

**KATHERINE MANSFIELD AND THE ART OF
THE SHORT STORY**

Gerri Kimber

Foreword by Professor Claire Davison

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Textual Note

An earlier edition of this book, *A Literary Modernist: Katherine Mansfield and the Art of the Short Story*, was first published by Kakapo Books, London, in 2008. This new and considerably expanded edition has been revised and updated to reflect new editions of Mansfield's work and recent criticism.

In this short study, it is impossible to cover every aspect of Mansfield's fiction writing. New themes for critical analysis are emerging all the time, a testament to the importance now accorded Mansfield in the modernist canon. Since the publication of the annual *Katherine Mansfield Studies* journal by Edinburgh University Press in 2009 (now a book series), themes such as the Arts, the Fantastic, the (Post)colonial, World War One, Translation, have been analysed in detail by some of the world's foremost Mansfield scholars. Readers of this book are directed to these volumes for more specific discussions of these themes.

For the purposes of clarity, I have corrected missing apostrophes, etc., in Mansfield's letters and notebook entries quoted in the text.

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Foreword

It is now almost universally acknowledged that language use both shapes and reflects cultural perceptions. This easily overlooked fact is best illustrated by observing linguistic suggestivity in neighbouring languages, where words might look alike and share the same etymological roots, but tend to resist neat equivalence by conjuring up associations far beyond what first meets the eye.

A particularly incisive example is the label 'short story' to evoke a brief, self-contained piece of prose-writing. How easily that epithet 'short' is taken to reflect something minor, lesser or lacking. Short on what, one might ask? Plot? Consistency? Aesthetic ambition? The opposite of 'short story' after all is not 'long story', but just story, or novel. There is no doubting that the label has its part to play in the undervaluing of short stories. Critics, readers and literary journalists are far more likely to observe that this or that writer 'only' wrote short stories than that they 'only' wrote novels or 'only' wrote poetry. The tenacious association of 'short in length' and secondary in importance becomes more apparent if we compare the literary appellation 'short story' with the equivalent term in another language, or with the name used for short forms in the other arts. In French, the novel is 'un roman', laying the emphasis on the distant ancestry of the prose form, harking back to the medieval romance. The English term 'novel' on the contrary announces 'novelty', which long fed into the conviction that there had been a 'rise' of the novel as a new form in prose in the early eighteenth century. An interesting quirk in etymology and usage then appears when evoking the short story on either side of the Channel. The French equivalent is 'nouvelle', reaching back to the English 'novel', yet also pointing to innovation rather than length, while also evoking hints of journalism and modernity, as well as femininity with all its attendant cultural constructions. As for short forms in the other arts, the 'miniature' in painting, no

matter how evocative of size, implies meticulous craftsmanship rather than less substance. A minutely hewn diamond is not perceived as a small sculpture; an orchestral tone-poem is not a short symphony any more than an aria is a short opera.

Resistance to the short story as an intricate, exquisite art form in itself, rather than as a lesser derivative of the novel, drawn to depth rather than length, has been a lasting feature of much literary criticism and literary history. Despite a growing sense that the short story was often the most aesthetically experimental, formally innovative, emotionally powerful prose form of the early twentieth century, as well as the site for many authors' most subversive and most intimate writings, it has not been unusual to find short stories and their writers overlooked, or relegated to the footnotes or summed up with expedition in a later chapter once more monumental prose forms or more lavishly avant-garde poetic and dramatic writings have been considered. And yet, even in the dawning years of the twentieth century, there was a growing sense that what in French are known as 'les formes brèves' – brief art forms – actually came closer to capturing a sense of the modern, the fugitive, and the all too vulnerably human than did the larger, more traditional or more polished art works. It was an era when the vast ambitions of industrialisation, colonialism and the nation-state were gradually showing their bleak, corrosive underside, and the warning signals were all too ominously present telling of a collapse or apocalypse to come. How apt, then, that after the sprawling, all-encompassing multi-volume Victorian novels, or the ambitiously scaled Wagnerian operas, there should be a retreat to quieter, under-stated art forms, or powerfully illuminating glimpses as quickly followed by silence – the pointillist water colour, the prelude, nocturne or rhapsody, the dramatic monologue, the photograph. Such 'brief forms' were of their times in other ways too, and were often a direct off-shoot of industrialisation: the rise of 'little magazines' bringing essays, prose poems and sketches to new enthusiastic readers, where the focus was more often on self-contained pieces rather than on publication

in serial version; the unprecedented availability of cheaply printed daily newspapers making writers more attentive to concision and powerful precision; the development of advertising requiring the intrinsic value of an object to be rendered desirable in a slick picture, a slogan, and a promise. Technological break-throughs like the telegraph, phonograph and telephone brought other brief encounters into everyday life, with a poetry of their own. In Virginia Woolf's words, 'The telephone, which interrupts the most serious conversations and cuts short the most weighty observations, has a romance of its own'.¹ Even the early cinema, despite its propensity to embrace larger-scale stories, was a conglomerate of short forms – episodic music, black screens and subtitles, expressionist body language, shifts of scene. It was not for nothing that films were known as 'the pictures'.

Attempting to define what the new prose work in keeping with the times would be, Virginia Woolf, writing in 1927, foresaw that it would be a variety of the novel with some of the attributes of poetry. It would be free, fearless, flexible, and archly democratic. It would give 'the sneer, the contrast, the question, the closeness and complexity of life'. It would 'take the mould of that queer conglomeration of incongruous things – the modern mind'.² When she wrote the two essays quoted here, 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future' and 'How it Strikes a Contemporary', Woolf was both looking into the future to see where the craft of fiction might be going, but also looking back from an imagined point in the future to consider what later generations might make of her own era. She could have reached the very same conclusions had she looked back to what one of her own generation had already achieved during her short lifetime in precisely these domains: a question, a closeness, a misleadingly translucent complexity, an art of incongruous things, modern minds and democratic representations. And that writer was of course Katherine Mansfield, whose writing Woolf

¹ 'How it Strikes a Contemporary', in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4, ed. Andrew McNeillie, (New York and London: Harcourt, 1994), p. 237.

² 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future' in *Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4, p. 436.

painfully confessed was ‘the only writing I have ever been jealous of’, and whose death left Woolf feeling that she would henceforth be writing ‘into emptiness’.³

As our understanding of the modernist era and the spectacular flourishing of dynamic, innovative art forms in the early years of the century has shifted and evolved, so the central place of Katherine Mansfield in this new cultural landscape has come to be acknowledged. Similarly, the recent four-volume *Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Works of Katherine Mansfield* (of which Gerri Kimber is the deviser and Series Editor), to be added to the five volumes of letters, has transfigured our understanding of a figure long seen as a lesser author practising a lesser art. It now appears clear that Mansfield was both of her time, and ahead of it; she was likewise both an inheritor of the short story tradition and a pioneer taking the art form to new territories. Early works show her drawing on legends and fairy tales; certain more experimental vignettes point to the influence of newly discovered, newly translated writers such as Dostoevsky, Maupassant, Ibsen and Maeterlinck. The dawning era of psychoanalysis can be felt in many of the prose pieces, with their interest in dreams, fantasy lives and the scars of the past. Doubtless one of the most widely travelled writers of her era, Mansfield could capture the sense of shifting, rootless exile and dispossession, whether through the vibrant bustle of international railways, through the social microcosms formed during the weeks of steamship travel, or through the random, arbitrary facelessness of hotels and rented accommodation.

Another essential feature of Mansfield’s poetics is their intimately enmeshed awareness of the body, both the human body and the gendered body, the senses, affect and memory. As illness gradually left her fragile and crippled, so the prose forms once explored by the vibrantly expressive socialite, the clown, actress and mimic changed; ever in touch with her era, she took to observing life at a remove, through the windows, creating a sense of

³ Anne Olivier Bell, ed., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 2, (New York : Harcourt Brace, 1980), pp. 227-8.

framed pictures and separation that echoes the pictorial techniques of Matisse or Chagall in the same era. Mansfield was a practising feminist even if she was impatient with political labels. She tore the gloss from the pain, poverty and physical suffering of under-privileged women; she trampled over sexual prejudices and norms in her own life as well as in her poetics; she used art to explore what colonial politics meant in the minds and bodies of the colonised and the colonisers. She was also a practising intermedialist long before academia took up the term: her stories grow from pieces of music, pictures, poems, architectural details. Cinema techniques are transposed back into writing, theatrical monologues and dialogues are re-mediatised as prose. When Luigi Russolo was writing a manifesto to celebrate *The Art of Noises* (1913), Mansfield was composing stories to orchestrate the musical and environmental soundscapes of her century. And her letters and reviews prove one of the most engaging artistic manifestos of the era, explicitly defining what she sought from art, and where she and her contemporaries might be going from there.

In other words, today's readers looking into the poetics and context of modernism would be well advised to start with Mansfield, but the wealth of reading materials might make it hard to know where to begin. Which book should come first when faced with the voluminous guides and companions to Modernism, the sheer mass of literary concepts and critical approaches to be tackled, the daunting task of taking on not just Anglophone modernism, but the European heritage of Symbolism, the global politics of colonial and post-colonial literatures, and the interweaving aesthetics of all the arts? My own answer to this hypothetical arts student or avid reader, standing bemused before many shelves or long bibliographies of essential reading, would be Gerri Kimber's *Katherine Mansfield and the Art of the Short Story*. In keeping with the aspirations of the Palgrave Pivot series, Kimber's book is an achievement as a short form itself: a concise, readable but nevertheless authoritative and encompassing study that offers the reader not only specialised approaches to Mansfield's art

but insights into perspectives that critics have yet to tackle (see page XX for example). In fourteen compact sections, the study guides the reader through an impressive overview of Mansfield's artistic endeavours, her foremost critics and biographers, the critical studies and theories that have best engaged with her works, encompassing glimpses of Mansfield's own cultural tradition and context and taking into account a huge variety of stories extending from the best-known anthology favourites to the least known sketches that were only published for the first time in 2012. Readers would be hard pushed to find a clearer account of how Mansfield 'influenced, reflected, and conveyed modernist aesthetic principles'⁴ in such an accessible format. Likewise readers only now discovering the impressive 220-story collection in the Edinburgh *Collected Works* would do well to do so with Kimber's work as a guide, for it underlines how the different works need to be read together. This can include coverage of stories read as stepping stones in her genesis as a writer, or as illustrations of the inextricable interlinking of economic necessity and aesthetic vision, such as the cinematographic principles Mansfield was learning as an extra at the film studios, for example, or as fascinating textual proof of her awareness of Maori lives, customs and language, thereby making sense of her entire life and works, rather than just the focal points.

Might we one day see a Guide or Companion to twentieth century literature that starts with a resounding chapter on short stories as the pioneering, trailblazing artefacts of Modernism, or neo-realism or the postmodern? Or which acknowledges openly that Mansfield wasn't just in keeping with the major modernists of her era, but was often steps ahead of them when it came to looking perceptively at the bulky artistic and political heritage that was theirs, and perceiving new modes and forms of fiction most suited to making sense of it? Since 2013, when Alice Munro was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, it has at least been possible to believe that a writer who 'only' writes short stories can be acclaimed

⁴ Sydney Janet Kaplan, *Katherine Mansfield and the Origins of Modernist Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 1.

alongside, and indeed ahead of her contemporaries. With Gerri Kimber's work in hand, and an understanding of the vast tradition of short-story telling leading from the folktales and customs of the pre-print past through to the dazzling flashes of modernist experimentation, Katherine Mansfield emerges as one of the essential figures leading to full literary recognition and international honours for individual writers, and their art.

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Introduction

‘It seems to me very important that women should learn to write. Does it to you? God knows I don’t like them much when they do it – or men either for the matter of that. Mr Beresford gave a lecture upon fiction the other day at the 1917 Club – a deplorable exhibition...and then Morgan Forster said the *Prelude* and *The Voyage Out* were the best novels of their time, and I said damn Katherine! Why can’t I be the only woman who knows how to write?’

Virginia Woolf writing to Katherine Mansfield, 13 February 1921.⁵

Discussion of Mansfield’s writing technique in the early years after her death was initially subordinate to the overwhelming interest in her personality, with the hagiography of her life and praise for her personal writing – particularly in France – for many years taking precedence over any consideration of her fiction. However, with the passage of time there emerged a more balanced and critical viewpoint, removing the saint-like, ethereal, wholly false mask of the author so revered by the French. My aim in this book is to illustrate how radical and innovative Mansfield’s narrative writing would become during her life-time, ultimately placing her at the forefront of modernist short story writers. Recent criticism has also turned towards favouring Mansfield’s personal brand of literary modernism. As an example, in Michael Levenson’s 1999 *Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, Mansfield is only accorded a few brief mentions; however, in his revised 2011 edition of the same book, space devoted to Mansfield criticism is considerably enhanced, particularly in Elleke Boehmer and Steven Matthews’s chapter on ‘Modernism and Colonialism’, where several pages are devoted to Mansfield criticism.⁶ Indeed, criticism on Mansfield as a (post)colonial writer has enjoyed particular popularity in recent years.

I shall not be considering Mansfield’s personal writing in this study, except where it furnishes details of her personal aesthetic philosophy pertinent to the study of her fiction. It is

⁵ Joanne Trautmann Banks, ed., *Congenial Spirits: The Selected Letters of Virginia Woolf*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1989), p. 128.

⁶ Michael Levenson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

not known what Mansfield might have accomplished had her life not been cut short or whether her narrative art might have gone in a different direction. Nevertheless, since the publication of the two volume Edinburgh edition of her *Collected Fiction* (2012), it is now possible to assess her true fiction legacy, which comprises some 216 stories and story fragments, totalling nearly half a million words. Mansfield was that rare thing – a writer exclusively associated with the short story; Anthea Trodd points out that ‘the brevity and relative marginality of this still, in English, fairly new form, offered her a refuge analogous to that of children’s fiction’.⁷ For many readers and critics (and again, especially in France), the perception was that she *was* almost writing children’s fiction. Though children may be depicted in many of her most famous stories, her themes are entirely adult in both form and content.

Yet, the notional superficiality of her stories, together with the premise that the short story is perceived to be a lesser form, has meant that many critics have viewed Mansfield as a minor writer, though as Bonnie Kime Scott makes clear, for her, she is ‘a marginal not a minor writer – marginalised in particular ways during her lifetime and in rather different ways after her death’.⁸ How Mansfield came to develop her own particular free indirect discourse form of writing, linking it to literary impressionism, culminated in her position as one of the most important early exponents of the modernist short story. Her techniques include the use of symbolism, literary impressionism and humour; themes incorporate violence, war, death, childbirth, relationships – especially in marriage, together with feminist and sexual issues.

Mansfield as Innovator of the Modernist Short Story

⁷ Anthea Trodd, *A Reader’s Guide to Edwardian Literature* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 72.

⁸ Bonnie Kime Scott, ed., *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 299.

Like painting in watercolours, short story writing may seem a deceptively easy task for those who have not attempted it, and this goes part way to explain the dismissive tone taken by so many critics towards the genre. H. E. Bates was an early critic who understood this difficulty: '[t]he short story is the most difficult and exacting of all prose forms; it cannot be treated as a spare-time occupation; and above all it must not be allowed to foster the illusion [...] that its very brevity makes it easy to do'.⁹ Clare Hanson makes the claim that the short story has often been the 'chosen form of the exile [...] who longs to return to a home country which is denied him/her', Mansfield's work being an obvious example of this tenet.¹⁰ She continues:

I would suggest that the short story has been from its inception a particularly appropriate vehicle for the expression of the ex-centric, alienated vision of women. It is striking, for example to see the way in which the early 'modern' short story, in the form of the psychological sketch was taken over by women writers during the era of the New Women of the 1880s and 1890s.¹¹

Lorna Sage emphasises how Mansfield 'put even more into the story form than her contemporaries, however, since it was really her *only* form', reiterating once more how unusual was Mansfield's position in utilising the short story as her sole narrative art form.¹² Of course, the short story, by its very nature, imposes different criteria on the writer to that of the novel. Cherry Hankin illuminates the differences thus:

While the novel, with its expansive treatment of character, can afford to imitate the open-endedness of life in its conclusion, the linguistic economy of the short story imposes a more rigorous pattern. The closure or ending of the narrative is integral, not only to our sense of the work's completeness but to our perception of the design as a whole.¹³

Added to this, Bates reflects how, 'as in a great drawing, so in a great short story: it is the lines that are left out that are of paramount importance. Not that this is all; it is knowing what

⁹ H. E. Bates, *The Modern Short Story from 1809 to 1953* (London: Robert Hale, 1988), p. 10.

¹⁰ Clare Hanson, ed., *Re-reading the Short Story* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 3.

¹¹ Hanson, *Re-reading the Short Story*, p. 3.

¹² Lorna Sage, ed., *The Garden Party and Other Stories*, (London: Penguin, 2000), p. vii.

¹³ Cherry Hankin, 'Fantasy and the Sense of an Ending in the Work of Katherine Mansfield', in Jan Pilditch, ed., *The Critical Response to Katherine Mansfield* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 183.

lines to leave out that is of the greatest importance, too'.¹⁴ Sage comments that for Mansfield, this editing out of superfluous subject matter would evolve into 'short stories [...] intensely crafted and evocative objects on the page, sometimes with nearly no plot at all in the conventional sense'.¹⁵ Concurring with this notion, Kathleen Wheeler elucidates further on how this rejection of a conventional plot structure and ensuing dramatic action yields to, 'impressionistic evocations of epiphanic moments'.¹⁶ I shall demonstrate the importance of the epiphanic moment in Mansfield's narrative art in another section of this study.

Wheeler encapsulates all the definitions of the modernist short story which have evolved over the years and sets Mansfield's work into this body of evidence:

Modernist fiction largely dispensed with (or even de-emphasised) plot, action, drama, structure, shape, development, and so on [...]. These conventions are used in the service of the greater expression of the interior life, though not at the expense of social relations and externalised dramatics which provide a social-realist context. Mansfield's stories and many other modernist fictions, then, are not quite accurately described as rejecting such conventions, so much as for wrenching them away from traditional emphasis on the realistic representation of external, social, public relations, which relegate interiority to the sidelines or even into virtual non-existence. One could argue that Mansfield artfully hid the 'mechanics' of her stories, as artists need to do.¹⁷

It is therefore possible to place Mansfield firmly within the modernist movement, because of the body of work she produced, together with the philosophy behind her narrative art. Writing in the 1990s, Sydney Janet Kaplan comments further:

To insist on Mansfield's significance to the development of modernist fiction might surprise some of the current revisionary critics of modernism, who have nearly erased her from the history of the movement, but it would not have surprised critics during the 1920s or 1930s, when Mansfield was widely imitated, discussed, and revered. In 1934,

¹⁴ Bates, p. 8.

¹⁵ Sage, p. vii.

¹⁶ Kathleen Wheeler, *Modernist Women Writers and Narrative Art* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), p. 124. Wheeler argues that Clare Hanson in her book *Short Stories and Short Fiction 1880-1980* (London: Macmillan, 1985), underestimates the dramatic quality of Mansfield's stories. For Wheeler the plot is 'not so much lacking, as reconceptualised and realised in new and unexpected ways from realist practices'. Wheeler, p. 203.

