prose says "Mlle. Dias de Corta" is "written in the second person" (84), which is not entirely accurate, since it is in the form of a letter, implying that a first-person subject must be guiding the pen. A film version could consist of a single older Frenchwoman, alone in an apartment as she writes to an absent audience. Gallant's literary letter is more like a diary entry as the narrator provides an overview of the decades leading up to the time "Mlle." appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1992. The first few pages exhibit the narrator's nationalism; she is convinced that "Asians," "Arabs and Africans" and "unskilled European immigrants" (133) are taking over Paris. Eventually she explains the *why* behind her writing: the narrator, along with her son and his wife (who presumably does not know about the abortion and who seems to know Alda only through stories) felt "great joy and astonishment" because they saw Alda on television "last night" (135).

Though few specific dates are given, the narrator whisks us from around 1970 to 1992, a date subtly revealed through a reference to "Euro Disney" (135) – Disneyland Paris opened in April of that year. The recipient of the letter is conspicuously absent, meaning that even though "you" appears some 150 times, there is no primary addressee. The opening sentence ("You moved into my apartment...") immediately excludes the reader and only as we continue to read do we realize that Alda will never see this letter. That raises a crucial question that I will return to: Why write to a *you* that cannot receive the letter?

As narratologists have noted, until the 1990s there was little investigation into second-person narrators simply because there was little "second-person narration"

to be found (Leech and Short 301). Since then, theory has caught up.⁴ Before turning to theorists, however, a word from authors who have considered this narrative perspective in aesthetic terms is in order. Francine Prose argues that the "you" form can all too easily come to seem like a distracting tic" because the reader might bristle: "What do you mean, *me*?" (2012, 83). Moreover, a *you*-story can seem as superficial as a look-at-me fake limp on stage, or an attention-seeking hat above a threadbare suit. That is why Prose, writing specifically about "Mlle.," elsewhere states that the second-person is "the potentially trashiest point of view" (2022). There have, of course, been two prominent and successful examples of pure *you*-narratives: Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* and Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*, but they are the exceptions that prove the rule. As Howard Mittelmark and Sandra Newman quip, in a whimsical but entirely useful popular writing guide, "it was named the 'second person' when McInerney became the second person to get away with it and it became clear that he would also be the last" (161).

When a writer opts for a *you*-narrative or inserts a *you* outside dialogue, the pronominal referent is doubly slippery because a *you*-narration implies a double addressee. "You" can refer to a fictional character but also to the reader – such as when *Lolita*'s Humbert Humbert says, "if you can still stand my style" (8). However, in such cases the *you* is imposed because we cannot respond to what the writer is saying and we are therefore objectified. We are voiceless spectators to a dialogized monologue. As per the contract we enter every time we read a print book, we are addressed, but unable to respond. The more vague the *you*, the more we feel that the narrator is speaking to us. As Alice Bell and Astrid Ensslin point out, we are less likely to feel directly addressed, less likely to identify with "you," as the "defining attributes of 'you' become more specific" (317). James Phelan further highlights the shifting ground beneath the one being addressed. He argues that

when the second-person address to a narratee-protagonist both overlaps with and differentiates itself from an address to actual readers, those readers will simultaneously occupy the positions of addressee and observer. Furthermore, the fuller the characterization of 'you,' the more aware actual readers will be of their differences from that 'you,' and thus, the more fully they will move into the observer role, and the less likely this role will overlap with the addressee position. (351)

We slip into an observer role just as we do when a stranger waves at a person *behind* us and we think they are waving at us, resulting in overlap, hesitation or confusion.

4 Nevertheless, there is still relatively little academic focus on second-person narration and even in guides to narratology this type of narrator is generally given short shrift.

Slippery *you*-references aside, it is evident from the first sentence of “Mlle. Dias de Corta” that we are not addressees of the narrator’s unsendable letter. Like all fiction, this story is an invitation to voyeurism, as thrilling as impersonation.⁵ We might, however, by proxy take up Alda’s position as a voiceless individual being harangued by a curmudgeonly former landlady. If asked *Whose side are you on?* few will respond: *The reproving landlady’s!* Within the first few pages, Alda is accused of many things: she is “careless” (131) because she spilled a few crumbs; lazy because she did not spring to clean up the mess (“Actually, you had not made a move” (131)); she eats too quickly (131); she is wasteful (because this tenant from the south ruined an electric heater “before its time by leaving it turned on all night” (134)); and she is gluttonous because she takes advantage of the included breakfast (“What a lot of coffee, milk, bread, apricot jam, butter, and sugar you managed to put away!” (134)). Our sympathy for Alda may grow as the list grows. Many a reader can imagine consuming a hearty breakfast at another’s expense; many others will have left their own heaters on all night. Because these are peccadillos committed years ago, the narrator seems petty, begrudging, and trapped in the past. Would the present-day Alda feel addressed or would she think that was a different Alda?

THE ACTOR AND THE ACT?

Gallant’s narrator confuses Alda with the roles she played on television – once in a film and once in an “oven-cleanser commercial” (135). Within a single paragraph, Gallant speaks to Alda the actress and Alda the individual. To our amusement, she blends the role with the actor: “You assured us that the product did not leave a bad smell or seep into food or damage the ozone layer” (136). She then directly addresses the flesh-and-blood Alda of yore: “I recall some of the things you told [my son] Robert about your early years. He was just twenty-two and easily moved to pity” (137). There is a lacuna and a coldness in these two sentences. We are not told what these “things” are (presumably Robert has been vague when discussing the tenant with his mother), and the declarative sentence that ends in “pity” is chillingly terse.

The widow then recalls the last time she saw Alda acting, in a television film that aired almost ten years before the time of writing (“April 24, 1983”). Again to our amusement, she reminds Alda of the plot of a movie she knows better than most: Alda’s character becomes romantically involved with an architect, and is seen “making mad love” with him (137); “Then you and he have a big quarrel,

5 From Tamas Dobozsy’s 2006 story “Dead Letters,” about illegal trade in letters that have been sent but can’t be delivered: “The collectors’ interest wasn’t so much voyeurism, peering into someone else’s life, as impersonation, taking on that life, becoming the person the letters were sent to” (62).

because of his basic indifference to the real world, and you take a bunch of red roses out of a vase and throw them in his face. (I recognized your quick temper.)" (137). Gallant is bold for spending such a "disproportionate chunk of narrative time" on a "shabby love-plot" (O'Donoghue, "Best Story"). Her description is a virtuoso variation on what it means to be tedious, right down to the overt symbolism of throwing not just roses but *red* roses. If describing a television show or, worse, a television commercial is death to conversation, describing them to the very actor who committed their lines to memory is murderous. Yet the aesthetic risk is worth it because Gallant simultaneously gives us an insight into the narrator's seemingly simple mind and, meanwhile, hints at the passing years. Where the younger Alda was "standing around with no clothes on" (138), the once-slovenly Alda is now the maternal face of a cleaning agent that does not harm an ozone layer that few people had heard of before the early 1990s.

It would be easy to mock the widow's inability to see the difference between the flesh-and-blood Alda and the characters she plays. However, she is distanced from Alda, who is effectively a blank space onto which she projects her ideas, and it is this reminiscing distance that sends the narrator looking for clues into Alda's character. At least some of the artlessness arises from desperation, which becomes clear only as we follow the widow's progression from a badgering landlady to a solitary individual inhabiting a lonely Parisian apartment.

ACCUSATIONS

The accusations the narrator levels against Alda may be petty, but they are at least founded in reality. Alda had indeed left a trail of crumbs and "spilled milk" (131). Her gravest accusation, however, is that Alda is not French. The story's second sentence contains the slight "You had just arrived in Paris from your native city, which you kept insisting was Marseilles" (131), with the gerund form implying Alda's rote answer to a question asked over and over again. Later we read this witty exchange:

"I'm afraid you must think we French are cruel to animals, Mlle. Dias de Corta, but I assure you not everyone is the same." You protested that you were French, too. I asked if you had a French passport. You said you had never applied for one. "Not even to go and visit your family?" I asked. You replied that the whole family lived in Marseilles. "But where were they born?" I asked. "Where did they come from?" (135)

The back-and-forth of this I-asked-you-said inquisition is comic because there is nothing Alda could provide or say to convince her landlady that she legitimately belongs in France. The narrator jabs and dodges like a boxer, first asking for the

documentary evidence of a passport, then playing a game of lineage by asking where Alda's family was born, where they came from. This line of inquiry could stretch back to Adam and Eve. Read aloud, these terse lines would sound like comedy⁶ – not least because they are an *almost* dialogue that replicates in miniature the structure of the letter as a whole. In neither letter nor inquisition does Alda have a voice. She exists as a blank that the narrator longs to fill, including with confirmation of Alda's ethnicity. The sly humour, of course, lies in the fact that whatever Alda answers can be used by the widow against her, since the question of where Alda's forebears came from would remain relevant even if Alda possessed a French passport.