¹⁷ Wheeler, p. 125.

for example, T.S. Eliot selected Mansfield's 'Bliss' as an illustration of the dominant experimental tendency of contemporary fiction.¹⁸

And yet in 1987, as an example of this erasure from the movement, Gillian Hanscombe, in a book entitled *Writing for their Lives: The Modernist Women, 1910-1940*, failed to make any mention of Mansfield.¹⁹

Of course, being 'merely' a short story writer does not aid Mansfield's cause. For Hanson, being a woman writer also explains Mansfield's marginalisation, since her choice of form determines the status of her art, as does her sex.²⁰ She goes on to explain that since the short story, by its very nature, has a form of exclusion together with an implied tendency towards the expression of that which is marginal, for many women writers it became their most important – and in some case their *only* literary form.²¹ Kaplan takes this feminist viewpoint further, claiming that central to Mansfield's development as a modernist writer is 'her deconstruction of traditional conventions of fiction which restrict the roles of women'.²²

Mansfield's fiction – and literary modernism as a whole – is associated with a rejection of conventional plot structure and dramatic action in favour of the presentation of character through narrative voice.²³ For Dominic Head, 'the plotted story, of which Maupassant is seen as figurehead, is set against the less well structured, often psychological

¹⁸ Sydney Janet Kaplan, *Katherine Mansfield and the Origins of Modernist Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 1-2.

¹⁹ Gillian Hanscombe, *Writing for their Lives: The Modernist Women, 1910-1940* (London: Women's Press, 1987).

²⁰ Clare Hanson, 'Katherine Mansfield', in Scott, p. 303.

²¹ Hanson, 'Katherine Mansfield', in Scott, p. 300.

²² Kaplan, p. 86.

²³ Dominic Head asserts that the modernist short story has, 'a generic tendency towards paradox and ambiguity [...] authorial detachment and the resulting emphasis on artifice and structural patterning (paradigmatic elements) [giving] rise to an uncertain surface structure. These capacities of modernist short fiction conform to the accepted characteristics of modernist literature in general: the limited action and an associated ambiguity and preoccupation with personality; and the self-conscious foregrounding of form and the concomitant reliance on pattern – paradigmatic devices – to express that which is absent from the surface, or syntagmatic level of the narrative'. Dominic Head, *The Modernist Short Story* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 8.

story; the “slice-of-life” Chekhovian tradition. It is to this tradition that the stories of the Modernists (those of Joyce, Woolf and Mansfield in particular) are usually said to belong’.²⁴

In describing the qualities of the new modernist literature, Michael Levenson describes how

[n]othing was beyond the reach of technical concern: not the frame of a picture, not the shape of a stage, not the choice of a subject, not the status of a rhyme. [...] Novels of the period continually enacted strenuous negotiations between new formal strategies and the unprecedented social matter that they sought to absorb.²⁵

Mansfield is present at the beginning of this movement as one of its most exciting and cutting-edge protagonists, according her a prominent place in the literary modernist movement as a whole, with modernist tendencies present throughout her fiction.

Many different influences would come together to create Mansfield’s own personal aesthetic philosophy, continually evolving and developing throughout her life. It remains one aspect of her work treated in a particularly subjective way by critics in general, since the disparity between viewpoints is so marked. For Rhoda Nathan, ‘the key to Mansfield’s carefully finished stories lies in her essential personal difference from modernists. [...] Her fiction simply does not concern itself with the anxiety, guilt, and anomie associated with modernism’.²⁶ Kaplan, on the other hand, writing only three years later, feels that Mansfield, ‘through her critical writings as well as her brilliant innovations in fiction [...] influenced, reflected, and conveyed modernist aesthetic principles’.²⁷ Nowadays, Mansfield’s position as a major modernist writer is assured. Peter Childs comments, for example, that she is ‘the most important modernist author who only wrote short stories’.²⁸

There is, in addition, a Wildean undercurrent present in so much of her writing; the sardonic, humorous Mansfield – the short story writer who was able to demolish and ridicule

²⁴ Head, p. 16.

²⁵ Michael Levenson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 3.

²⁶ Rhoda B. Nathan, *Katherine Mansfield* (New York: Continuum, 1988), p. 137.

²⁷ Kaplan, p. 1.

²⁸ Peter Childs, *Modernism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), p. 94.

‘sophisticated’ society as Wilde himself did; yet one who can also, within the space of four or five pages, portray a vision of poverty and unhappiness such as we find in ‘Life of Ma Parker’, or the character of Ada Moss in ‘Pictures’. Few writers of her generation dared to desanctify marriage and all the outmoded Victorian principles associated with it, so devastatingly and so frequently as Mansfield, in stories such as ‘The Man Without a Temperament’, ‘Mr Reginald Peacock’s Day’, ‘Marriage à la Mode’, ‘Bliss’, ‘The Singing Lesson’ or ‘Honeymoon’.

Mansfield may have come from middle-class stock, but it is wrong to say, as Sean O’Faolain did in 1948:

True, one must not ask of a writer more than a writer can give. One must not expect from Katherine Mansfield that cry across the vague of death. She had charm, and that light sweetness does persist, in little eddies and gushes. I feel she wrote too easily, too lengthily, too self-indulgently, happy to recollect, not critically measuring what she had to give, either unwilling or unable to win intensity by compression.²⁹

This quotation typifies a certain body of opinion prevalent at the time O’Faolain was writing, examining a limited selection of Mansfield’s stories for their surface value only, alluding to well-off bourgeois characters, or apparently seedy sentimental types, dismissing them all as trite or affected. The other body of opinion, exemplified in the French approach to her work, ignores the often bitter and cynical reality presented on the written page, and, confusing biographical detail with narrative technique, sees in all her work a spiritual search for health and happiness, a longing to return to the world of her childhood – a denial of all things ugly in life. In fact, as I shall demonstrate, Mansfield presents a very down-to-earth kind of ‘truth’, with its foundations to be found in the everyday world she saw around her.

Mansfield’s Narrative Technique

In November 1920, with a little over two years left to live, Mansfield wrote to Murry:

²⁹ Sean O’Faolain, ‘Katherine Mansfield’, *New Statesman and Nation* 35 (17 January 1948), p. 54.

What a QUEER business writing is. I don't know. I don't believe other people are ever as foolishly excited as I am while I'm working. How could they be? Writers would have to live in trees. [...] If one remained oneself all the time like some writers can it would be a bit less exhausting.³⁰

For her entire adult life, Mansfield was a 'professional' writer. Even as a teenager in New Zealand, bored with family life and desperate to return to England, a few of her short stories were published in an Australian magazine.³¹ In 1911, back in London, her first book of short stories, *In a German Pension* was published; she was just twenty-one.

Her technique is composed of several key elements. Mansfield's short stories develop over the course of time into 'slices of life' – glimpses into the lives of individuals, families, captured at a certain moment, frozen in time like a painting or a snapshot. On the whole, a single 'main' event is revealed and developed, no case is presented for or against their actions or their life; they simply 'are'. Vincent O'Sullivan discerns that in Mansfield's art, 'one event may offer us, in miniature, something which holds true of an entire life, or perhaps of life itself'.³²

W. H. New also points out that the reader should not be taken in by the surface simplicity of her stories, since it serves, 'as a cloak for more subversive themes and attitudes'.³³ An example of this subversive attitude is demonstrated by Mansfield's insistence on mentioning 'the unmentionable' – all the tiny fragments, hidden within her carefully chosen lexicon, intended to shock, to stimulate, to bring to life, to provoke those details with

³⁰ Vincent O'Sullivan and Margaret Scott, eds, *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984-2008) Vol. 4, p. 97. Hereafter referred to as *Letters* followed by volume and page number.

³¹ Antony Alpers comments: 'Back in Wellington, after her years at Queen's College, [Mansfield] expressed her misery in some self-indulgent mood pieces, strongly influenced by her passion for Oscar Wilde. Entitled *Vignettes*, some of these were eagerly accepted in Melbourne by E. J. Brady for his newly founded magazine, the *Native Companion*'. Antony Alpers, ed., *The Stories of Katherine Mansfield: Definitive Edition* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 545.

³² Vincent O'Sullivan, 'The Magnetic Chain: Notes and Approaches to K.M.', in Pilditch, p. 142.

³³ W. H. New, *Reading Mansfield and Metaphors of Form* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999), p. ix.

which she stamps her initials on a piece of work, examples of which will be highlighted later on. Other ironically subversive themes to be discussed include her criticism of conventional relationships, together with a social critique of prejudice and small-mindedness, all of which is achieved through suggestion, through implication; no pronouncements are ever made, the characters, according to Gillian Boddy, ‘betray themselves, usually unwittingly, through their actions and words’.³⁴

Solitary characters narrate their interior monologues in one text; in others, as Edward Wagenknecht notes, ‘[Mansfield] had Dickens’ ability effectively to “tag” a character through the description of some single characteristic action’.³⁵ One of Mansfield’s greatest strengths is her ability to ‘become’ her fictional characters and to depict with acute psychological insight the workings of their minds, as well as delineating their physical attributes. For each character she develops a distinctive voice and an appropriate narrative strategy.³⁶ Mansfield is recorded by many of her contemporaries as having a gift for impersonation, which she incorporated into her work through the myriad of characters presented there. Ida Baker, Mansfield’s school-friend and companion remarks: ‘There was a bell-like quality in her rich low voice and her singing was a high, pure soprano [...] She was

³⁴ Gillian Boddy, ‘Frau Brechenmacher and Stanley Burnell: Some Background Discussion on the Treatment of the Roles of Men and Women in the Writing of Katherine Mansfield’, in Michel Dupuis and Paulette Michel, eds, *The Fine Instrument* (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1989), p. 91.

³⁵ Edward Wagenknecht, ‘Katherine Mansfield’, in Pilditch, p. 25.

³⁶ Julia van Gunsteren, too, discusses this feature: ‘The Platonic distinction between *diegesis* and *mimesis* has persisted throughout discussions on the way of rendering speech and has served as a point of departure for discussions of ‘point of view’ in fiction ever since James and Lubbock. The characteristic feature of *diegesis* is that ‘the poet himself is the speaker’ and does not even attempt to suggest to us that anyone but himself is speaking. In *mimesis*, on the other hand, the poet tries to create the illusion that it is not he who is speaking’. Julia van Gunsteren, *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Impressionism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990), p. 101. The narrator’s absence from the texts of Mansfield remains one of the most striking features of her work. As Gunsteren also points out: ‘[t]he narrator’s presence in or absence from a text has a crucial effect on a story’s structure. The narrator is therefore the most central concept in the analysis of a narrative text. The identity of the narrator, his participation, his perceptibility, and the choices that are implied, all give the text its specific character’ (p. 100).

a born actress and mimic, and even in her ordinary everyday life took colour from the company she was in'.³⁷ Leonard Woolf concurs with this opinion:

By nature, I think, she was gay, cynical, amoral, ribald, witty. When we first knew her she was extraordinarily amusing. I don't think anyone has ever made me laugh more than she did in those days. She would sit very upright on the edge of a chair or sofa and tell at immense length a kind of saga, of her experiences as an actress [...T]he extraordinary funniness of the story was increased by the flashes of her astringent wit. [...] Her gifts were those of an intense realist, with a superb sense of ironic humour and fundamental cynicism.³⁸

Mansfield's narrative voice speaks through one particular character after another, with no generalising authorial view or voice; Claire Tomalin describes this technique as encapsulating 'the isolation in which each character dwells. [...] There is no history in these stories, and no explanation of motive. The most brilliant of them are post-impressionist (and post-Maupassant) works, grotesquely peopled and alight with colour and movement'.³⁹

Mansfield uses numerous grammatical devices to develop her creativity, notably a variety of sentence forms, listed by Marilyn Zorn as, 'the rhetorical question, the exclamation, repetition, the abrupt shift in syntax signalled by the dash, the unfinished sentence [... and] the difference in male and female speech'.⁴⁰ Mansfield develops a mastery of the art of being brief; there is nothing extraneous in her stories. Imagery abounds, which develops into the use of recurring symbols, which unify all her work. For Nathan these symbols are, 'similar to the "leitmotifs" of Wagner's music and Mann's fiction, whose repetition recalls each previous occurrence, and which unify the work in terms of its theme'.⁴¹ As Delia da Sousa Correa notes, 'Music was of particular importance, but "performance" is a

³⁷ Ida Baker, *The Memories of LM* (London: Michael Joseph, 1971), p. 233.

³⁸ Leonard Woolf, *The Autobiography of Leonard Woolf* (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), p. 204.

³⁹ Claire Tomalin, *Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life* (London: Viking, 1987), p. 6.

⁴⁰ Marilyn Zorn, 'Visionary Flowers: Another Study of Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss"', *Studies in Short Fiction* (Spring 1980), p. 145.

⁴¹ Nathan, p. 14.

principle that informs Mansfield's work in a wider sense, and extends to her engagement with film and painting, as well as with music, drama and the written word'. She goes on to explain:

Scholars interested in relationships between her writing and the visual arts have claimed her in turn as a Fauvist and an Impressionist. Others have noticed the radical extent to which her writing internalised the long-shot, close-up, jump-cut techniques of the new art of cinema, long before other Modernists descended from their lofty disparagement of this vulgar form of entertainment (Mansfield even acted as a film extra while she was living in London).⁴²

Mansfield's fascination with the cinema is certainly reflected in the way she presents scenes and even characters, as I shall go on to demonstrate.

Dramatic techniques

One of the most significant and most noticeably dramatic of Mansfield's techniques is the use of the 'nouvelle-instant' – or 'slices of life', where the action occupies merely a brief instant of time. For René Godenne, 'the key stone of [Mansfield's] short story is really the moment'.⁴³ He goes on to list the use of the 'nouvelle-instant' in the original different story collections as follows: '9 out of 13 in *In a German Pension*, 12 out of 14 in *Bliss*, 14 out of 15 in *The Garden Party*, 5 out of 10 in *The Dove's Nest*, 8 out of 10 in *Something Childish*', underscoring the importance of this Mansfieldian hallmark technique.⁴⁴ These 'moments' can be divided into two distinct types: the 'habitual' and the 'unique'; the former reveals a typical moment in a particular life/lives (e.g. 'The Man Without a Temperament', 'Marriage à la

⁴² Delia da Sousa Correa, 'Performativity in Words: Musical Performance in Katherine Mansfield's Stories', *Katherine Mansfield Studies*, 3, 2011, eds Delia da Sousa Correa, Gerri Kimber and Susan Reid, pp. 21-34.

⁴³ René Godenne, 'Katherine Mansfield's 'Nouvelle-Instant'', in Dupuis and Michel, p. 113.

⁴⁴ Godenne, p. 115.

Mode', 'The Wind Blows'), whereas the latter describes a unique event in a given life which may never be repeated (e.g. 'Bliss', 'Life of Ma Parker', 'A Dill Pickle').

Here is a typical moment in a typical day for the 'man without a temperament':

'Oh, the post! Oh, how lovely! Oh, Robert, they mustn't all be for you! Have they just come, Antonio?' Her thin hands flew up and hovered over the letters that Antonio offered her, bending forward.

'Just this moment, Signora,' grinned Antonio. 'I took-a them from the postman myself. I made-a the postman give them for me'.

'Noble Antonio!' laughed she. 'There – those are mine, Robert; the rest are yours'.

Antonio wheeled sharply, stiffened, the grin went out of his face. His striped linen jacket and his flat gleaming fringe made him look like a wooden doll.

Mr Salesby put the letters into his pocket; the papers lay on the table. He turned the ring, turned the signet ring on his little finger and stared in front of him, blinking, vacant.⁴⁵

Here, in the space of a few lines, Mansfield delineates the stultifying boredom facing a husband dutifully looking after his sick wife in a foreign hotel. Everything points to a typical routine on a typical day: the absurd excitement over the post, the ritual game with the waiter, whose politeness and jocularly is a façade which disappears as soon as his face is turned away from the couple (with the woodenness of his actions emphasised), the emasculation of the husband handed his post by his wife as if he were a child, and finally the unconscious, repetitious movement of the signet ring and the use of the word 'vacant' – setting the tone of the episode as well as indicating the mind-set of the husband.

Even in the instances where a more conventional narrative unfolds – as in 'The Doll's House' or 'Je ne parle pas français' – the notion of the 'instant' is ever present. This technique abnegates the need for anecdote – the reader is left to explore these states of being presented in any given story and analyse the effect on the characters, who frequently remain nameless. Indeed, in stories such as 'Pictures', the action takes place within a single day;

⁴⁵ Gerri Kimber and Vincent O'Sullivan, eds, *The Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), vol. 2, p. 201. All page references to Mansfield's stories are taken from this edition, and follow directly after any quotation.

other examples include ‘Prelude’, ‘At the Bay’, ‘The Doll’s House’, and ‘Mr Reginald Peacock’s Day’. As Head observes:

It is sometimes claimed that the unit of time in modernist fiction is the day, whereas in nineteenth-century fiction it is the year. One can compare *Mrs Dalloway* with *Under the Greenwood Tree*, *Ulysses* with *Emma*. Naturally this is not a hard-and-fast rule, but it does indicate a general shift in the treatment of time. It is interesting to note that both *Mrs Dalloway* and *Ulysses* were originally conceived as short stories.⁴⁶

One technique which acts as a marker for these particular stories is the way they begin – cutting straight through to the action, from the very first line, as if a stage direction is being given, with the use of temporal constructions implying a prior knowledge of the event being described; this technique is known as ‘in medias res’. Examples include: ‘And after all, the weather was ideal’ (‘The Garden Party’ 2/401), ‘Very early morning’ (‘At the Bay’ 2/342), ‘And then, after six years, she saw him again’ (‘A Dill Pickle’ 2/97), ‘Eight o’clock in the morning’ (‘Pictures’ 2/178), ‘The week after was one of the busiest weeks of their lives’ (‘The Daughters of the Late Colonel’ 2/266). Nathan asserts that:

One of Mansfield’s great narrative gifts is her ability to set a tone, plunge the reader into the heart of the event, and at the same time imply that the action has been building for a great while. [...] All the anxiety and prayer preliminary to the lawn party are implicit in that ‘And after all’, which phrase miraculously dissipates them.⁴⁷

The theatrical/cinematic tone is enhanced in some of the longer stories by their division into sections or ‘scenes’; ‘Prelude’, ‘At the Bay’ and ‘The Daughters of the Late Colonel’ are all divided into twelve scenes (with ‘At the Bay’ having an additional four line scene at the end).

Kinoshita observes how, “‘Prelude’ and ‘At the Bay’ have an almost identical narrative style and structure; the two stories have both an omniscient point of view and (multiple) limited points of view, and these limited points of view fully demonstrate

⁴⁶ Head, p. 6.

⁴⁷ Nathan, p. 41.

Mansfield's intensified free indirect discourse'.⁴⁸ This particular technique is neither indirect speech *nor* directly transcribed interior monologue; rather it presupposes the use of an omniscient narrator that the reader already knows. Joseph Flora makes the following comment:

The method of 'Prelude' is in many ways its content. Its title is the name of a musical form, the story reflects Mansfield's early training – she played the cello, sang, and for a time thought of a career in music. The prelude as developed by Bach is a very free form, and with Chopin becomes highly suggestive and imaginative, almost appearing improvised. In Mansfield's hands the form is plotless. People move; there are clearly identified 'scenes', each with completed action; but there is no strictly linear cause and effect. Connecting the scenes is a larger movement consisting of exactly pointed rhythms and balances.⁴⁹

In free indirect discourse, we are never told which thoughts belong to which character: instead the narrative moves between a more conventional narrator and a character's conscious thoughts. The result is an intimate method of storytelling, where, for certain moments, we *become* the character on the page. This use of free indirect discourse would become a hallmark of Mansfield's narrative technique, together with the episodic nature of certain stories and their theatrical quality; as Mansfield remarked in a letter, discussing 'Prelude', 'What form is it you ask? [...] As far as I know, it's more or less my own invention'.⁵⁰ Some years later she referred to 'the *Prelude* method – it just unfolds and opens'.⁵¹ Cherry Hankin notes, with regard to this particular structural device:

⁴⁸ Kinoshita, p. 119. One of Mansfield's early literary influences was Walter Pater, well-known for his appreciation of Flaubert, whose novel, *Madame Bovary*, is famous for its use of free indirect discourse.