Indeed, Gallant sets up this witty exchange perfectly because the widow clearly delights in heritage and names. For example, she believes "Thousands of foreign-sounding names are deliberately 'lost' by the authorities and never show up in telephone books or computer directories" (133). Like any good conspiracy theory, this one is unprovable and water-tight in its logic. How do you prove that an absent name exists? The narrator describes her son's wife Anny as "a young lady of mixed descent. (Two of her grandparents are Swiss.)" (132). (The parenthetical clarification always stokes laughter when students read it aloud in class.) Just before that, she describes two of her son's co-workers: "One was born in Martinique and can't pronounce her 'r's. The other looks Corsican" (132). What does a Martinique "r" sounds like? How does one spot a Corsican at fifty paces? Although Mavis Gallant has said in an interview that Alda "is obviously Portuguese" (Gallant 9:43), there is no hard evidence in the story itself that she was not born and educated in France. Ariel Katz argues the paucity of information about Alda's background means "the widow's assumptions rest almost entirely on Alda's name" (2022); there is also the fact that many Portuguese emigrated to France around the time the story takes place.

Gallant masterfully suggests the many negative aspects of the narrator's character, but the final impression she leaves is more complex. Comparing the first and the final words of a story is often illustrative and fun because we can trace the narrative arc. "You moved into my apartment.... dear Mlle. Dias de Corta" are the feisty opening words, focussing on property and dwelling (and, passingly, on abortion). The final paragraph is in complete contrast to the open lines⁷ because it provides a painfully honest look at the widow's inner state. The widow now pleads for Alda to return:

You need not call to make an appointment. I prefer to live in the expectation of hearing the elevator stop at my floor and then your ring, and of having you tell me you have come home. (142)

6 Marta Dvořák argues that "oral delivery" or a sense of the same is crucial to recognizing Gallant's "quiet but sustained humour" (8).

7 In this regard, "Mlle." ends like many of Gallant's early stories because it contains a final that "soften[s] the dispassionate perspective" of a seemingly cold narrator (Gadpaille, 39).

A story that began with an obsession with ownership, belonging and property concludes with an open admission that Alda is, more than the narrator's son, at "home" in her apartment. More importantly, the final word casts a warmer glow over what we have just read. If the "dear" in the first sentence seemed conventional or sarcastic, here, in retrospect, it assumes a shade of the far more intimate "chère." Francine Prose, in one of her appreciations of "Mlle.," says that Gallant, "without ever venturing very far from the narrator's claustrophobia-inducing flat," traverses decades in this "unsent – and unsendable – letter" (2022). By the end of the letter, she has also traversed vast emotional terrain.

GENERIC PATHS AND LONELINESS

"Mlle. Dias de Corta" raises important questions of genre and it is by design that I have referred to the story as a letter, as a diary entry, and as a monologue. In *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular*, Rust Hills views the monologue as "probably the most awkward way to tell a story," not least since the monologist "is presumed to be the same after he ends his harangue as he was before he began it" (149). If we think of real-life monologues delivered by this or that uncle, or of clumsily handled monologues in fiction, we will agree with Hills. Gallant, however, creates a work that approaches a stage version of monologue, where "the character is altered by saying" their piece (Merlin, 85). It would be fascinating to hear "Mlle." not only read aloud but performed, because it is an exercise in character development or change. The reader who is not immediately turned off by the narrator's odious views gets to see how she becomes more welcoming as the final lines draw near.

Michael Ondaatje argues that in Gallant's works "tenderness arrives unexpectedly" (8). His assessment is only partially true for "Mlle." In that story, Gallant so carefully lays the foundation for the narrator's change from crustiness to tenderness that the change of heart in the final paragraph seems abrupt; a second or third reading reveals just how brilliantly Gallant sets up the shift. This is no eleventh-hour, unmotivated conversion with credulity-straining alacrity. Equally important, we are placed in the position of feeling compassion for the widow in her solitude even while remaining keenly aware of "and angry at her prejudice" (Katz, 22). It is this unsettling balance that saves the story from falling into sentimentality.⁸ As well, we can more easily forgive or forget prejudice that exists only in theory. The narrator does not carry out any prejudicial actions.

That the narrator is intensely lonely becomes obvious as we turn the pages. Her relationship to her son seems cold and distant, especially in this remembered

8 Lenore Myka is more strident: "We feel pity and maybe a little bit of shame at having been as judgmental as the narrator herself" (2015).

exchange: "Once, as he was going out the door, I asked if he loved me. He said the answer was self-evident: We were closely related" (132). Given that we have already seen the dark side of the narrator, "self-evident" could be justifiably interpreted to mean *No!* One wonders why the narrator asked her son this question just as he was exiting. Was she summoning courage? Robert's cold reply, meanwhile, indicates his pragmatic desire to arrive at his destination but also a refusal to put on a show. He is, like Cordelia in *King Lear*, unwilling to make a spectacle of his love. From Cordelia's "I love your Majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less" to Robert's "self-evident" is not far. Of course, Robert lacks Cordelia's love and he performs neither through words nor actions.

Proving that the narrator is lonely would be breaking through unlocked doors. The aim here is to show how Gallant adroitly structures the narrator's evolution from intolerance towards a gentle tolerance. The tolerance grows from a longing to have Alda return. Early on, when considering how to invite a paying stranger into her home, the narrator recalls that "even those concerned for my welfare, from coiffeur to concierge" (132) had suggested that a male tenant was the wiser option. On first reading, the phrase "coiffeur to concierge" appears like a dash of French to add a certain *je ne sais quoi* to this very Parisian story (as she confides in the two as if they were close friends or family); it may appear to be a lapse in taste for the superb stylist Mavis Gallant, there for the sake of alliteration, what Bill Richardson calls "the cheap perfume of literature" ("June 21"). Most importantly, the sweeping "from ... to" suggests a wide circle of friends worried about the narrator's wellbeing. Nothing of the sort. In fact, the convergence of *c*'s is fortuitous. Beyond the family – cold son Robert, long-deceased husband, and the prim "Swiss" daughter-in-law whose character is summed up in a single line: "She is employed in the accounting department of a large hospital and enjoys her work" (132) – few other acquaintances are mentioned. Only the concierge and Alain the coiffeur are shown to converse with the widow, and though they may have been on friendly terms with her, each was essentially an economic or business associate. Alain retired and departed, and the "concierge you [Alda] knew stayed on for another fifteen years, then retired to live with her married daughter in Normandy" (142).

Never having been allowed to work (late husband's orders), the narrator has neither retired nor moved. Although she seems stuck in a past that precedes the tumultuous changes of 1968, she frequently shows awareness of changing times. After interrogating Alda about her heritage or where she is *really* from, she glosses the passport exchange (quoted above): "There wasn't so much talk about European citizenship then. One felt free to wonder" (135). "European" in this gloss implies an identity category that shackles imagination. Later in her letter she mentions Portugal but checks herself: "Portugal is a coincidence: I am not implying any connection with you or your relations or fellow citizens" (138). Though she has

not shaken off the conviction that Alda is Portuguese, she attempts to downplay or mitigate the ethnic connection. The next line reads in part like boilerplate language cribbed from a European Union document: "If we are to create the Europe of the twenty-first century, we must show belief in one another and take our frustrated expectations as they come" (138). The turn after "belief in one another" is insightful in its ambiguity. The first-person plural seems to indicate prejudice, but it is another hazy referent. "Our frustration" can apply to all, to those who, like the narrator, are wary of the new arrivals in France, but also to those new arrivals who are aiming to build a new life within western Europe.

CONCLUSION

A western bon mot about money reads, "When a feller says: 'It hain't th' money, but th' principle o' th' thing,' it's th' money." Gallant reverses this adage in "Mlle. Dias de Corta," when the widow claims she took in Alda for "companionship rather than income" (132). On first reading, this phrase appears to be a lie, a concession to bourgeois pieties about *never* discussing money, since it follows immediately after the revelation that the widow's husband's "last words" to her were about her "financial future and were not overly optimistic" (131). It becomes clear that these words are utterly sincere, since companionship is what the widow yearns for. The letter manifests a desire to reset the calendar. Again we are offered insight into the narrator's mind: according to her daughter-in-law and new coiffeuse, "fashions of the seventies are on the way back" (141). The suggestion is that Alda, too, can come back.

Seeming and *being* is ever crucial in literature, and rarely more so than in "Mlle. Dias de Corta." A six-word version might read: "A crusty old lady becomes kind." A six-word generic assessment might ask: "Is this story really a letter?" The question of genre is crucial to "Mlle.," and if we imagine this story to be a letter, it is a love letter that slowly unfolds itself. It is a love letter, which, even if fictional, retains a dose of the real and the emotionally sincere. As the line "companionship rather than income" evinces, the widow is writing truthfully about her love for a young woman who briefly imbued her life with "joy and astonishment" (135).

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Vrnitev domov, *ti* in žanr v zgodbi »Mlle. Dias de Corta«

Ta članek raziskuje stilistična in estetična tveganja v izbrani zgodbi pistaeljice Mavis Gallant, "Mlle. Dias de Corta." Razmišlja o narativni poti v zgodbi, ki je napisana v obliki pisem, ki nikoli ne bodo prejeta, ker je prejemnikov naslov neznan. V poglobljenem pogledu v zgodbo preučim obširen čustveni teren, ki ga pripovedovalka prepotuje in sproti opazujem žanrske pomisleke, drugoosebno pripoved in korenine, na katerih temeljijo pripovedovalquine nenade značajske spremembe.

Ključne besede: Mavis Gallant, žanre, kratka zgodba, drugoosebna pripoved