⁴⁹ Joseph Flora, *The English Short Story 1880-1945: A Critical History* (Boston: Twayne, 1985), p. 68.

⁵⁰ *Letters*, 1, p. 331 (11 October 1917).

⁵¹ *Letters*, 4, p. 156 (1 January 1921). Gunsteren discusses Mansfield's literary experimentation, saying: '[m]any writers at the beginning of this century experimented and searched for new forms and methods to describe the world around them. The Literary Impressionists, like the Impressionists in painting, focused on perception. They attempted to formulate reality by breaking it into momentary fragments, selected intuitively and subjectively. They relied on sensory (ap)perceptions, used clusters of images and rendered their emotions in a "slice of life" picture of some every day ordinary experience. Their solipsistic visions of apparently directly perceived moments ("d'un moment de la durée")

The ordering of 'Prelude' is most obvious in its structural division into twelve episodes during the course of which certain thematic ideas are introduced, brought to a climax, and either resolved or allowed to subside. Unifying these episodes, and providing a natural transition between them, is the repeated appearance of objects or activities which have symbolic meaning.⁵²

Andrew Gurr takes these ideas one stage further, claiming a link with Eliot:

As the first of the major stories 'Prelude' was in all sorts of ways an innovation. Its form, twelve episodes or scenes, each one linked obliquely by theme and implication rather than by incident to its predecessor, was original in fiction, its closest kin perhaps being the associative form Eliot developed at the same time for *The Waste Land*. The material, a highly contrived reshaping of childhood memories, was both Proustian and Symbolist. In the form of a search for the past the artist creates a present self out of the personal store of memory, a *recherche* for the timeless *temps perdu* [...]. The influence of symbolism is not so aggressive as it became in poetry, but it is apparent in Mansfield's short fiction in several ways, notably the delicately etched minutiae which only become symbolic through their recurrence and their juxtapositions in the patterns of parallel and contrast through the discontinuities of the narrative.⁵³

Mansfield, ever the innovator and seeker after new experiences, was fascinated with the new medium of the cinema – as noted earlier, she was an extra on several silent movie productions in London.⁵⁴ Her narrative art reflects this interest in the deliberate cinematic impression of so many of the stories; it is as if the narrator has a moving camera, panning across, then focusing in, which provides so many of the stories with their unique 'pictorial' quality. Hanson also remarks on a more specific connection:

It is interesting to consider the reciprocal relation between the short story and film, both forms which have altered our conception of narrative. Both short story and film reject or deny certain levels of narrative, a certain kind of discursive 'explanation', preferring instead to work on a level on which unconscious desires and motives may be explored via 'associations not examined by reason'.⁵⁵

were presented in an atmospheric "Stimmung", which surrounds events, characters and the narrator'. Gunsteren, p. 7.

⁵² Cherry Hankin, 'Katherine Mansfield and her Confessional Stories' in Rhoda B. Nathan, ed., *Critical Essays on Katherine Mansfield* (New York: Hall, 1993), p. 12.

⁵³ Andrew Gurr, 'Katherine Mansfield: The Question of Perspectives in Commonwealth Literature', in Pilditch, p. 201.

⁵⁴ Murry notes: 'Katherine had acted as a super in a few cinematograph productions'. John Middleton Murry, ed., *The Journal of Katherine Mansfield 1904–1922: Definitive Edition* (London: Constable, 1954), p. 72, n.1.

⁵⁵ Hanson, *Re-reading the Short Story*, p. 6. An earlier critic, Elizabeth Bowen, had also made a similar connection: 'The short story [...] in its use of action is nearer to the drama than to the novel. The cinema, itself busy with a technique, is of the same generation: in the

On 16 January 1917, Mansfield wrote to Bertrand Russell: ‘Tomorrow I am acting for the movies – an “exterior scene in walking dress”. Doesn’t that sound awfully strange to you?’ Less than a week later, on 21 January 1917, she wrote again: ‘Will the sun ever shine again? My last day with the “movies” – walking about in a big bare studio in what the American producer calls “slap up evening dress” has laid me low ever since’.⁵⁶

Mansfield’s story ‘Pictures’⁵⁷ not only pays homage to the then innovative art form of the cinema, but is remarkable both for its portrayal of Miss Ada Moss, one of the most memorable of all Mansfield’s characters, as well as for its insight into the seedy world of the unemployed, trying to get a ‘lucky break’ in films. Comedy and pathos are both present in equal measure. To begin with, the story is comical and almost flippant; by the end there is very little comedy left at all. Miss Moss deceives the reader by being so constantly cheerful and optimistic that we forget, or rather ignore, as she does, her true plight. The story centres on a form of self-deception, in the same way that Mansfield perceived at first hand how cinematic techniques could deceive the viewer. The protagonist is Miss Ada Moss, ‘contralto singer’, an apparently respectable member of society. Yet throughout the story, the reader is presented with tiny insights, which gradually lead the reader towards an understanding that perhaps Ada Moss has sunk lower than she would have us believe. Occasionally, she even finds her own appearance startling whenever she sees herself in a mirror, yet she will not acknowledge the state to which she has fallen.

last thirty years the two arts have been accelerating together. They have affinities – neither is sponsored by a tradition; both are, accordingly, free; both, still, are self-conscious, show a self-imposed discipline and regard for form; both have, to work on, immense matter – the disoriented romanticism of the age’. Elizabeth Bowen (intro), *Faber Book of Modern Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), p. 16.

⁵⁶ *Letters*, 1, p. 293, p. 294.

⁵⁷ Originally titled ‘The Pictures’, it was reworked from a dialogue piece entitled ‘The Common Round’, first published in the *New Age*, 21: 5, 31 May 1917, pp. 113–15.

The first jolt comes when we see her leave her torn nightdress on underneath her clothes. Then there is the seedy description of ‘an old dead powder puff’ (2/181), which emphasises the shabby quality of all Miss Moss’s belongings. Even personal hygiene is drawn in when we realise that she probably smells: ‘The girl not only frowned; she seemed to smell something vaguely unpleasant; she sniffed’ (2/183). Towards the end of the story, when Miss Moss’s attempts to cover up her poverty and misery have failed, she has a ‘good cry’ (2/184), in the Square Gardens, and we are presented with an embarrassing view of a rather unsavoury elderly woman wandering the streets of London, crying in public places. To a stranger she is little more than a down-and-out who does not even know what day it is, and that is finally how she appears to the reader.

The major theme running throughout the story is how human beings bear up under the weight of adversity; Miss Moss maintains her confidence in life. Here we see her attempting to find work:

At the North-East Film Company the crowd was all the way up the stairs. Miss Moss found herself next to a fair little baby thing about thirty in a white lace hat with cherries round it.

‘What a crowd!’ said she. ‘Anything special on?’

‘*Didn’t* you know, dear?’ said the baby, opening her immense pale eyes. ‘There was a call at nine-thirty for *attractive* girls. We’ve all been waiting for *hours*. Have you played for this company before?’ Miss Moss put her head on one side. ‘No, I don’t think I have’.

‘They’re a lovely company to play for,’ said the baby. ‘A friend of mine has a friend who gets thirty pounds a day. . . . Have you *arcted* much for the *fil-lums*?’

‘Well, I’m not an actress by profession,’ confessed Miss Moss. ‘I’m a contralto singer. But things have been so bad lately that I’ve been doing a little.’

‘It’s *like* that, isn’t it, dear?’ said the baby (2/183).

The emphasis on the word ‘attractive’ indicates that Miss Moss does not fall into this category. She is also not on her own in needing a ‘lucky break’ – the ‘fair little baby thing about thirty’, is quite understanding of her predicament; indeed in mentioning her age, Mansfield stresses that Miss Moss is merely one of many, desperate for work to pay for food and lodgings.

There are uses of animal imagery throughout the story, emphasising how the so-called civilised world is really no better than a jungle. Women outside, mopping steps, are ‘crabs’ (2/180) and a charwoman is depicted ‘crawling’ (2/181) on her hands and knees. The ‘cat without a tail’ (2/180) also emphasises the ugly side of life. The sinking feeling in Miss Moss’s stomach as she watches the cat sip the spilt milk is hunger, though she will not even acknowledge this: ‘It gave Miss Moss a queer feeling to watch – a sinking – as you might say’ (2/180).

Finally, Miss Moss is on the verge of prostitution.

The stout gentleman considered her, drumming with her fingers on the table.

‘I like ’em firm and well covered,’ said he.

Miss Moss, to her surprise, gave a loud snigger.

Five minutes later the stout gentleman heaved himself up. ‘Well, am I goin’ your way, or are you comin’ mine?’ he asked.

‘I’ll come with you, if it’s all the same,’ said Miss Moss.

The ending is deliberately ambiguous. Is it the first time that Miss Moss has had to resort to this potential way of earning money or is this a common practice for her? We do not know and Miss Moss does not wish us to know. There is a kind of sad beauty for Mansfield in Miss Moss’s life, in her attempt to preserve her dignity, to hide her true predicament from the outside world.⁵⁸

The Epiphanic Moment

Allied to the idea of the ‘nouvelle-instant’ is Mansfield’s use of Joycean ‘epiphanies’,⁵⁹ or to use her own words, the ‘blazing moment’:

⁵⁸ Angela Smith agrees with this notion: ‘The final role of prostitute negates everything that she has tried to affirm about her own dignity. It is ironic that she cannot get a job as an extra, as life requires her to act to survive’. Angela Smith, *Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf: A Public of Two* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), pp. 202-3.

⁵⁹ Gunsteren explains the term thus: ‘In English literary criticism it is used in a wide sense, to refer to any experience that stands out in a character’s inner life by its concentrated intensity. This aspect of aesthetic theory is elaborated by James Joyce at considerable length, though it has come to extend beyond the Joycean definition as presented in *Stephen Hero*. Stephen’s

If we are not to look for facts and events in a novel – and why should we? – we must be very sure of finding those central points of significance transferred to the endeavours and emotions of the human beings portrayed... The crisis, then, is the chief of our ‘central points of significance’ and the endeavours and the emotions are stages on our journey towards or away from it. For without it, the form of the novel, as we see it is lost. Without it, how are we to appreciate, the importance of ‘one spiritual event’ rather than another? What is to prevent each being unrelated – complete in itself – if the gradual unfolding in growing, gaining light is not to be followed by one blazing moment?⁶⁰

This was written in May 1919, four years before Mansfield’s death, with some of her finest stories still to be written. O’Sullivan points out that, ‘[when] epiphanies occur, as often as not they emphasise the unattractive reality under which human feeling persists’.⁶¹ This was to be an important technique for Mansfield, as it was of course for James Joyce; the title of one of her most famous stories, ‘Bliss’, emphasises the prominent role this technique was to play in her narrative art.⁶² The sense of ‘bliss’ in this story underlies more uncomfortable feelings of self-discovery, revealed in the story’s epiphanic moment, where, according to Wheeler

epiphany is characterised by the recognition of the significance of a ‘trivial’ incident and the emphasis on the spiritual nature of the experience’. Gunsteren, p. 80.

⁶⁰ Gerri Kimber and Angela Smith, eds, *The Poetry and Critical Writings of Katherine Mansfield* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 550. Review of *Heritage* by V. Sackville West, titled ‘A Novel Without a Crisis’.

Gunsteren perceives a Hegelian ideality in this notion:

The epiphany can be seen as a ‘moment of truth’ in the character’s mind, as described in the text as a brief moment of experience. The ‘moment of truth’, whether experienced by a fictional character or as a spontaneous ‘gift’ in life, had considerable weight for Mansfield. The philosophy of Hegel underlies the intuition of harmony within dissonance characteristically assigned to such epiphanic moments. Mansfield had read Hegel at Queen’s College, as an early notebook reference shows, and her notes on Vaihinger also indicate familiarity with Hegel’s thinking. The Hegelian ideality, when reconciling warring opposites, recurs as one of the themes in letters and journals, with varying degrees of emphasis on (sensory) apperception’. (p. 81)

⁶¹ O’Sullivan in Pilditch, p. 142.

⁶² Mansfield used the word ‘blissful’ in the following letter, talking of the epiphanic moment:

God forbid that another should ever live the life I have known here and yet there are *moments* you know, old Boy, when after a dark day there comes a sunset – such a glowing gorgeous marvellous sky that one forgets all in the beauty of it – these are the moments when I am *really writing* – Whatever happens I have had these blissful,

the narrative techniques draw attention not only to extraordinary moments or acts of insight and perception, but to the ordinary too, in order to reveal the nature and characteristics of various types of perception, failures as well as successes of insight, blindness as well as visionary, imaginative perception.⁶³

O'Sullivan believes that in Mansfield's hands 'the epiphany becomes so often a beam of light sweeping over the gulf. And in about fifty stories, both the illumination and what remains when it fades, have to do with the way their author regarded the complications of sex'.⁶⁴ A perfect example of this occurs in 'Bliss', where Bertha Young the protagonist actually experiences two epiphanic moments: firstly, in a sexually charged moment looking at a pear tree with the enigmatic Pearl Fulton, and at the end of the story, when Bertha sees her own husband share a furtive moment of affection with the same character. The story concludes with Bertha exclaiming: 'Oh what is going to happen now?' as Mansfield reintroduces for the last time the image of the pear tree, which was 'as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still' (2/152). The implication is that once these impermanent moments of 'bliss' have passed, the tree will go on existing, flowering, in all its beauty.

In the final scene of 'At the Bay', Beryl has her epiphanic moment when she finally sees Harry Kember for the womaniser he is, emphasising O'Sullivan's notion of 'unattractive reality':

'No, I'm not coming any farther', said Beryl.

'Oh, rot!' Harry Kember didn't believe her. 'Come along! We'll just go as far as that fuchsia bush. Come along!'

The fuchsia bush was tall. It fell over the fence in a shower. There was a little pit of darkness beneath.

'No, really, I don't want to', said Beryl.

For a moment Harry Kember didn't answer. Then he came close to her, turned to her, smiled and said quickly, 'Don't be silly! Don't be silly!'

perfect moments and they are worth living for'. (*Letters*, 3, p. 176 [c.12 January, 1920])

⁶³ Wheeler, p. 122.

⁶⁴ O'Sullivan in Pilditch, p. 143.

His smile was something she'd never seen before. Was he drunk? That bright, blind, terrifying smile froze her with horror. What was she doing? How had she got here? The stern garden asked her as the gate pushed open, and quick as a cat Harry Kember came through and snatched her to him.

'Cold little devil! Cold little devil!' said the hateful voice.

But Beryl was strong. She slipped, ducked, wrenched free.

'You are vile, vile', said she.

'Then why in God's name did you come?' stammered Harry Kember.

Nobody answered him. (2/370-1)

All of Beryl's burgeoning awakening to her own sexuality, hinted at throughout the story, climaxes in this final moment. Thoughts and actions are two very different things. From a distance, Kember's flirting releases feelings that she longs to give in to: 'that weak thing within her seemed to uncoil, to grow suddenly tremendously strong' (2/370); but close up, and in that final decision-making moment, the reality of the situation dawns on her. Both characters eye 'the little pit of darkness', one with anticipation, the other with mounting horror. Nature, in the form of the 'stern' garden, passes an admonishment. The constant dual repetition of words and phrases serves both as emphasis and echo and gives the passage a macabre poetic feel, lyrically coaxing in 'Come along! Come along!', persuasively insistent in 'Don't be silly! Don't be silly!' and revelatory in 'vile, vile'.

Epiphanic moments in Mansfield's fiction seem, then, to consist of manifestations which go on to produce a profound realisation, perceived by the reader though not necessarily by the characters themselves (as in 'Bliss'); as Head points out, 'the resulting ambiguity often reveals the point of her art'.⁶⁵ Where the character is in a percipient state, then the emphasis moves towards more of a spiritual experience.

Use of Literary Impressionism

Wasn't that Van Gogh shown at the Goupil ten years ago? Yellow flowers – brimming with sun in a pot? I wonder if it's the same. That picture seemed to reveal something that I hadn't realised before I saw it. It lived with me afterwards. It still does – that and another of a sea captain in a flat cap. They taught me something about writing, which

⁶⁵ Head, p. 110.

was queer – a kind of freedom – or rather, a shaking free. When one has been working for a long stretch one begins to narrow ones vision a bit, to fine things down too much. And its only when something else breaks through, a picture, or something seen out of doors that one realises it.⁶⁶

This quotation highlights Mansfield’s appreciation of post-impressionist art. She would go on to transpose this impressionistic technique onto her own literary endeavours. The term ‘literary impressionism’ was first coined by Ferdinand Brunetière in an article he wrote on Daudet as early as 1879, describing this new style of writing as a means whereby one can, ‘[t]ranspose a systematic means of expression of an art, which is the art of painting, into the area of another art, which is the art of writing’.⁶⁷ Brunetière saw this new movement – which he strongly rejected – as a development of Naturalism, incorporating the main principles of Impressionism in painting (itself a fusion of the revolutionary ideals of Courbet allied to the more leisurely ideals of Manet). Bates notes something of the phenomenon, though he does not refer to it as literary impressionism when he remarks, ‘It is no longer necessary to describe; it is enough to suggest. The full-length portrait, in full dress, with scenic background, has become superfluous; now it is enough that we should know a woman by the shape of her hands’.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ *Letters*, 4, p. 333 (5 December 1921).

⁶⁷ ‘une transposition systématique des moyens d’expression d’un art, qui est l’art de peindre, dans le domaine d’un autre art, qui est l’art d’écrire’. Ferdinand Brunetière, ‘L’impressionnisme dans le roman – *Les Rois en exil* par M. Alphonse Daudet’, *Revue des deux mondes*, 36 (15 November 1879), p. 459, my translation. Alphonse Daudet’s work was well known to Mansfield (see Kimber and Smith, pp. 196-201). As for the early development of this style in the novel in England, Gunsteren argues that both Conrad and Ford Madox Ford played a role: ‘It was Ford who observed that “you must render, never report”: “We saw that life did not narrate but left impressions on our brains”’. Gunsteren, p. 18.

⁶⁸ Bates, p. 24. Head discusses the lack of plot in Mansfield’s stories, noting: ‘It is true that plot is de-emphasised in the stories of Joyce, Mansfield and Woolf, and this distinguishes their work from the more carefully plotted short fictions of, for example, Henry James and Joseph Conrad. But this de-emphasis is not a rejection: on the contrary, the adaptation of well-plotted story types is an important feature in the stories of Joyce, Mansfield and Woolf, in whose works a consciousness of conventional story forms provides structure and referential landmarks, even where such conventions are subject to revisionist or ironical treatment’. Head, p. 17.

This specific literary technique has now come to be associated with Mansfield, initiated by O'Sullivan who in his preface to *The Aloe* states:

There is a kind of prose which is not dissimilar to what we now call 'confessional verse', and Mansfield was perhaps the first to shape it to the purposes she set herself as story writer. It has no desire to move too far from verifiable places and events. It is less interested in 'character' (in any full or traditional sense) than it is in the glancings of temperament, in the way symbol reverberates through the drift of the narrative. Such prose is more concerned with how intuitions relate than it is in how a 'story' proceeds, in the mining of suggestions rather than the set pieces of social behaviour.⁶⁹

This sense of a narrow vision or 'palette' is echoed by Gunsteren, who relates Mansfield's restricted use of subject matter to that of the post-impressionist painter Monet and his series of paintings on identical themes (haystacks, water-lilies, etc); she states, 'It may be argued that Monet's aesthetic principle in painting multiple views of haystacks and cathedrals may be related merely to the aesthetic principle of subjective perception, i.e. "transliterated" into literature, to a restricted, relative point of view'.⁷⁰ Melissa C. Reimer confirms this viewpoint:

Among the ways in which Mansfield aligned herself with Impressionism is her use of everyday subject matter and privileging of modernity, her focus on small, seemingly insignificant details at the expense of comprehensive description, her preference for the vignette which provides the reader with only fleeting glimpses of people and places, and her preoccupation with colour and her emphasis on surfaces and reflections. Her employment of multiple, shifting perspectives which are both subjective and fractured also displays an affinity with Impressionism, as does the attention she pays to the ephemeral effects of artificial and natural light, weather effects, and seasonal changes.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Vincent O'Sullivan, ed., *The Aloe with Prelude* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1983), p. 8.

⁷⁰ Gunsteren, p. 15.

⁷¹ Melissa C. Reimer, 'A Literary Impressionist?: Mansfield's Painterly Vignettes', *Katherine Mansfield Studies*, 3, 2011, pp. 35-50.

Mansfield – and later Virginia Woolf – would appropriate this technique and use it to notable effect in their writing. Mansfield was present at both Post-Impressionist Exhibitions organised by Roger Fry in 1910 and 1912 in London;⁷² what she saw left an indelible impression, both in her memory and subsequently on her narrative art.⁷³ It is no exaggeration to say that the event ‘rocked’ the art establishment in England. For most people, it was their first encounter with Post-Impressionist art. The works on display by Manet, Picasso, Cézanne, Matisse, Gauguin, and Van Gogh, among others, met mainly with derision. The colours were perceived as garish, the compositions childish, and some of the subject matter shocking. The artists involved had moved beyond the Impressionism of Monet, Pissaro and Renoir, and were distorting form for expressive effect, as well as using unnatural or arbitrary colours. Van Gogh for example, with his sunflower series, implemented a unique yellow spectrum using newly invented pigments. E. M. Forster’s famous reaction was that ‘Gauguin and Van Gogh were too much for me’.⁷⁴ Many critics considered the exhibitions offensive. Yet Mansfield was fascinated, and the influence these paintings would go on to have in her narrative art is exemplified in the quotation at the beginning of this section.

Liminality, together with the sense of the transitional, is also part of this impressionistic, stylistic device, and is to be found in ordinary spaces and commonplace

⁷² According to Angela Smith, ‘In the Preface to the Catalogue of the second Post-Impressionist Exhibition, in 1912, Fry defines the assertive “thisness” of the paintings: “They do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life [...] In fact they aim not at illusion but at reality”. [...] That was precisely how Van Gogh’s painting affected Mansfield’. Smith, p. 149.

⁷³ Raymond Mortimer describes the first exhibition as having ‘a success comparable to that of a knock-about farce. Rubicund club-men in tall hats flocked to guffaw at the masterpieces of Cezanne; in front of paintings by Van Gogh and Matisse ladies in feather boas brandished angry parasols or broke into peals of carefully silvery laughter. Eminent physicians diagnosed the types of ophthalmia or insanity from which the painters must suffer; learned critics vied with ingenuous Academicians in the virulence of their abuse. But to a few young artists the show was a revelation’. Raymond Mortimer, *Duncan Grant* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1944), p. 5.

⁷⁴ Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968) p. 22.

objects such as mirrors, staircases, and windows, within the confines of Mansfield's domestic arena. Characters as insiders, self-absorbed in their own reflections, frequently position themselves in liminal spaces such as staircases or staring out of windows, allowing her to engage with altered perceptions of interiority. Modernist interiors glint with the presence of reflective surfaces. Mansfield meditated on the effect of the mirror within the claustrophobic interior, writing to Murry 'I walk up and down – look at the bed – look at the writing table – look in the glass and am frightened of that girl with burning eyes'.⁷⁵ An ambivalent domestic space linked to freedom, escape, or even perhaps confinement – stairs – a *place in-between* – fascinated Mansfield. (This notion is allied to the use of ellipses in Mansfield's stories, which I discuss at length elsewhere.)⁷⁶ As Mansfield explained to Dorothy Brett in July 1921:

Don't you think the stairs are a good place for reading letters? I do. One is somehow suspended. One is on neutral ground - not in one's own world nor in a strange one. They are an almost perfect meeting place. Oh Heavens! How stairs do fascinate me when I think of it. Waiting for people - sitting on strange stairs - hearing steps far above, watching the light *playing* by itself - hearing - far below a door, looking down into a kind of dim brightness, watching someone come up. But I could go on forever. *Must* put them in a story though! People come out of themselves on stairs - they issue forth, unprotected. And then the window on a landing. Why is it so different to all other windows? I must stop this . . .⁷⁷

Indeed, within Mansfield's domestic arena, in so many of her stories, at least one character will, at some point, be looking out of a window. These myriad references to windows by Mansfield reveal for Alpers how a 'trick of her mind is evident: she is constantly inhabiting one space while observing another, and has her characters doing the same'.⁷⁸ This view from a window – another *place-in-between* – can alter perceptions from the present to the past, from the past to the future, and invite the crossing of a metaphorical threshold to an event yet to be realised or understood. A story which exemplifies this liminal place is 'The

⁷⁵ *Letters*, 2, pp. 229-30 (9 June 1918).

⁷⁶ See 'Translating Mansfield's Punctuation' in Gerri Kimber, *Katherine Mansfield: The View from France* (Oxford/Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), pp. 153-8.

⁷⁷ *Letters*, 4, p. 256 (29 July 1921).

⁷⁸ Alpers, *Life*, p. 53. He explains: 'Six separate sketches of this time [1908-9] all begin near windows or doors'.

Tiredness of Rosabel' (1908): 'Rosabel [...] down on the floor, pillowing her arms on the windowsill . . . just one little sheet of glass between her and the great, wet world outside!' (1/134). In this liminal position Rosabel reflects on the harsh reality of the events of the day, as well as dreaming of an alternative fairy-tale scenario of the same events. And of course in 'Bliss', Bertha Young's first epiphany comes as she looks through a window at the moonlit pear tree, in the presence of Pearl Fulton. There are myriad other examples.

The 'painterly' technique of Mansfield often takes the form of the presentation of a 'still-life' within a descriptive passage, such as is found in 'Bliss':

Mary brought in the fruit on a tray and with it a glass bowl, and a blue dish, very lovely, with a strange sheen on it as though it had been dipped in milk. [...]

There were tangerines and apples stained with strawberry pink. Some yellow pears, smooth as silk; some white grapes, covered with a silver bloom and a big cluster of purple ones. [...]

When she had finished with them and had made two pyramids of these bright round shapes, she stood away from the table to get the effect – and it really was most curious. For the dark table seemed to melt into the dusky light and the glass dish and the blue bowl to float in the air. (2/142)

The similarity between this piece of descriptive prose and any number of Cézanne's still-life paintings is striking. Smith, too, remarks on the connection when she writes of how, "“Still-life” passages in the fiction of Mansfield and of Woolf are similarly charged, conveying both an image of the fruit and the mood of the perceiver [...]. These fruits are the equivalent of Cézanne's apples and oranges that are about to topple".⁷⁹

Sometimes it is not merely a passage from a story that bears the mark of literary impressionism; occasionally an entire story could be described as a 'vignette' or a picture. The story 'Bank Holiday', just a couple of pages in length, resembles the description of a painting by Manet or Renoir:

Old fat women in velvet bodices – old dusty pin-cushions – lean old hags like worn umbrellas with a quivering bonnet on top; young women, in muslins, with hats that might have grown on hedges, and high pointed shoes; men in khaki, sailors, shabby clerks, young Jews in fine cloth suits with padded shoulders and wide trousers,

⁷⁹ Smith, p. 153.

‘hospital boys’ in blue – the sun discovers them – the loud, bold music holds them together in one big knot for a moment. (2/223-4).

The story is a ‘picture’ in itself, and translates, as Nathan says, ‘the pictorial effects of the painters into metaphors of light, shape and immediacy of impression’.⁸⁰ In 1908, the painter Matisse wrote, ‘I want to reach this condensation of sensations which makes a picture’;⁸¹ Mansfield was after the same visual experience but in a different artistic form and achieves just such a condensation in ‘Bank Holiday’. As she wrote in 1921, ‘I too have a passion for technique. I have a passion for making things into a whole if you know what I mean. Out of technique is born real style, I believe. There are no short cuts’.⁸²

In one of Mansfield’s longest stories, ‘Je ne parle pas français’, vignette after vignette is ‘painted’ for the reader by the narrator, Raoul Duquette:

And then there is the waiter. [...] He is grey, flat-footed and withered, with long, brittle nails that set your nerves on edge while he scrapes up your two sous. When he is not smearing over the table or flicking at a dead fly or two, he stands with one hand on the back of a chair, in his far too long apron, and over his other arm the three-cornered dip of dirty napkin, waiting to be photographed in connection with some wretched murder. ‘Interior of Café where Body was Found’. You’ve seen him hundreds of times. (2/113).

This is a ‘narrator-artist’ perception; the character poses as if for a portrait and the narrator duly presents the reader with a description that might have been executed by any number of impressionist artists.⁸³ In conclusion, Wheeler claims, ‘[I]ike impressionist paintings,

⁸⁰ Nathan, *Katherine Mansfield*, p. 108.

⁸¹ ‘Je veux arriver à cette condensation des sensations qui fait le tableau’. Henri Matisse, ‘Notes d’un peintre’, *Grande revue* (25 December 1908), p. 734, my translation.

⁸² *Letters*, 4, p. 173 (3 February 1921).

⁸³ Nathan agrees that ‘Je ne parle pas français’ has an impressionistic feel: ‘Although this lengthy story is unsatisfactory because it fails to tie up a number of loose ends, it is a fascinating piece of “art”, notable for its attempt to do with language what the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists were doing with brush and palette. This is Mansfield’s most “painterly” story, its aesthetic effects calculated, not incidental’. Nathan, *Katherine Mansfield*, p. 107.

Mansfield's stories seem designed explicitly to draw the reader's attention to 'the act of perception itself', not in a general, but in a specific sense'.⁸⁴

The Incorporation of Symbolism

In my book *Katherine Mansfield: The View from France*, I consider to what extent Mansfield's writing was influenced by the Symbolist and the Decadent movements in France.⁸⁵ Hanson and Gurr also point out that '[in] her early attempts to piece together an aesthetic [she relies] almost entirely on the writings of Symons, and to a lesser extent, Wilde. From these two, she took ideas which continually influenced her art'.⁸⁶ Hanson develops this point elsewhere, stating that, 'Mansfield is a symbolist writer, taking from her early reading of Arthur Symons, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde the belief that in literature abstract states of mind or feeling should be conveyed through concrete images rather than described analytically'.⁸⁷ For Pamela Dunbar, the Wildean influence encouraged Mansfield's own radicalism (much in evidence in her narrative art as I shall demonstrate), and concludes that, 'her own life became, like Wilde's, largely the result of a conscious decision to challenge

⁸⁴ Wheeler, p. 122.

⁸⁵ 'Influences and Innovations', in Kimber, pp. 23-49.

⁸⁶ Hanson and Gurr, pp. 21-2. Kaplan also concurs with the importance of Symbolism in Mansfield's art: 'Her emergence into 'modernism' was not derivative of other twentieth-century writers, but a function of her own synthesis and imaginative reworking of late-nineteenth-century techniques and themes. The symbolists had given her a glimpse of a view of art in which abstract analysis was replaced by suggestive concrete images and symbols'. Kaplan, p. 47.

⁸⁷ Hanson, in Scott, p. 301. Hanson cautions against a cross-gender methodology, however, in the case of Mansfield:

There is a wide gap between, for example, Eliot's famous description of his 'method' of the objective correlative (on which he attempts to confer a quasi-scientific status) and Mansfield's evocation of her method in a letter to Murry (16 November 1919). Mansfield avoids analysis and abstraction, explaining her method by using practical examples [...]. While Eliot seeks to create a critical metalanguage in which to discuss his texts, Mansfield resists it, probably because her symbolist method was arrived at by a different route from that of Eliot and has quite a different inflection. (Hanson, p. 301.)

restrictive social and sexual norms in the interests of broader experience and a deeper ‘truth’.⁸⁸

Under the editorship of A. R. Orage, the weekly journal the *New Age* – which started publishing Mansfield’s stories from 1911 – critics propounded theories about the literary revolution taking place on both sides of the Channel. C. K. Stead notes:

Several of them, including Hulme and Flint, were aware of the relevance of modern French poetry to such an enterprise. As far back as 11 July 1908 Flint had written in *The New Age* of a similarity between Mallarmé and Japanese poetry and of the possibility of a poetry composed of suggestions rather than complete pictures.⁸⁹

There was considerable interaction between the French and English Symbolist movements; indeed, according to Kinoshita, ‘the origin of French Symbolism can be traced back to the influence of the literature of English language: Baudelaire’s enthusiastic appraisal and study of Edgar Allan Poe’s poetics’.⁹⁰ For Zorn, it is her ‘awareness of the signatory aspect of nature which links Mansfield to the Romantic poets’;⁹¹ for Gurr, ‘[t]he Symbolist mode, in which she composed all her major work, is essentially metaphoric and poetic’.⁹² In Mansfield’s stories, as this discussion demonstrates, symbols are everywhere, often reoccurring in different stories and thus linking up thematically throughout her work – a metaphor in one section acts as a stem-cell out of which a whole story is grown in another.

One story which exemplifies this notion is ‘Miss Brill’, a parody of the isolated expatriate; the story of a woman who whilst seeming to see everything, actually sees nothing. Symbols are everywhere: the little fox fur, anthropomorphised and mirroring the life of Miss Brill herself, though with its overt male characterisation it offers a sensual satisfaction for

⁸⁸ Pamela Dunbar, *Radical Mansfield: Double Discourse in Katherine Mansfield’s Short Stories* (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. xi.

⁸⁹ C. K. Stead, ‘Katherine Mansfield and the Art of Fiction’, in Pilditch, p. 172.

⁹⁰ Kinoshita, p. 105.

⁹¹ Zorn, p. 142. For a discussion on the importance of the symbolist influence on Mansfield see: Nelson Wattie, ‘Katherine Mansfield as a Noble Savage: The Cry Against Corruption’, in Dupuis and Michel, pp. 149-56.

⁹² Gurr in Pilditch, p. 200.

her, at least in the early part of the story; the ‘ermine toque’ – a metonymic name for the character of the prostitute, down on her luck, as the decaying state of her ermine hat suggests; the orchestra, whose music echoes Miss Brill’s emotions as the story runs its course. The story is a brilliant evocation of an impoverished, lonely, empty life. For Miriam B. Mandel it is ‘almost a parody of the isolated expatriate’.⁹³ Miss Brill’s rude awakening out of a reverie in which she views herself as an actor in the scene she sees in front of her, sat on a park bench, brings her make-believe world crashing down around her. It is one of the most famous passages in Mansfield’s stories:

[...] Miss Brill prepared to listen.

‘No, not now,’ said the girl. ‘Not here, I can’t.’

‘But why? Because of that stupid old thing at the end there?’ asked the boy. ‘Why does she come here at all – who wants her? Why doesn’t she keep her silly old mug at home?’

‘It’s her fu-fur which is so funny,’ giggled the girl. ‘It’s exactly like a fried whiting.’

‘Ah, be off with you!’ said the boy in an angry whisper. Then: ‘Tell me, ma petite chère –’

‘No, not here,’ said the girl. ‘Not yet.’

* * *

On her way home she usually bought a slice of honey-cake at the baker’s. It was her Sunday treat. Sometimes there was an almond in her slice, sometimes not. It made a great difference. If there was an almond it was like carrying home a tiny present – a surprise – something that might very well not have been there. She hurried on the almond Sundays and struck the match for the kettle in quite a dashing way.

But to-day she passed the baker’s by, climbed the stairs, went into the little dark room – her room like a cupboard – and sat down on the red eiderdown. She sat there for a long time. The box that the fur came out of was on the bed. She unclasped the necklet quickly; quickly, without looking, laid it inside. But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying. (2/254)

Miss Brill’s tears are the fox’s tears. For Mandel, the symbolism and the use of imagery in the story are powerful tools ‘by means of which Mansfield encourages and enables us to discover how her character got to where she is; in no small measure, Miss Brill herself

⁹³ Miriam B. Mandel, ‘Reductive Imagery in “Miss Brill”’, *Studies in Short Fiction*, 26: 4, 1989, pp. 473-7 (p. 474).

created the smallness of her life'.⁹⁴ In a letter to Murry, written a week after this story was completed, Mansfield stated, 'I am very glad you liked Miss Brill. I liked her too. One writes (*one* reason why is) because one does care so passionately that one *must* show it – one must declare one's love'.⁹⁵ The poignancy of the story reflects Mansfield's ability to enter into a character, to *become* that character, so, that for the duration of the story, we too become immersed in Miss Brill's world; thus, the inevitable crash, when it comes, as evinced in the above extract, is felt all the more keenly by the reader.

Plants, and especially flowers, are constantly recurring symbols in the stories; according to O'Sullivan, this was a direct result of the influence of Wilde on her work. In 'The Garden Party', Mansfield gives full reign to her flower theme, from the depiction of the roses which start the story, the lilies bought in profusion by the mother, the daisies on Laura's hat and in the grass – they fill the pages of the story:

There, just inside the door, stood a wide, shallow tray full of pots of pink lilies. No other kind. Nothing but lilies – canna lilies, big pink flowers, wide open, radiant, almost frighteningly alive on bright crimson stems.

'O-oh, Sadie!' said Laura, and the sound was like a little moan. She crouched down as if to warm herself at that blaze of lilies; she felt they were in her fingers, on her lips, growing in her breast. (2/404)

Yet flowers are never present merely to add botanical interest or 'colour' to a story. Here we see a young girl's burgeoning sexuality, crimson, wide open flowers, their stamens on full view, touching her, feeling her as a lover would – perhaps indicative of the end of innocence, placed at the beginning of a story which charts the development of Laura's cruel entry into the adult world via the death of a carter. Other flower imagery in the story hints at this theme; 'The gardener had been up since dawn, mowing the lawns and sweeping them, until the grass and the dark flat rosettes where the daisy plants had been seeded to shine' (2/401), found in the first paragraph of the story, and, 'The first thing she saw was this charming girl in the

⁹⁴ Mandel, p. 477.

⁹⁵ *Letters*, 4, p. 116 (21 November 1920).

mirror, in her black hat trimmed with gold daisies, and a long black velvet ribbon' (2/409), after the discovery of the death of the carter.⁹⁶ The innocent, wild, virginal daisies are removed to make way for the artificial, showy gold daisies on the hat given to Laura by her mother to placate her over the carter's death. Even the black ribbon hints at the sense of bereavement felt over the loss of childhood innocence and symbolising too, the death which has recently occurred.⁹⁷ At the end of the story, when Laura is allowed to visit the carter's family with some leftovers from the garden party, her mother says, 'Take the arum lilies too. People of that class are so impressed by arum lilies' (258).

Here, I contend, in a new reading of this story, Mansfield deliberately chooses to mistake the name of the lilies, clearly identified as 'canna' lilies earlier in the stories. Mrs Sheridan's love of 'canna' lilies is seen as nothing more than artifice and whim – by the end of the story she cannot remember which sort of lilies she had ordered. The fact that the word 'arum' is mentioned twice in two consecutive sentences indicates, firstly, that this is no mere species oversight on the part of the author and secondly, that the change of name is significant. The canna lily is a brightly coloured tropical flower, often bright red or yellow – here they are pink. The arum lily is virginal white, used both in bridal bouquets and funeral wreaths,

⁹⁶ The mirror itself is a potent symbol for Mansfield as noted earlier. For Andrée-Marie Harmat:

Mansfield's art is polyphonic [...]. The image of the mirror ranks among Mansfield's most obsessive means of psychological revelation. In nearly all her best stories, a focal character involuntarily or deliberately encounters her or his own reflected image; Linda, Beryl, Bertha, Matilda, Monica Tyrell, Laura, Raoul Duquette [...]. The mirror mainly connotes two antithetic human attitudes: repulsion or attraction. (Harmat, in Dupuis and Michel: 117-8).

⁹⁷ The hat, of course, also has symbolic meaning in its own right. Head agrees:

Laura's vanity defeats her scruples. The passing-down of the hat signifies the heritage that Mrs Sheridan offers her daughter, and Laura is afforded a new glimpse of herself as a replica of her mother [...]. Rather than merely parroting the parental opinion, Laura is happy to appropriate it... The hat motif is here installed as a symbol of the transference discourse, and continuing ideological control. (Head, p 134.)

elegant and old-fashioned. Remembering Mansfield's intimate knowledge of Wilde and especially his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I believe that she is invoking Wilde's own theme of corruption in his novel and acknowledging the words from the Book of Isaiah, quoted by Basil Hallward as he stares in disbelief at his ruined portrait of Dorian, 'Though your sins be as scarlet, yet I will make them white as snow'.⁹⁸ The reader is witness to Mrs Sheridan's artificial values corrupting her daughter. I also propose that in this story, Mansfield is obliquely referring to the following passage from Wilde's novel:

Huge carts filled with nodding lilies rumbled slowly down the polished empty street. The air was heavy with the perfume of the flowers, and their beauty seemed to bring him an anodyne for his pain...A white smocked carter offered him some cherries [...]. They had been plucked at midnight and the coldness of the moon had entered into them. A long line of boys carrying crates of striped tulips, and of yellow and red roses, defiled in front of him.⁹⁹

It is surely no coincidence that it is a carter who dies in 'The Garden Party' and that the story is as full of the images and smells of flowers – and lilies – as is *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Perhaps the most famous flowering plant symbol used in Mansfield's fictional work is that of the aloe, given prominence in two of her longest and most famous stories, 'Prelude' (originally entitled 'The Aloe'), and 'At the Bay'. Yet again, I propose a link with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; Dorian's passion for perfumes sends him on a journey of discovery, where he learns about 'scented, pollen-laden flowers, of aromatic balms, and of dark and fragrant woods, of spikenard that sickens, of hovenia that makes men mad, and of *aloes* that are said to be able to expel melancholy from the soul'.¹⁰⁰ Some of the most pervasive

⁹⁸ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Ward, Lock, 1891). The quotations in this book are taken from the following edition: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 154.

⁹⁹ Wilde, p. 86

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 130, my italics.

symbols in ‘Prelude’ are ‘the plants, trees and flowers of the natural world’,¹⁰¹ and the most important of these is the aloe, described in ‘Prelude’ as follows:

The island was made of grass banked up high. Nothing grew on the top except one huge plant with thick, grey-green thorny leaves, and out of the middle there sprang up a tall stout stem. Some of the leaves of the plant were so old that they curled up in the air no longer; they turned back, they were split and broken; some of them lay flat and withered on the ground. [...]

Linda looked up at the fat swelling plant with its cruel leaves and fleshy stem. High above them, as though becalmed in the air, and yet holding so fast to the earth it grew from, it might have had claws instead of roots. The curving leaves seemed to be hiding something; the blind stem cut into the air as if no wind could ever shake it (2/73).

The plant is taller than a man, ancient and gnarled. The aloe is not related to the cactus family but is rather – and significantly – a species of lily, that most important of symbols in Mansfield’s opus. Linda, the mother, tells her young daughter Kezia, that it only flowers once every hundred years. The daughter is troubled by the aloe’s age – her focus is on the decaying parts of the aloe; conversely, the mother focuses on its height and thrust and sees in it what she most fears. Smith senses that:

The text implies that she is pregnant with her fourth child, and terrified of her husband’s sexuality as it results in ‘great lumps of children’ [...]. When Linda is most frightened she imagines that small things are swelling and coming alive [...]. It is as if Linda envies the aloe, suddenly gendered as a female, its infertility; it only gives birth every hundred years.¹⁰²

Kezia, the child, finds herself drawn to the aloe on several occasions – its sense of mystery, marooned on its magical island of grass, troubles and concerns her, echoing her childlike troubles and concerns in the real world. On a personal level for Mansfield, Gurr claims that, ‘the aloe signifies the daunting fears and pains of a lifetime, lived for a brief moment of flowering, that timeless moment which both illuminates and justifies all the rest of the pained and miserable time of learning’.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Cherry Hankin, ‘Katherine Mansfield and her Confessional Stories’, in Nathan, *Critical Essays*, p. 12.

¹⁰² Smith pp. 97-8.

¹⁰³ Gurr in Pilditch, p. 205.

Sexuality as a Theme

Mansfield talked openly about sexual issues in her notebooks and letters from an early age, though much of what she wrote on these subjects remained unprinted during Murry's lifetime. The following was written in 1907 when she was nineteen, but omitted from both editions of the *Journal* edited by Murry:

Do other people of my own age feel as I do I wonder so absolutely powerfully *licentious*, so almost physically ill. I alone in this silent clock filled room have become powerfully – – – I want Maata. I want her as I have had her – terribly. This is unclean I know, but true. What an extraordinary thing – I feel savagely crude, and almost powerfully enamoured of the child. I had thought that a thing of the Past. Heigh Ho!!!!!!!!!!!! My mind is like a Russian novel.¹⁰⁴

This is a brutally honest, revelatory diary entry, even by modern standards – and even more so for a young girl in the Edwardian era. O'Sullivan was one of the first critics to reveal the sexual aspect of Mansfield's work and devotes an entire section of his essay 'The Magnetic Chain' to its discussion. He points out: '[o]ne of the important matters biographers have approached too cautiously is the extent to which lesbianism touched Mansfield's adult life. Criticism also might find its presence more marked in her work than has yet been conceded'.¹⁰⁵ He goes on to argue that sexuality and sexual issues are, 'a feature of Mansfield which any perspective must include',¹⁰⁶ though most do not. He continues, 'discussion of the New Zealand stories usually overlooks how much they hold that is sexually ambiguous'.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Margaret Scott, ed., *The Katherine Mansfield Notebooks*, 2 vols (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), Vol. 1, pp. 103-4 (29 June 1907). Hereafter referred to as *Notebooks*, followed by volume and page number.

¹⁰⁵ O'Sullivan in Pilditch, p. 144.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 145.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, p. 146. Regarding 'Prelude', O'Sullivan queries its reception thus:

It is curious that discussion of this story has touched so lightly upon its important sexual implications. Perhaps the emphases upon its clarity, on the depiction of the children, or on Mansfield's own comments that this was her attempt to make the past live again, have prevented critics from perceiving how sex is at its very centre. The

Threaded through both 'Prelude' and 'At the Bay' is an uneasy sexual awareness, the darker side of which penetrates, permeates and colours the writing in both stories. In 'Prelude', the sexual undertone centres firstly on Linda Burnell, and the narrator's intent is to show how three births have reduced a wife to near frigidity. In Linda's eyes, her husband is a 'Newfoundland dog [...] that I'm so fond of in the daytime' (2/87), but at night the good natured buffoon of a man, Stanley Burnell, so amusingly portrayed in both stories, seems an entirely different character:

There were times when he was frightening – really frightening. When she just had not screamed at the top of her voice: 'You are killing me'. And at those times she had longed to say the most coarse hateful things. . . .

[...]

Yes, yes it was true. [...] For all her love and respect and admiration she hated him. (2/87)

Linda Burnell is a strange, almost fleeting character, whose personality and innermost thoughts are revealed by Mansfield in a series of thinly veiled interior monologues during the course of the 'Burnell' cycle of stories. She is a dreamer, a solitary person, a woman with no urgent sexual desire, yet who has had to give herself up to her husband as duty compels her to do. The despair she feels in 'Prelude' carries through to 'At the Bay':

And what was left of her time was spent in the dread of having children.

[...]Yes, that was her real grudge against life; that was what she could not understand. [...] It was all very well to say it was the common lot of women to bear children. It wasn't true. She for one could prove that wrong. She was broken, made weak, her courage was gone, through child-bearing. And what made it doubly hard to bear was, she did not love her children (2/355).

In this extract, Mansfield is seen fighting for a woman's right to do as she sees fit with her own body. There is also nothing 'loose' about this style of writing. Her ideas are expressed firmly and cogently and leave no doubt as to their meaning. Yet readers frequently dismiss these notions, or else do not see them and this is surely deliberate on the author's part, since Mansfield's writing is essentially multi-layered.

four ages of women which are caught in a fragment of family life cannot but include this aspect of experience. (O'Sullivan, p. 148)

If Linda Burnell portrays the unresponsive, broken side of female sexuality, her sister, Beryl Fairfield, is a vehicle for the expression of all the sexual desires and emotions felt by a young, unmarried woman, whose latent sexuality starts to become a burden which she has no means of alleviating. She is portrayed in direct contrast to her sister; indeed, one can perceive echoes of Mansfield's own character in Beryl. In both 'Prelude' and 'At the Bay', a whole section is devoted to Beryl's sexual thoughts as she examines her body; her physical attractiveness is clearly stated in 'Prelude':

Standing in a pool of moonlight, Beryl Fairfield undressed herself. She was tired, but she pretended to be more tired than she really was – letting her clothes fall, pushing back with a languid gesture her warm, heavy hair.

[...] She shut her eyes a moment but her lips smiled. Her breath rose and fell in her breast like two fanning wings. (2/64)

In 'At the Bay', there is a similar scene where Beryl undresses, only this time she has an audience and significantly, the observer is female: "Mercy on us" said Mrs Harry Kember, "what a little beauty you are". "Don't", said Beryl softly; but drawing off one stocking and then the other, she felt a little beauty' (2/352). Both stories end with Beryl sitting alone in a room. In 'Prelude' (with the final tiny intrusion of Kezia), it is before lunch, as she examines the facets of her own personality, wanting so desperately to explore her sexual feelings, and in 'At the Bay' her encounter with Harry Kember is late at night, emphasising the forbidden nature of all things sexual to a single woman of good upbringing. Beryl's role in both stories has long been neglected, but the fact that Mansfield accords her so much importance as a vehicle for introducing and developing sexual themes (alongside her sister), by allowing her presence to be the driving force of the final scene in each of the two stories, gives an indication to the reader of the significance of her character.

In 'Prelude', Mansfield depicts the following scene, where Linda Burnell, is lying in bed, dreaming:

'How loud the birds are', said Linda in her dream. She was walking with her father through a green paddock sprinkled with daisies. Suddenly he bent down and parted the

grasses and showed her a tiny ball of fluff just at her feet. 'Oh, Papa, the darling'. She made a cup of her hand and caught the tiny bird and stroked its head with her finger. It was quite tame. But a funny thing happened. As she stroked it began to swell, it ruffled and pouched, it grew bigger and bigger and its round eyes seemed to smile knowingly at her. Now her arms were hardly wide enough to hold it and she dropped it into her apron. It had become a baby with a big naked head and a gaping bird-mouth, opening and shutting. Her father broke into a loud clattering laugh and she woke to see Burnell standing by the windows rattling the Venetian blind up to the very top (2/66).

This surely is one of the most sexually charged passages in Mansfield's opus, glossed over and ignored for many years by critics who either could not or would not see the message contained in Linda's strange dream. In the use of the bird, the reader is presented with an image of male genitalia in the process of arousal. However, there is also an implication of incest or at least seduction by the father conjured up by the words, 'he bent down and parted the grasses and showed her a tiny ball of fluff', for the words are too carefully chosen to imply anything else. This would explain Linda's sexual repression, hinted at throughout the story and her fear of childbirth, once more emphasised in this episode when the bird transforms into a grotesque baby. I would also assert that in this recurrent theme of the horrors of childbirth, seen to notable effect in the *German Pension* stories, Mansfield was influenced by the writings of her former friend Beatrice Hastings, a suffragette; Alpers states that '[Hastings'] writings on the agony of childbirth [in the *New Age*], were some of the paper's most vigorous polemics',¹⁰⁸ though no one to date appears to have noted the possible connection. Linda's daughter, Kezia, also inherits this sense of sexual trauma explicit in her own words, 'I often dream that animals rush at me [...] and while they are rushing, their heads swell e-enormous' (2/61). Head concurs generally with this notion and sees in 'Prelude' 'the evocation of male sexual predacity and female victimisation',¹⁰⁹ in a story

¹⁰⁸ Alpers, *Life*, p. 114,

¹⁰⁹ Head, p. 119.

superficially centred on a simple house move, where the main characters appear to be little children absorbed in their world of make-believe and play.¹¹⁰

The aloe plant itself has its own sexual connotations; for Nathan, its ‘natural blind force drives it deep into the soil and shoots its generative member high into the atmosphere’.¹¹¹ For Smith too, the aloe is an important sexual symbol in the story; when Linda looks ‘at the long sharp thorns on the leaves she reaches a moment of epiphany when she recognises her hatred of her husband at night, when he makes love to her and then is humble and dismissive’.¹¹² Other stories abound in sexual references. O’Sullivan states:

The predatory comes to the surface in many stories [...]. The sense that sexual awareness brings one to the edge of the uncontrollable, to levels of the mind and behaviour which normally are not exposed, is permanent in Mansfield’s writing about men and women. Also is the sense of one partner inevitably exploiting the other. Sex is the most intense experience in Mansfield’s fiction, yet so much about it is said through implication. What *is* presented constantly and openly is the disillusion it entails.¹¹³

It becomes difficult to comprehend the attitude of early critics such as Bates, who claims Mansfield peopled her stories with ‘chattering, overgrown school girls busy asking and answering breathless, facile questions about love, life and happiness’.¹¹⁴

In ‘Je ne parle pas français’, the narrator, Raoul Duquette, a seedy, bisexual Parisian gigolo describes how as a ten-year-old boy his African laundress took him, ‘into a little outhouse at the end of the passage, caught me up in her arms and began kissing me’ (2/116). Omitted however, from every popular edition until 1984 (when Alpers restored to the story all the parts edited out from the original manuscript by Mansfield’s publishers, with the help

¹¹⁰ Smith believes that in the case of both Mansfield and Virginia Woolf, ‘it is possible to wonder whether the unfulfilled desire to experience motherhood led to the creation of fictional children: Kezia, the Sheridan children, the young Ramseys. [...] Certainly both writers see their work as a refuge from sterility and despair’. Smith, p. 47.

¹¹¹ Nathan, *Katherine Mansfield*, p. 23.

¹¹² Smith, p. 100.

¹¹³ O’Sullivan in Pilditch, p. 146.

¹¹⁴ Bates, pp. 129-30.

of Murry), was the following sentence: ‘And then with a soft growl she tore open her bodice and put me to her’ (2/116). This editorial suppression and others like it were, as Alpers states, ‘all of phrases or passages essential to Mansfield’s portrayal of the cynical attitudes toward love and sex of her narrator, Raoul Duquette’.¹¹⁵ He goes on to make the point that Mansfield’s writing (and the issues it raised), was simply ahead of its time and that had the unexpurgated version appeared in *Bliss*, then ‘Katherine Mansfield would sooner have been recognised as the serious writer she was’.¹¹⁶

In ‘Bliss’, according to New, ‘Mansfield presents what amounts to an anatomy of female sexual desire’.¹¹⁷ Kaplan agrees, also noting the Wildean influence, which for her ‘uses symbolism, epigrammatic phrasing, and exaggeration to highlight its undercurrent of half-suppressed lesbian sexuality’.¹¹⁸ In the story, sexual arousal comes in an epiphanic moment of self-realisation:

What was there in the touch of that cool arm that could fan – fan – start blazing – blazing – the fire of bliss that Bertha did not know what to do with?

Miss Fulton did not look at her; but then she seldom did look at people directly. Her heavy eyelids lay upon her eyes and the strange half smile came and went upon her lips [...]. But Bertha knew, suddenly, as if the longest, most intimate look had passed between them – as if they had said to each other: ‘You too?’ – that Pearl Fulton, stirring the beautiful red soup in the grey plate, was feeling just what she was feeling. (2/147-8)

O’Sullivan believes he is stating the obvious when he claims: ‘Bertha’s feeling for Pearl Fulton is a lesbian one. This may not be explicit, but it would be an obtuse reading of the story which overlooked it’.¹¹⁹ Yet it is only in the last few years that lesbian references in Mansfield’s narrative art have been brought forward for discussion.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Alpers, *Stories*, p. 561.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ New, p. 107.

¹¹⁸ Kaplan, p. 32.

¹¹⁹ O’Sullivan in Pilditch, p. 149.

¹²⁰ See, in particular, David Coad, ‘Lesbian Overtones in Katherine Mansfield’s Short Stories’ in Michael J Meyer, ed., *Literature and Homosexuality* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000),

Feminist Issues

Discussing Mansfield's feminism, Wheeler declares:

Her analyses are not simplistic; she does not portray women as victims and men as perpetrators or victors. Rather, women are shown to be as much enslaved by themselves as by society or by men (as Blake argued tirelessly), and especially by the 'insipid idea that love is the only thing in the world'. Men, moreover, are shown to suffer from the emotional immaturity and dependency that result from their own enslavement to money, success, and sexual prowess.¹²¹

Hanson and Gurr note that 'there is what must be called a feminist awareness running throughout her writing, in the sense that there is always a strong feeling of division and discontinuity between male and female experiences of life'.¹²² For Nathan however, this is still not obvious:

It would be a mistake to place Mansfield in the company of twentieth-century feminist writers [...] even though she frequently presents the woman as the victimised partner in the union. Rather, she should be seen as a transitional writer in the context of her changing time, perhaps a residual romantic with a touch of submerged lesbianism [...]. Mansfield never addresses herself to hard issues in feminist thought such as education, equality of opportunity, economic independence, or true equality between the marital partners.¹²³

Mansfield does, in fact, address herself to these issues, though perhaps by indirect and therefore less contentious means.

Although never a declared suffragette, Mansfield was nevertheless concerned with feminist issues and incorporated them into her fiction; as early as 1908, at the age of nineteen she wrote:

pp. 223-8; Sydney Janet Kaplan, *Circulating Genius: John Middleton Murry, Katherine Mansfield and D. H. Lawrence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

¹²¹ Wheeler, p. 133.

¹²² This feminist influence would have been felt by Mansfield at an early age since in her old school magazine of 1904, a certain Professor Hudson is thanked for presenting the school with a collection of books and periodicals in French on 'La Femme et le Féminisme'. On the theme of French feminist influence, Kaplan notes that, '[i]nadvertently, Mansfield's reading about Balzac through Symons may have alerted her to a quality that would relate to her own later style [...]. Pater and Symons provided techniques that Mansfield would use later to uncover, at its deepest level, the culturally determined condition of women'. Kaplan, p. 64.

¹²³ Nathan, *Katherine Mansfield*, p. 86.

Here then is a little summary of what I need – power, wealth and freedom. It is the hopelessly insipid doctrine that love is the only thing in the world, taught, hammered into women, from generation to generation, which hampers us so cruelly. We must get rid of that bogey – and then, then comes the opportunity of happiness and freedom.¹²⁴

And a few weeks later:

I feel that I do now realise, dimly, what women in the future will be capable of achieving. They truly, as yet, have never had their chance. Talk of our enlightened days and our emancipated country – pure nonsense. We are firmly held in the self-fashioned chains of slavery. Yes – now I see that they *are* self-fashioned and must be self-removed.¹²⁵

Mansfield rarely wavered from the essential tenets expressed in these few sentences, and in one story after another we see her expose the way many women are downtrodden and used by men – be it their fathers or their husbands – with money, or the lack of it, often a central issue. For Liselotte Glage, ‘trying to remove these chains was to be the battle of her life’.¹²⁶ Strangely, Alpers does not see this; he claims that her stories, ‘don’t, of course, have an overt message for society with regard to the roles of women’.¹²⁷ Kaplan also notes the critics’ denial of feminism in Mansfield’s fiction: ‘It is interesting to see how so many of the earlier critics of Mansfield are unable to discern her deconstruction of the ‘feminine’; rather, they define her as its apotheosis’.¹²⁸ Alpers’ premise has now been superseded by most Mansfield critics; indeed as Sage points out, Simone de Beauvoir as early as 1949 in *Le deuxième sexe*, ‘would quote Mansfield’s [...] stories with special approval, for the clarity with which they identified the mystificatory processes that entrap women [...] and [show] that Mansfield as good as demonstrates that no maternal “instinct” exists’.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ *Notebooks*, 1, p. 88 (April 1908).

¹²⁵ *Notebooks*, 1, p. 110 (May 1908).

¹²⁶ Liselotte Glage, ‘Biographies and no End: Katherine Mansfield Criticism in Search of its Subject’, in Dupuis and Michel, p. 39.

¹²⁷ Alpers, *Life*, p. 328.

¹²⁸ Kaplan, p. 159.

¹²⁹ Sage, p. xii.

Every Mansfield story – without exception – concerns, to a greater or lesser extent, two issues in particular – love or money. Kate Fullbrook agrees with my hypothesis and claims that ‘in each case Katherine Mansfield writes an ironic prose that is a reflection of, and a commentary on, the kinds of false consciousness she diagnoses as classically working in her characters’.¹³⁰ In the ‘Life of Ma Parker’, lack of money has contributed to the harshness of Ma Parker’s life – without it she has no freedom:

It was cold in the street. There was a wind like ice. People were flitting by, very fast; the men walked like scissors; the women trod like cats. And nobody knew – nobody cared. Even if she broke down, if at last, after all these years, she were to cry, she’d find herself in the lock-up like as not.

[...]

She couldn’t go home; Ethel was there. It would frighten Ethel out of her life. She couldn’t sit on a bench anywhere; people would come arsking her questions. She couldn’t possibly go back to the gentleman’s flat; she had no right to cry in strangers’ houses. If she sat on some steps a policeman would speak to her.

Oh, wasn’t there anywhere where she could hide and keep herself to herself and stay as long as she liked, not disturbing anybody, and nobody worrying her? Wasn’t there anywhere in the world where she could have her cry out – at last?

Ma Parker stood, looking up and down. The icy wind blew out her apron into a balloon. And now it began to rain. There was nowhere. (2/296-7)¹³¹

This is one of Mansfield’s bleakest polemics against the lot of women in society and demonstrates how some of her characters are present to cast light on the fundamentally isolated, frightened nature of the human condition. For Mansfield, money equals independence. Ma Parker has virtually no money and therefore no independence; her life has been one of constant self-sacrifice, her own needs subjugated to those of her family, to the extent that she no longer has a first name – she is simply ‘Ma’ – her role as a mother has superseded her role as an individual. The passage above is made all the more poignant since it is written in Ma Parker’s own voice, her own idiolect through the use of free indirect discourse; the reader is inside her mind as she goes about the drudgery of her daily life. The

¹³⁰ Kate Fullbrook, ‘Katherine Mansfield: Subjection and Authority’, in Dupuis and Michel, p. 55.

¹³¹ This story is ‘painterly’ in its images, as this quotation demonstrates. Impressionistic in feel, it also conjures up the images of a Lowry painting.

death of her beloved grandson is the final straw in Ma Parker's bleak life. We see the story moving powerfully towards its epiphanic moment – Ma Parker's overwhelming need to grieve in private, without holding back, for her grandson's death and finally for herself and the harshness of the life that has been allotted to her, with the final, terrible revelation that even this simple, cathartic act will be denied her, because of her lot in life, because she is poor, because she has nowhere private to go that will not arouse suspicion in one of her class. Even Linda Burnell's outburst in 'At the Bay', 'It was all very well to say it was the common lot of women to bear children. It wasn't true' (2/355), is repeated in this story, as Ma Parker tells her 'literary gentleman': 'We had thirteen little ones and buried seven of them. If it wasn't the 'ospital it was the infirmary, you might say!' (2/294). These outbursts are blistering attacks on the then commonly held view of women as mere child-bearers. Once more this theme takes us back to Linda Burnell in 'At the Bay', speaking for the newly emancipated women of Mansfield's era, able – perhaps for the first time – to voice their feelings: 'Yes, that was her real grudge against life; that was what she could not understand. That was the question she asked and asked, and listened in vain for the answer. [...] She was broken, made weak, her courage was gone, through child-bearing' (2/355). The same is true of Ma Parker, though she does not have the verbal means to express it; we see her, alone, in a society that places no value on her. The 'Life of Ma Parker' is, for Susan Lohafer, a '*Feminist Exemplum*': 'In the short, declarative statement that ends this story, Ma states what *she* needs [...] an urgency is developing, an *I* is emerging. From a feminist perspective, this is a tragically meagre, yet relatively great achievement for a woman like Ma'.¹³² Strikingly, we

¹³² Susan Lohafer, *Reading for Storyness: Preclosure Theory, Empirical Poetics and Culture in the Short Story* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 80. I find it baffling that after reaching this point of understanding, Lohafer is nevertheless able to describe the story, in the same book, thus: 'Katherine Mansfield's 'Life of Ma Parker' is an unabashed tearjerker. The old cleaning woman keeps her eyes dry, but *we're* not supposed to. In fact, the emotional bribery is so patent, the assault on pity so bald, it's hard not to dismiss this story as an embarrassing lapse, one of quite a number of stories in which Mansfield's tougher insights

see in the character of Ma Parker the potency of Mansfield's narrow focus, which, whilst individualising one person's suffering, is in fact representative of an entire sociological group.

The 'Daughters of the Late Colonel' is also an indictment of the patriarchal society in which Mansfield lived, where the bullying of women – and particularly spinsters, as here – was commonplace. Constantia and Josephine, two middle-aged spinster sisters, have had their wants and desires so subjugated by those of their domineering father, that after his death they find themselves unable to make the simplest decision for themselves. As Kinoshita points out, 'the middle-aged, unmarried, bourgeois women, socially *belong to* their father; they are "nobodies"'.¹³³ Here again the reader is presented with another 'ordinary' tragedy – like that of Ma Parker – in the utilisation of two middle-aged spinsters, who have had no life to speak of and done nothing of any importance, as the centre of her narrative, fashioned into one of Mansfield's most powerful and enduring stories. It evokes for Smith, 'the sexuality, painful sacrifice, and perhaps masochism that a woman defined as a bourgeois spinster with no sexual experience has suppressed'.¹³⁴ In the following passage, Josephine, one of the spinster daughters, reflects on her life:

If mother had lived, might they have married? But there had been nobody for them to marry. There had been father's Anglo-Indian friends before he quarrelled with them. But after that she and Constantia never met a single man except clergymen. How did one meet men? Or even if they'd met them, how could they have got to know men well enough to be more than strangers? (2/281)

and cooler ironies fail to control her sentimentality. The story is dissipated in the emotive response, which is triggered too simply and spent too quickly'. Lohafer, p. 72. Surely this latter viewpoint negates the former?

¹³³ Kinoshita, p. 101. She sees this story as Mansfield's Proustian story of habit: 'The sisters' perpetual fear of their menacing father, their social and moral repression (their docile acceptance of conventional values), their closed, narrow social circle (their social isolation or 'voluntary' alienation), and the resultant lack of stimulation – have made their life clogged and boring'. Kinoshita, p. 289.

¹³⁴ Smith, p. 223.

These sisters are not fools. They acknowledge that their life has been one of sacrifice, though they have never had the means to do anything about it – lack of personal money again is stressed here. ‘Father’ is used as a metaphor, a recurrent image as well as a character, almost more powerful in death than in life. Time and again in the story we see his ruthlessness and selfishness directed at his daughters, for whom he is a hard taskmaster and oppressor. There are in fact three deaths in this story, since with the death of their father, the spinsters’ lives are now apparently pointless. Nathan believes that the colonel ‘has left his daughters a legacy of dread and impotence in their bereavement’.¹³⁵

David Daiches views this story as ‘a landmark in the history of the short story [...where] everything has reference to the mood of the story, everything is organised so as to bring “the deepest truth out of the idea”. That so much should be achieved by such an economy of means is the greatest tribute to Katherine Mansfield’s technique’.¹³⁶ Mansfield herself was proud of this story; she frequently despaired of the persistent devaluation and misrepresentation of it during her lifetime. In a letter written in 1921 to William Gerhardt she wrote:

While I was writing that story I lived for it but when it was finished, I confess I hoped very much that my readers would understand what I was trying to express. But very few did. They thought it was ‘cruel’; they thought I was ‘sneering’ at Jug and Constantia; they thought it was ‘drab’. And in the last paragraph I was ‘poking fun at the poor old things’.

It’s almost terrifying to be so misunderstood.¹³⁷

Yet Nathan is still able to write that Mansfield in her stories ‘was not troubled by the plight of the woman who has not secured her own independence or framed her own identity’.¹³⁸ It is

¹³⁵ Nathan, Katherine Mansfield, p. 95.

¹³⁶ David Daiches, *New Literary Values: Studies in Modern Literature* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1969), p. 105.

¹³⁷ *Letters*, 4, pp. 248-9 (23 June 1921).

¹³⁸ Nathan, *Katherine Mansfield*, p. 85. She continues on this theme: ‘Mansfield [...] was rather more old-fashioned in her vision of feminine fulfilment. Her women are, by and large, modelled after Rousseau’s Sophie, the young girl who would be educated to be Émile’s ideal

difficult to understand how such a viewpoint comes to be expressed, given the abundance of evidence to the contrary.

Relationships

Allied to the themes of sexuality and feminism is that of relationships. As Gillian Boddy points out, often in Mansfield's works, 'the worlds of male and female seem only tenuously linked. The men seem quite alien at times to that world in which women are comfortable'.¹³⁹ For Boddy, this is not simply a matter of Mansfield's early bisexuality, but more to do with the pleasure and ease women find in their own company and how this is frequently disrupted by the appearance of a male character.¹⁴⁰ This is most obviously portrayed in the case of Stanley Burnell. In the following passage from 'At the Bay', Beryl has just seen Stanley out of the house on his way to work:

Into the living-room she ran and called 'He's gone!' Linda cried from her room: 'Beryl! Has Stanley gone?' Old Mrs Fairfield appeared, carrying the boy in his little flannel coatee.

'Gone?'

'Gone!'

Oh, the relief, the difference it made to have the man out of the house. Their very voices were changed as they called to one another; they sounded warm and loving as if they shared a secret. [...]

Even Alice, the servant-girl, washing up the dishes in the kitchen, caught the infection and used the precious tank water in a perfectly reckless fashion.

'Oh, these men!' said she, and she plunged the teapot into the bowl and held it under the water even after it had stopped bubbling, as if it too was a man and drowning was too good for them. (2/348)

This relief to be free of the dominance of the man of the house implies a degree of friction and dissonance when he is present, felt by all the various generations of women who make up

wife [...]. When Mansfield's women fail in these mandated skills, they are unhappy and insecure'. Nathan, p. 85.

¹³⁹ Gillian Boddy, 'Frau Brechenmacher and Stanley Burnell: Some Background Discussion on the Treatment of the Roles of Men and Women in the Writing of Katherine Mansfield', in Dupuis and Michel, p. 89.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

the household, as well as the class structure present within it. An undercurrent of violence and sexuality is touched upon through the symbolic drowning by the maid of the teapot with its protruding upright spout, and the need to make sure that it is completely dead and ‘had stopped bubbling’.

For Mansfield, most men are unable to participate in any sense of intimacy and the ones that do, have a particularly feminine side to their natures, as, for example, Jonathan Trout in ‘At the Bay’, who is despised by the all-male Stanley Burnell. Boddy senses that, ‘[t]hrough [Trout] Katherine Mansfield gives a picture of what men might be, if only they were allowed to be, and had the courage to break free from the role society has traditionally placed on them’.¹⁴¹ With the words Mansfield puts into his mouth we see the contrast between Trout and Stanley:

‘But as it is, I’m like an insect that’s flown into a room of its own accord. I dash against the walls, dash against the windows, flop against the ceilings, do everything on God’s earth, in fact, except fly out again. And all the while I’m thinking, like that moth, or that butterfly, or whatever it is, “The Shortness of Life! The Shortness of Life!” I’ve only one night or one day and there’s this vast dangerous garden, waiting out there, undiscovered, unexplored’ (2/365-6).¹⁴²

Moreover, within the soul-searching Trout, Mansfield encapsulates her own feelings on the effect of coming to terms with her own mortality as a result of her tuberculosis.

Whilst Stanley Burnell is portrayed as a buffoon, some of Mansfield’s male characters are seen behaving in a despicable fashion towards women. Anne Holden Rønning contends that, in the New Zealand stories, ‘male/female relationships as seen in the Burnells, though polarised, admit of some form of compatibility, whereas in the European stories these

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p. 90.

¹⁴² The fly motif was taken up again by Mansfield in the story entitled ‘The Fly’, a much discussed piece, whose themes are very similar to those mentioned above by Jonathan Trout.

relationships seem to end in a state of hopelessness'.¹⁴³ I agree with this notion – Stanley Burnell may be a buffoon, but he is not intentionally cruel.

In 'Mr Reginald Peacock's Day' however, Mansfield paints for the reader a man at his most selfish. As the narrative progresses, the reader, through the use of free indirect discourse, assumes the role of Reginald Peacock, and by acting out this role is led to an in-depth understanding of his character. As the story develops, the revelation of a petty and shallow mind is brought to the fore; the true colours of the 'peacock', as in nature, are slowly and magnificently revealed. In addition, the bird's call, 'Dear lady, I shall be only too charmed' (2/53), becomes progressively and deliberately more boring through its over use. Peacock's whole life is a charade. The irony evolves from the dualism of the two roles he plays – that of singing tutor and rent-a-tenor socialite, which he loves, and the more down-to-earth role of husband and father, with all the attached responsibilities, which he hates. He lives only for the former role, to the detriment of the latter. Reality can play no part in the escapist world he has created for himself, and his philosophy of escaping from life – the motto of the story – creates unhappiness and suffering for his neglected family.

Form and meaning are completely intertwined in this story. The time of the action is set within a day. The story starts with Reginald in bed and ends with his wife in bed. For Reginald, it is the only uncontrolled time of the day, when he is forced to think. The rest of the day is dictated for him. He does not need to think. Even when he comes across a gap in the day when he is not actually doing anything, he goes to sleep – so that he is not forced to think; when he does, we see and feel the workings of a petty, small-minded, nasty individual, and when he is acting out the daily charade of his life, the constant use of repetition in the language of the text emphasises the essentially boring and inane facets of his personality. His

¹⁴³ Anne Holden Rønning, 'Katherine Mansfield, British or New Zealander – The Influence of Setting on Narrative Structure and Theme', in Dupuis and Michel, p. 131.

actual words are hollow and without real meaning, as is shown here when talking to his long-suffering, subservient wife:

‘Oh no, that’s not it!’ Reginald pretended to smile. ‘You do the work yourself, because, for some extraordinary reason, you love to humiliate me. Objectively, you may not know that, but, subjectively it’s the case’. This last remark so delighted him that he cut open an envelope as gracefully as if he had been on the stage. . . . (2/51)

It is only the presence of his wife that is a reminder of reality; that is why he loathes her. The story is deliberately anti-climactic, building up to a point where something *does not* change. Peacock remains less than fully aware of his own nature and situation. As a character, he will continue deluding himself, lacking the strength to force the moment to a crisis. And once again, the notion that a woman without money of her own will always be at the mercy of a man is made explicit here:

‘Reginald, can you let me have some money? I must pay the dairy. And will you be in for dinner tonight?’

‘Yes, you know I’m singing at Lord Timbuck’s at half-past nine. Can you make me some clear soup, with an egg in it?’

‘Yes. And the money, Reginald. It’s eight and sixpence’.

‘Surely that’s very heavy – isn’t it?’

‘No, it’s just what it ought to be. And Adrian must have milk’.

There she was – off again. Now she was standing up for Adrian against him. (2/53)

This is a demeaning and unpleasant moment for the deliberately nameless wife and shows the inequality of relationships where the man controls the purse strings. This story also demonstrates Stead’s premise concerning Mansfield’s ‘central preoccupation – the male seen as the destroyer of the female in a sexual relationship’.¹⁴⁴

Portrayal of Children

It is for her depiction of children that Mansfield is particularly renowned. Children are of paramount importance in every story in which they appear – and they appear very frequently – in ‘Prelude’, ‘At the Bay’, ‘Sun and Moon’, ‘The Doll’s House’ and many others. But these

¹⁴⁴ Stead in Pilditch, p. 168.

stories are not children's stories (which they are sometimes mistaken for) – children are used as vehicles for a number of different themes. Mansfield portrays them in their own world as well as trying to survive in the adult world with all its inherent difficulties. Yet because the children are so vividly presented, so finely portrayed and thus so memorable, they appear to monopolise the stories, so that many critics dwell almost exclusively on them, together with the beauty of the natural descriptions and Mansfield's unusual images, with the whole effect being extremely 'pretty'.

The New Zealand stories in particular are dominated by the portrayal of children and the relationship they have with their parents and the adult world in general. Rønning feels that, 'a child's attempt to understand grown-up behaviour should [...] be a key issue in any interpretation of "The Garden Party"'.¹⁴⁵ I would agree and extend this notion to cover every story where children play a prominent role. Mansfield's social conscience and sense of injustice is particularly evident in these stories, as demonstrated in 'The Doll's House'. Here again are the Burnell children, and the title invites the reader to settle back and enjoy a light-hearted children's story, but the title is only the outward visual presence hinting at a more significant, if hidden, reality.

For the most part, the reader inhabits the mind of the little girl Kezia. It is a child's eye view of the world, as in 'Sun and Moon', portrayed through such images and child-speak as 'spinach green'; 'the door was like a little slab of toffee'; 'Why don't all houses open like that?' (2/415). Adults intrude only briefly into the narrative. Instead, they are presented through the speech and thoughts of the children, achieved by exploiting the way children mimic their elders through speech: 'Not to stay to tea, of course, or to come traipsing through the house. But just to stand quietly in the courtyard' (2/416), and also through gesture: 'Emmie swallowed in a very meaning way and nodded to Isabel as she'd seen her mother do

¹⁴⁵ Rønning in Dupuis and Michel, p. 131.

on those occasions' (2/418). The unbending awkward attitudes of the adult world are portrayed in the image of the stiffly sprawled father and mother dolls who do not really fit, either in the doll's house itself, or in the innocent world of the children.

Head makes the point that

[t]he children [...] absorb and use adult discourse not specifically designed for their own consumption, and this, again, raises the issues of ideological power and conditioning. When Mansfield has the children play at being adults a serious investigation along these lines lies beneath the humorous vignette of childish mores.¹⁴⁶

The children are also forced to imitate their parents in the world of social rules and regulations. They follow their parents' lead in despising the Kelvey family for their poverty. Mrs Kelvey is described as a 'spry, hard-working little washerwoman'. Spry and hardworking are praiseworthy attributes, yet this description is followed by the ironical statement, 'This was awful enough' (2/417). What is awful is that she is a washerwoman; it is merely her situation in life that lets Mrs Kelvey down. The unfounded rumour that Mr Kelvey is in prison soon becomes a 'fact'. The whole episode is a penetrating insight into the sometimes bigoted and narrow-minded attitudes of provincial life, together with its ritualistic behaviour.

Animal imagery abounds in the descriptions of the Kelveys. Our Else is 'a wishbone of a child', 'a little white owl' (2/417), and the two girls together are 'two little stray cats' (2/419), 'chickens', 'little rats of Kelveys' (2/420). Their movements are also described with animal-like vocabulary, 'a twitch' (twice), 'a tug' (twice) (2/417), 'twitched', 'snorted' (2/419). The Kelvey children have learnt to live like little wild creatures, portraying instinctive, animalistic behaviour. For the most part they communicate silently, as animals do, and are altogether much closer to nature – on the same level as the animals. The Burnell girls 'brush through' the buttercups, whereas the Kelveys' *shadows* 'had their heads in the buttercups' (2/419).

¹⁴⁶ Head, p. 120.

The little doll's house lamp is the centrepiece of the story, making a symbolic reappearance from the original real-life lamp that Kezia carries in 'Prelude'. Kezia (and her lamp), hold out a ray of hope to the ostracised Kelveys, with her child-like, innocent attempt to include them in the fold.¹⁴⁷ Thus, a brief examination of this story reveals the deeper undercurrents that pervade all Mansfield's writing, completely overlooked by some early English critics, such as Kay Boyle in 1937:

There are blue skies with soft puffs of cloud in them, quaint houses, shimmering seas in pastel colours, Frenchmen invariably with big mustaches; doll's tea sets, incredibly cute children, pretty names such as Pearl Button, pretty places and not enough, for what the intent must have been, hot love and comprehension for the persecuted young or old, or satire bitter enough for those she would condemn.¹⁴⁸

Yet even Jack Garlington, who, in 1956, condemns the above opinion as 'warped' goes on to state that 'it is true that little of Katherine Mansfield's work has a sociological basis'.¹⁴⁹ I contend that *all* of Mansfield's mature fiction writing has a sociological basis.

Nowhere is this emphasis more clearly demonstrated, especially with reference to children, than in 'The Garden Party'. It is one of the longer New Zealand stories and part of the 'Sheridan' cycle. Here is the 'Burnell' family under a different name, but slightly older; gone are the young children, the ubiquitous Stanley Burnell and the sensual Beryl. Instead, Mansfield presents us with the development of the teenage mind and its gradual succumbing to adult values and morals. On the surface, the story reads as a homely vision of youthful femininity and middle-class values, set within the picturesque New Zealand landscape. Yet these values, these notions, are the backdrop for a discourse on the plight of the working

¹⁴⁷ Kinoshita asserts that 'Kezia (as well as Mrs Fairfield) is characterised ideally; she represents conscience and humanity in the story [...]. The lamp in "Prelude" is given the same symbolical meaning as in "The Doll's House"; it represents truth, beauty and morality'. Kinoshita, p. 134. For Hanson and Gurr, too, '[t]he little lamp is not only light but art, the central reality amidst the material splendours of the doll's house'. Hanson and Gurr, p. 128.

¹⁴⁸ Kay Boyle, 'Katherine Mansfield: A Reconsideration', *New Republic*, 92, 20 October 1937, p. 309.

¹⁴⁹ Jack Garlington, 'Katherine Mansfield: The Critical Trend', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 2: 2, July 1956, p. 56.

classes, the presentation of staid, middle-class reaction to social inferiors, a child's last attempt to understand the world naturally and simplistically, without the need for a social mask, though this mask becomes more stiflingly present each time Laura, the protagonist, at the onset of adulthood, tries to shy away from it. Head concurs with this premise:

‘The Garden Party’ focuses on Laura Sheridan’s incipient growth towards an understanding of the disparate elements of experience, a growth which involves a move to reject the blinkers of her social conditioning. This conditioning is represented by the collective thought of the Sheridans, exemplified by the fragmented, classist and egocentric world-view of Laura’s mother, Mrs Sheridan.¹⁵⁰

In addition, and most importantly, it is a war story, and is discussed as such later in this book.

In a story sixteen pages long, the garden party itself occupies a mere *half page* of narrative. The first four pages focus attention on the workmen as much as on any other characters. There are then three pages of pre-garden party preparations, followed by the first mention of the death which permeates the remaining nine pages of narrative. Yet, reading the story, one is not aware that the garden party takes up so little space; the title ‘Death of a Carter’ would be much more appropriate. The author uses the garden party as an excuse, a shroud, within which are encapsulated her myriad themes. Its false importance symbolises the way adults tend to gloss over everything ugly, to deny ugliness an entry into the common round of life.

The only character developed in any detail is Laura. The reader barely becomes acquainted with the other children, Jose, Meg, and Laurie – names deliberately taken from the pages of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*¹⁵¹ (since that is what they are becoming) – or the father or mother. They are stereotypes, predictable in their behaviour and actions and used as vehicles for the expression of social rules and behaviour.

It is too easy to gloss over the presence of the workmen; Mansfield wants us to uncover our eyes, to see them as Laura, still a child, sees them: ‘Four men in their shirt-sleeves stood

¹⁵⁰ Head, p. 131.

¹⁵¹ Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1868).

grouped together on the garden path. They carried staves covered with roles of canvas and they had big tool-bags slung on their backs. They looked impressive'. Then she focuses on the workmen individually. The first is 'a lanky freckled fellow, [who] shifted his toolbag, knocked back his straw hat and smiled down at her'; the second, a 'little fat chap [who] thrust out his underlip'; another was 'pale. He had a haggard look as his dark eyes scanned the tennis court' (2/402). But it is the first man, the tall one, which Mansfield dwells on. 'Only the tall fellow was left. He bent down, pinched a sprig of lavender, put his thumb and forefinger to his nose and snuffed up the smell' (2/403). Mansfield dwells on such a detail because it shows the reader how 'common' workmen can take pleasure from nature, that they too can be sensitive and open to the beauty that surrounds them. In this sense they are much more in tune with the garden than the Burnell family, to whom the garden belongs.

Mansfield continuously underlines her descriptions of the men as happy and smiling:

The [...] freckled fellow [...] smiled down at her.

His smile was so easy, so friendly [...]. And now she looked at the others, they were smiling too. 'Cheer up, we won't bite', their smile seemed to say. (2/402)

They are a vision of straightforward, uncomplicated life, the direct opposite of the characters and ideals embodied within the Sheridan family and their sophisticated garden party. The adjectives used to describe the workmen are not those which would commonly be used by Laura's social class to describe her inferiors: 'impressive', 'easy' (twice), 'friendly', 'nice' (twice), 'extraordinarily nice', 'friendliness', 'awfully nice'. Her use of them places her at odds with the values of the rest of her family, and especially her mother, who does not view her social inferiors in the same light at all: 'People like that don't expect sacrifices from us' (2/409).

Laura is a misfit who has to learn to toe the line, to recognise her position in society and that of others, and not to flout any of the rules. As William Atkinson points out:

The story shows clearly that two different types of rite are taking place: a rite of temporary status reversal and rite of permanent passage. The garden party begins as

carnival, a feast of fools when status is temporarily turned upside down. But Laura's mother uses events that almost ruin the festivities to move her daughter from a mildly rebellious adolescence to a young-womanhood that does not question the status quo. In short, Laura's own transformation is entirely conventional; the subversiveness of the story lies in its uncovering of Laura's middleclass tendency to aestheticise the unfamiliar and thereby neutralise it.¹⁵²

This is an unconventional but clear reading of the story, seeing Laura's journey not so much as a coming-of-age narrative, but rather as 'a reversal ritual [where] the accidental death of the carter allows Mrs. Sheridan to turn it into a status elevation for Laura'.¹⁵³ And this ultimately false status is symbolised through daisies; initially present in the grass in the early morning, but mowed away by the gardener during the preparations for the garden party, they mutate into brassy-gold false flowers decorating a black hat given to Laura by her mother, a bribe to enable her to forget the accident in the street below the house: 'this charming girl in the mirror, in her black hat trimmed with gold daisies, and a long black velvet ribbon. Never had she imagined she could look like that. Is mother right? she thought. And now she hoped her mother was right' (2/409). The use of free indirect discourse here, as so often with Mansfield, reveals dilemma, though not always resolution (for example, in the case of Ma Parker).

Use of Humour

Humour is frequently present in Mansfield's short stories (as it is in her personal writing and letters), yet this is one aspect of her writing continually glossed over by many of her critics. She displays in her narrative art, wit, metaphorical flair, psychological subtlety and incisive phrasing in order to capture the nuances of consciousness and the duplicities of society.

During her lifetime she was renowned for being an amusing companion, raconteur and mimic; many years after her death, Leonard Woolf remarked of her, 'I don't think anyone has

¹⁵² William Atkinson, 'Mrs. Sheridan's Masterstroke: Liminality in Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden-Party"', *English Studies*, 87: 1, 2006, pp. 53-61 (p. 54).

¹⁵³ Atkinson, p. 54.

ever made me laugh more than she did in those days'.¹⁵⁴ In her fiction, the comedic side of her personality is used to great effect – and is present in almost every mature story. Katherine Anne Porter was a rare, early Mansfieldian critic who understood the importance of Mansfield's use of humour, noting in 1937: 'She possessed, for it is in her work, a real gaiety and a natural sense of comedy; there were many sides to her that made her able to perceive and convey in her stories a sense of human beings living on many planes at once, with all the elements justly ordered and in right proportion. This is a great gift'.¹⁵⁵

Mansfield's youthful devotion to the works of Wilde has already been noted; the form of his wit replicated in her own artistic endeavours. Here is an example from 'Bliss':

'I wonder if you have seen Bilks' new poem called *Table d'Hôte*', said Eddie softly. 'It's so wonderful. In his last Anthology. Have you got a copy? I'd so like to show it to you. It begins with an *incredibly* beautiful line: "Why Must it Always be Tomato Soup?"

[...]

'Here it is', said Eddie. "'Why Must it Always be Tomato Soup?" It's so *deeply* true, don't you feel? Tomato soup is so *dreadfully* eternal' (2/151-2).

The comedy is brittle and sarcastic, her wit of the balloon-pricking variety, as Mansfield icily condemns, with the stroke of her pen, the pseudo-intellectual who has nothing of any value to say. We are laughing *at* Eddie here, not *with* him. 'Bliss' was written in Bandol during the second half of February 1918; Mansfield wrote to Murry on 26 February, 'You will again "recognize" some of the people. *Eddie* of course is a fish out of the Garsington pond (which gives me joy) and Henry is touched with W. L. G'.¹⁵⁶ As noted first by Alpers: 'The satire of arty London drawing-rooms is as clever and thin as that of Aldous Huxley, himself the model

¹⁵⁴ Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911-1918* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1964), p. 203. Stead refers to this quotation when talking of the humour in Mansfield's first collection of stories, *In a German Pension*: 'It is not, as it once seemed, an anti-German book so much as an anti-male book – but not quite simply anti-male either. It is full of that subtle humour, that dead-pan presentation of absurdities, which characterised Katherine Mansfield's talk and letters and made her seem to Leonard Woolf the most amusing conversationalist he had ever known'. Stead in Pilditch, pp. 156-7.

¹⁵⁵ Katherine Anne Porter, 'The Art of Katherine Mansfield', in Pilditch, p. 46.

¹⁵⁶ W. L. G is the novelist W. L. George. *Letters*, 2, pp. 97-8.

for Eddie'.¹⁵⁷ A diary entry of Woolf's from 9 March 1918 describes Huxley at this time: 'We had tea at the 17 Club. One room was crowded, & silent; at the end of the other Aldous Huxley & a young woman in grey velvet held what should have been a private conversation. A. has a deliberate & rather dandified way of speaking'.¹⁵⁸ Mansfield mimics this dandified tone perfectly in 'Bliss'.

Stanley Burnell is also a figure of fun in 'Prelude' and 'At the Bay', though the humour she uses to portray his character is much gentler and less cruel, as exemplified in 'At the Bay':

A few moments later the back door of one of the bungalows opened, and a figure in a broad-striped bathing suit flung down the paddock, cleared the stile, rushed through the tussock grass into the hollow, staggered up the sandy hillock, and raced for dear life over the big porous stones, over the cold, wet pebbles, on to the hard sand that gleamed like oil. Splish-Splash! Splish-Splash! The water bubbled round his legs as Stanley Burnell waded out exalting. First man in as usual! He'd beaten them all again. And he swooped down to souse his head and neck (2/344).

Bodies, real, flabby, flesh-and-blood ones, are strewn throughout her work. An entire character is delineated in these few lines of text. From them we learn that Stanley is a figure of fun in the way that he looks – 'broad-striped bathing suit' – the way that he runs – 'staggered up the sandy hillock' – the fact that he is of a nervous disposition – 'raced for dear life' – that he is childishly competitive – 'First man in as usual!' The reader also notes that he is not a great swimmer, for rather than plunging into the water he 'swooped down to souse his head and neck'; this final act has a somewhat cowardly feel to it. This is our first glimpse of Stanley in the story. If we had never read 'Prelude' we should still have a clear idea as to the nature of the man delineated here in the sequel; ensuing marital infractions and disaffections are encapsulated in her beadily funny portrait of this particular character.

Another technique Mansfield uses to inject comedy into her narrative art is the use of speech to delineate characterisation – specific idiolects which immediately reveal to the

¹⁵⁷ Alpers, *Life*, p. 274.

¹⁵⁸ Anne Olivier Bell, ed., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*. Vol. 2, 1920–1924 (London: Hogarth, 1978), p. 125.

reader the type of character who is speaking. This is an important aspect of her work for Stead, who notes, with reference to Stanley Burnell:

Coming direct through the language is the characterisation – Burnell’s energy, his confidence, his childlike delights and disappointments, his conventionality, the limits of his understanding [...]. We can describe him in abstract terms, which is what the lesser fiction writers would do, inviting us to do their imagining for them. Mansfield doesn’t describe in abstracts – she presents [...].¹⁵⁹

Children’s language too is rendered phonetically: ‘cross my heart straight dinkum’, ‘a ninseck’, ‘noncle’, ‘naunt’, ‘nenamuel’, ‘numeral’, ‘Gentle Jesus meek anmile’. She even wrote to her agent, J. B. Pinker, about such phonetic spellings:

There is no chance – is there? – of the typist correcting my spelling in the long story *At the Bay*. There are several words which appear to be spelt wrong – i.e. *emeral* for *emerald*, *ninseck* for *insect* and so on. [. . .] But my hand on my heart I mean every spelling mistake! It interferes with the naturalness of childrens’ or servants’ speech if one isolates words with commas or puts them in italics. That’s my reason for leaving them plain.¹⁶⁰

‘Affected’ idiolects are a particular favourite of Mansfield’s; there is a mockery in her depiction of grandiose yet ridiculous accents. Nowhere is this better portrayed than Nurse Andrews in ‘The Daughters of the Late Colonel’:

‘When I was with Lady Tukes’, said Nurse Andrews, ‘she had such a dainty little contray-vance for the buttah. It was a silvah Cupid balanced on the – on the bordah of a glass dish, holding a tayny fork. And when you wanted some buttah, you simply pressed his foot and he bent down and speared you a piece. It was quite a gayme’.
(2/268)

Once again, in a few short sentences, the essence of a character is presented to the reader, and more so than any traditional description could provide within a similar number of words. The reader knows Nurse Andrews is a snob, for she feels the need to name her last titled employer. We know that she is from the lower classes because she makes such an effort with her speech – in effect she tries to lose her working class origins but succeeds only in making

¹⁵⁹ Stead in Pilditch, p. 163. Idiolects are a frequent vehicle for comic effect in Mansfield’s writing and are one of the features of her work most difficult to replicate in translation. See my chapter ‘Translating Katherine Mansfield’ in Kimber, pp. 125-79.

¹⁶⁰ *Letters*, 4, p. 286 (29 September 1921).

herself sound ridiculous. Her unbridled admiration for the butter spearer only serves to make her appear more ludicrous. Nurse Andrews is a memorable comic character in a story which nevertheless addresses serious issues. Mary Burgan writes, '[t]he encounters with these aggressive "professional" servants are among the most Dickensian comic passages in Mansfield's stories. As in Dickens, however, in Mansfield the comedy is inflected by pathos'.¹⁶¹ It would be wrong to suggest that Dickens's work influenced Mansfield's writing, but rather, as Smith notes, 'that her interaction with it with provided a recurrent stimulus to her creativity'.¹⁶² She goes on to reveal how

[b]oth are brilliant comic writers. Dame Jacqueline Wilson has spoken potently about the effect on her of Mansfield's ability to enter a child's consciousness; Dickens was of course the first British novelist to see the world through a child's eyes, most evidently in the opening chapters of *David Copperfield* and of *Great Expectations*.¹⁶³

Mansfield uses comedy in her stories as a means of entertainment, which at the same time underlines her serious sociological message. As an experienced public performer, she knew and understood as well as anyone that the complicity engendered by laughter makes an audience more receptive to the performer's point of view. Nathan considers 'The Daughters of the Late Colonel' to be 'one of the stories that best illustrates Mansfield's comic gifts'.¹⁶⁴ She sees this story as a species of black comedy, and indeed all the characters are either parodies or eccentrics of one sort or another. Yet rather than ridiculing the pathos of the spinster sisters' lives, the comedy intensifies it – they become real for us, we feel for them,

¹⁶¹ Mary Burgan, *Illness, Gender and Writing: The Case Of Katherine Mansfield* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 165. Irene Simon asserts, 'Irony is close to sarcasm. In a broader sense it refers to a "conflict between appearance and reality"'. As such it is nearer to Socratic irony and implies disguise or deception, whether as flattery, condemnation, or reserve'. Irene Simon, 'Irony in the Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield', in Dupuis and Michel, p. 98.

¹⁶² Angela Smith, 'Mansfield and Dickens: "I am not reading Dickens idly"', Katherine Mansfield Society Annual Lecture, 2010, p. 7.

¹⁶³ Smith, 'Dickens', p. 12.

¹⁶⁴ Nathan, *Katherine Mansfield*, p. 96.

we look kindly upon them. Smith concurs with this notion and states, '[t]heir lives are ordinary tragedies, like those of Mansfield's Miss Moss and Miss Brill [...]. The delicate comedy with which they are treated acknowledges the problems of making middle-aged women the centre of a narrative'.¹⁶⁵

Kinoshita also notes the use of comedy in 'The Daughters of the Late Colonel': 'The two sisters' fear of their father and their total powerlessness are pathetically but comically exaggerated in the story'.¹⁶⁶ Yet, whilst noting the comedic aspect of her work, none of the above mentioned critics dwell on it to any great extent; there is no sense that they find this aspect of her work critical to an understanding of her writing and the principles behind it. I contend that in the same way that every story raises a sociological or moral issue, every mature story, even the bleakest, contains an element of humour that is particularly and peculiarly Mansfield's own, used as a vehicle for transmitting her personal philosophy. O'Sullivan concurs with my view and considers that this comedic aspect of her work has been neglected for too long:

So much discussion of her work is blind to [this aspect]. I'm sure it was that which so enchanted [Bertrand] Russell into calling her the most intelligent woman he knew – humour always tends to flatter the auditor, as Wilde well understood. Interesting too that Leonard Woolf was so taken with her funniness, and saw Murry as a check on that side of her.¹⁶⁷

It is this eye for the absurd in life, this delight in highlighting the ridiculous and pointing it out for us that encourages us to connect with the author and whatever message she might be concentrating on in any given story.

Even in a story as outwardly bleak as 'Life of Ma Parker', the comedic element is present in the preposterous 'literary gentleman', who, as Mansfield indicates precisely through the use of humour, is neither literary, nor a gentleman. Kinoshita alerts us to the fact

¹⁶⁵ Smith, Katherine Mansfield, p. 223.

¹⁶⁶ Kinoshita, p. 187.

¹⁶⁷ Vincent O'Sullivan, via email to Gerri Kimber, 26 September 2003.

that, ‘the story illustrates Mansfield’s criticism of the dilettantish literary people who are neither interested nor find any significance in connecting their intellectual and artistic being with their social and moral being’.¹⁶⁸ An outwardly heartrending story of female working class misery is made all the more poignant as a result of the biting and sarcastic humour directed at Ma Parker’s employer:

‘A baker, Mrs Parker!’ the literary gentleman would say. For occasionally he laid aside his tomes and leant an ear, at least, to this product called Life. ‘It must be rather nice to be married to a baker!’

Mrs Parker didn’t look so sure.

‘Such a clean trade’, said the gentleman.

Mrs Parker didn’t look convinced.

‘And didn’t you like handing the new loaves to the customers?’

‘Well, sir’, said Mrs Parker, ‘I wasn’t in the shop above a great deal. We had thirteen little ones and buried seven of them. If it wasn’t the ’ospital it was the infirmary, you might say!’

‘You might, *indeed*, Mrs Parker!’ said the gentleman, shuddering, and taking up his pen again (2/294).

Mansfield feels no need to give this character a name. He is representative of a type who consider themselves better than others, when they are obviously no such thing. Through the use of incisive wit, the mean-mindedness of the ‘literary gentleman’ spreads like moral eczema through the story.

Unfortunately, it is precisely because of her humour – which makes Mansfield’s stories so instantly accessible to the reader – that she may have been taken at too superficial a level by critics in the early years after her death. Perhaps this explains why, in Britain in particular, Woolf has always had a higher profile than Mansfield. Both authors question social behaviour and attempt to break down conventions, but Woolf does not make the reader

¹⁶⁸ Kinoshita, p. 230. Mansfield’s social awareness is a critical component of her narrative art for Wheeler: ‘Her passionate social criticism of prejudice and smallness of mind, or unimaginative living remains unobtrusive, while nevertheless colouring and lighting all her stories’. Wheeler, pp. 123-4.

laugh out loud in her attempt. Yet Woolf recognised both the achievement and the importance of her friend and contemporary; less than a week after Mansfield's death in January 1923 she wrote in her diary, 'I was jealous of her writing – the only writing I have ever been jealous of. This made it harder to write to her; and I saw in it, perhaps from jealousy, all the qualities I disliked in her'.¹⁶⁹ More recently, this lightness in Mansfield's work has awakened a specific critical response. In a discussion of 'Bliss', Wheeler writes:

'Bliss' is also exemplary of the characteristics most often attributed to Mansfield's style, tone and manner. It has her familiar humour – the satire modified by pathos and compassion which she employed for her knife-like criticisms of conventional relationships and social forms of behaviour, simultaneously revealing subtleties of behaviour and feeling. In 'Bliss', as in many other Mansfield (and other modernist) texts, inconsequential – 'tremendous trifles' – are explored as sources of revelations [...]. That 'special prose', which delights in detail and understatement, in apparent simplicities and lucidities hiding infinitely complex and contradictory resonances of meaning [...]. Yet, paradoxically, that very prose of light deftness hides a play of darker forces – of isolation, and failure of communication.¹⁷⁰

Mansfield remains exemplary for how prodigious talent and seriousness of purpose may be couched in a readable, accessible – and entertaining – style.

Sun, Moon and Sea Imagery

At the very end of 'The Daughters of the Late Colonel', Constantia, one of the middle-aged spinster protagonists reflects:

She remembered the times she had come in here, crept out of bed in her nightgown when the moon was full, and lain on the floor with her arms outstretched, as though she was crucified. Why? The big pale moon had made her do it. [...] She remembered too how, whenever they were at the seaside, she had gone off by herself and got as close to the sea as she could, and sung something, something she had made up, while she gazed all over that restless water. [...] It was only when she came out of the tunnel into the moonlight or by the sea or into a thunderstorm that she really felt herself. What did it mean? What was it she was always wanting? What did it all lead to? Now? Now?
(2/282)

¹⁶⁹ Bell, p. 227 (16 January 1923).

¹⁷⁰ Wheeler, p. 122.

Here we are presented with one of Mansfield's characters arriving at an epiphanic moment of self-discovery, the irony being in this case that it simply does not happen; Constantia is unable to understand her feelings, unable to make that leap into self-discovery. But it is nature and its force which has brought her thus far, and this use of nature as a revelatory force permeates Mansfield's narrative text with the same symbols constantly recurring.

In her later stories, as noted above, Mansfield's use of this particular imagery has a more esoteric undertone; it is as if she is assuming a subconscious understanding of the workings of the universe through her use of recurring symbols, sometimes anthropomorphised to emphasise their importance. For Hanson, this is a particularly feminine approach:

Revelation through 'the slightest gesture' was, she wrote, her aim [...]. This indirection and obliquity might be viewed as particularly feminine, and I think it is feminine in the sense that there is a real distinction to be made between Mansfield's symbolist method and that of T. S. Eliot or James Joyce'.¹⁷¹

The moon for Mansfield is allied to the feminine, to the mysterious in life, the sun to the masculine.

In Switzerland, a year before her death, Mansfield read an esoteric book called *Cosmic Anatomy or the Structure of the Ego*.¹⁷² Its message was to propel her towards a meeting with Ouspensky in London a few months later, and ultimately to Gurdjieff's 'Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man'. On January 4 1922, she wrote:

I have read a good deal of *Cosmic Anatomy* – understood it far better. Yes, such a book does fascinate me. Why does Jack hate it so? To get even a glimpse of the relation of things, to follow that relation and find it remains true through the ages enlarges my little mind as nothing else does. It's only a greater view of psychology. It helps me with my writing for instance, to know that hot + bun may mean Taurus, Pradhana, substance. No, that's not really what absorbs me; it's that reactions to certain causes and effects

¹⁷¹ Hanson in Scott, p. 301.

¹⁷² Wallace, A. R. Lewis, pseud. 'M. B. Oxon', *Cosmic Anatomy or the Structure of the Ego* (London: Watkins, 1921).

always have been the same. It wasn't for nothing Constantia chose the moon and water – for instance!¹⁷³

O'Sullivan notes that “‘attract’ is far too moderate a word’ for what Mansfield felt towards *Cosmic Anatomy*. On finishing the book, she wrote to her friend Violet Schiff that “she had ‘passed through a state of awful depression [...] But I see my way now, I think. What saved me finally was reading a book called *Cosmic Anatomy*, and reflecting on it’”.¹⁷⁴ The use of the polar opposites of the sun and moon symbols in Mansfield's notebook extract above, also points to a more Eastern esoteric tradition, which she was certainly aware of, years before her reading of *Cosmic Anatomy*. The Chinese believe that there are two opposing, yet complementary forces that shape the universe and all things in it. These two forces or energies are known as Yin and Yang, which together form a balanced whole, referred to as Tao. The Tao is the concept of heaven and earth in harmony. Yang represents the male principle, positive, light, heat, active, heaven, summer, solid, strong, the sun. Yin represents the female principle, negative, passivity, dark, cold, earth, winter, water, the moon. Mansfield certainly used these representations in her work.

The story ‘Sun and Moon’, written in 1918, is an early example of this Symbolist methodology, containing Blakeian concepts of innocence and beauty. Often dismissed by critics, I believe the story to be a masterpiece of ironic exposé. I see it as a prelude to ‘The Garden Party’, written three year later with similar symbolic links; here, the adults give a dinner party and Mansfield uses a child, younger than Laura, to reveal the crude, insensitive world that adults make for themselves. The children's names – Sun (the boy), and Moon (the girl) – because of their peculiarity, lend the story an ambiguous tone from the outset.

¹⁷³ *Notebooks*, 2, p. 313 (4 January 1922). Alpers comments on this passage: ‘there is a good deal hidden in that. The allusion to the closing episode of “The Daughters of the Late Colonel” is her only admission anywhere, to the present author's knowledge, of her use of symbols’. Alpers, *Life*, p. 354.

¹⁷⁴ Vincent O'Sullivan, ‘Signing Off: Katherine Mansfield's Last Year’, in Gerri Kimber and Janet Wilson, eds, *Celebrating Katherine Mansfield: A Centenary Volume of Essays* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 13-27 (p. 14).

On the surface the story appears simple in technique and expression. It is Sun who narrates, Sun who describes the world as he sees it, a child's eye-view of the preparations for a party. Child-like descriptions are present in abundance. 'In the afternoon the chairs came, a whole big cartful of little gold ones with their legs in the air' (2/136).¹⁷⁵ The chairs are 'goldy', the chef has 'a cap like a blancmange', the lights are 'red roses' (2/137), the male guests are 'in black with funny tails on their coats – like beetles' (2/139). Adults, once more, are stereotyped; the mother becomes the vehicle for most of the author's sarcasm as the society lady whose main concern is the success of her dinner party, rather than the thoughts and feelings of her unimportant children – especially her son – who does not even have prettiness on his side to merit being trifled with:

Mother was running all over the house [...]. She only had time to say – 'Out of my way, children!'

[...]

Mother looked in with a white thing over her shoulders; she was rubbing stuff on her face.

'I'll ring for them when I want them, Nurse, and then they can just come down and be seen and go back again'. (2/136, 138).

Everything about the mother is false. She is like an automaton, 'running all over the house'. Her true nature is hidden, literally, with a 'mask' of cream on her face and a 'white thing over her shoulders'.

The moon is the mysterious symbol, hidden from view, cloaked in darkness. It is Moon, the little girl, who has totally subjected herself to the demands of her parents and society. Conversely, Sun – blazing, steadfast, unmysterious, is the little boy – the son – who outwardly questions so-called norms in the superficiality of life around him:

[T]he little pink house with the snow roof and the green windows was broken – broken – half melted away in the centre of the table.

'Come on, Sun,' said Father, pretending not to notice.

Moon lifted up her pyjama legs and shuffled up to the table and stood on a chair, squeaking away.

¹⁷⁵ This description is similar to one found in 'Prelude': 'She waved a white hand at the tables and chairs standing on their heads on the front lawn' (2/57).

‘Have a bit of this ice,’ said Father, smashing in some more of the roof. Mother took a little plate and held it for him; she put her other arm round his neck.

‘Daddy! Daddy!’ shrieked Moon. ‘The little handle’s left. The little nut. Kin I eat it?’ And she reached across and picked it out of the door and scrunched it up, biting hard and blinking.

‘Here, my lad,’ said Father.

But Sun did not move from the door. Suddenly he put up his head and gave a loud wail.

‘I think it’s horrid – horrid – horrid!’ he sobbed.

‘There, you see!’ said Mother. ‘You see!’

‘Off with you,’ said Father, no longer jolly. ‘This moment. Off you go!’

And wailing loudly, Sun stumped off to the nursery. (2/140-1)

How much is encapsulated in this short scene: the tipsy parents at the end of a successful party, the mother almost lascivious as she fondles her husband; the beautifully decorated ice pudding – the centrepiece of the dinner table – which earlier in the evening had overcome Sun with its beauty, is now smashed – ruined by the greed of the adult guests. Sun simply cannot understand why something so beautiful has been destroyed. Mansfield shows us how the true, honest, uncomplicated side of life, embodied in Sun, is ignored by those who cloak their lives in false, complicated, essentially incomprehensible ritualistic behaviour. The ironic twist, the play on names, serves to emphasise the twist society makes in real life.

The second paragraph of ‘At the Bay’ immerses the reader in the beauty of an early summer’s morning (soon to be disturbed by the ubiquitous Stanley Burnell as he makes his clumsy way from beach house to sea):

Ah-Ahh! sounded the sleepy sea. And from the bush there came the sound of little streams flowing, quickly, lightly, slipping between the smooth stones, gushing into ferny basins and out again; and there was the splashing of big drops on large leaves, and something else – what was it? – a faint stirring and shaking, the snapping of a twig and then such silence that it seemed someone was listening. (2/343)

The universe is holding its breath; nature is preparing itself for what the day will bring. For Hanson and Gurr, ‘[t]he sea, as always in Mansfield denotes [t]he mystery of life itself, inexhaustible, endless, impenetrable’.¹⁷⁶ This opening passage of ‘At the Bay’ has, for Angela Smith, ‘a strong sense of expectation and immanence [...] as in the Cézanne paintings

¹⁷⁶ Hanson and Gurr, p. 46.

where the apples and onions seem about to topple off their table [...]. The present participles are restless and dynamic though nothing can be clearly seen'.¹⁷⁷ The sea itself is accorded particular importance by O'Sullivan:

The sea is present in Mansfield's writing, as a natural feature, on hundreds of occasions. There are numerous times when its appearance does service as well for the clarification of some mood, the exposure of an apprehension which finds in the sea, or in waters of some kind, its most evocative emblem [...]. Seas, tides, rivers, may suggest intensity, its overwhelming wash of emotion, as well as the very reverse, the obliteration, a state of mind, a life.¹⁷⁸

The sea is also a feminine symbol, a feminine response, allied to the moon, whose power over it is all-consuming. It symbolically ends 'At the Bay' as it began it, 'A cloud, small, serene, floated across the moon. In that moment of darkness the sea sounded deep, troubled. Then the cloud sailed away, and the sound of the sea was a vague murmur, as though it waked out of a dark dream. All was still' (2/371). Immediately prior to these words, we have witnessed Beryl's frightening epiphanic moment, her sexual harassment by Harry Kember and her realisation that he was not what he seemed. That was her 'moment of darkness'; the sea, perhaps representing here her subconscious feelings, 'sounded deep, troubled'. But then comes a deeper awareness and understanding as 'the cloud sailed away', until finally she is safe, Harry Kember is gone and 'the sound of the sea was a vague murmur, as though it waked out of a dark dream'. The sea speaks for the troubled feminine psyche, eternal and mysterious.

The sun is completely different. For Mansfield, it overpowers the sea and the moon and subjugates them to its own needs. The sun for Mansfield is, as in 'Sun and Moon', the

¹⁷⁷ Smith, p. 168. Interestingly, it has been remarked that, '[o]ne could compare "At the Bay" to music such as the first piece of Debussy's "La Mer" with which the effect of the first three pages, descriptive of that particular dawn, has something in common'. Anonymous review, *Times Literary Supplement*, 2 March 1946, p. 102. Kinoshita also claims that 'At the Bay' 'may be called rather symphonic'. Kinoshita, p. 137.

¹⁷⁸ O'Sullivan in Pilditch, p. 141.

male, its power evident again in ‘At the Bay’, Mansfield’s own personal homage to the sea and all its symbolic meaning:

The tide was out: the beach was deserted; lazily flopped the warm sea. The sun beat down, beat down hot and fiery on the fine sand, baking the grey and blue and black and white-veined pebbles. It sucked up the little drop of water that lay in the hollow of the curved shells; it bleached the pink convolvulus that threaded through and through the sand-hills (2/356).

Words used to describe the sea are: ‘out’, ‘lazily’, ‘flopped’; words used to describe the sun are: ‘beat down’, ‘baking’, ‘sucked up’, ‘bleached’. Whilst writing the story, Mansfield wrote to Dorothy Brett on 4 August 1921: ‘It’s called At the Bay & its (I hope) full of sand and seaweed and bathing dresses hanging over verandahs & sandshoes on window sills, and little pink “sea” convolvulus, and rather gritty sandwiches and the tide coming in. And it smells (oh I DO hope it smells) a little bit fishy’.¹⁷⁹ In the face of the sun the sea has no energy, no life force; this has been sucked up, evaporated by the searing heat of the sun. Sexual references are also clearly present in the symbolic use of the curved, damp shells and the convolvulus with its obvious intended reference to female genitalia. Masculine colours predominate – ‘blue’, ‘black’ and ‘grey’; the more feminine ‘pink’ is bleached away.

The sun frequently makes an appearance when Stanley Burnell is present as here in ‘Prelude’:¹⁸⁰ ‘Back came Stanley girl with a towel, glowing and slapping his thighs. He pitched the wet towel on top of her hat and cape, and standing firm in the exact centre of a square of sunlight he began to do his exercises’ (2/66). Here too is Reginald Peacock: ‘Back in his bedroom, he pulled the blind up with a jerk, and standing upon the pale square of sunlight that lay upon the carpet like a sheet of cream blotting-paper, he began to do his exercises’ (2/50). I propose that the similarity in these passages is deliberate. Mansfield had

¹⁷⁹ *Letters*, 4, p. 261.

¹⁸⁰ Kinoshita affirms this notion: ‘The moon represents Linda, while the sun represents Stanley. Linda hates strong sunshine; she finds a glare “intolerable” [...] Stanley likes pulling the window blind up to the very top [...] Mrs Fairfield [Linda’s mother] always wears a choker of a “silver crescent moon with five little owls seated on it”’. Kinoshita, p. 134.

no need to plagiarise her own work – I believe she meant for the reader to view this repetition as symbolic. Both characters are a similar type (though Reginald Peacock is drawn with a crueller pen); they possess self-centred natures (evidenced by the placing of the towel, and the noisy jerking of the blind), and careful of their outward appearance. Smith considers that Stanley ‘experiences time as apocalyptic and linear, moving toward deadlines, and the ultimate closure, whereas [women] measure in seasons and cycles, suggested by the sea’s tides and the changes in light and temperature during the story’s one day’.¹⁸¹ Hankin argues that, ‘the pervasive motifs of the sun and sea (or water) provide a unifying framework for ‘At the Bay’ and very subtly reinforce the emotional tensions in the work. If the sun’s heat has the potential destructiveness of a man, water, the opposing element, has a woman’s power to deny as well as to bestow life’.¹⁸²

In the final moments of ‘The Daughters of the Late Colonel’ it is the oppressive father figure who is symbolised by the sun: ‘Josephine was silent for a moment. She stared at a big cloud where the sun had been. Then she replied shortly, “I’ve forgotten too”’ (2/282). The father is now dead, the sun is no more; instead of being able to replace the sun’s energy which has for so long dominated her life, Josephine is unable to make that giant leap, tragically encapsulated in the sentence which finally closes the story: ‘Then she replied shortly, “I’ve forgotten too”’.

There are frequent references to the sun throughout the story:

On the Indian carpet there fell a square of sunlight, pale red; it came and went and came – and stayed, deepened – until it shone almost golden.

‘The sun’s out’, said Josephine, as though it really mattered.

[...]

The sunlight pressed through the windows, thieved its way in, flashed its light over the furniture and the photographs. Josephine watched it. When it came to mother’s photograph, the enlargement over the piano, it lingered as though puzzled to find so

¹⁸¹ Smith, p. 173.

¹⁸² Hankin in Nathan, *Critical Essays*, p. 31.

little remained of mother, except the ear-rings shaped like tiny pagodas and a black feather boa (2/280-1).

The carpet on which the sunlight falls, is 'Indian'; this brings into play the image of the absent father, since it was because of him that the family had moved to Ceylon. The sunlight is not strong to begin with; its colour is pale red, something of the feminine in it. This is a chance for the sisters to assert themselves if only they could see it – the power of the sun, with the death of the father is uncertain, ephemeral. But no one notices, and gradually its masculine force asserts itself until it shines 'golden' – the superficial, metallic, male colour. Only then does Josephine notice its presence, when its power is too strong, its force too pronounced to be altered, "The sun's out", said Josephine'. Now the sunlight has a grip on the room, on their lives, it has 'thieved its way in' – they have been taken unawares, with the sense of something having been stolen from them. By now, Josephine is a passive observer to the power of the sunlight; she 'watched it'. It lingers over the picture of the dead mother, 'puzzled'. Here, Mansfield shows us how the male and the female never truly understand each other; the mother as a personality is now a distant memory held in a dusty, light-faded photograph. Even in death the sunlight attacks the mother, as it did in life; if the 'sun', the male, had not made her go to India, then she would never have been bitten by a snake and killed. The presentiment of her death was there in life, symbolised by the black feather 'boa', wrapped round her in the photograph, for 'Josephine remembered standing on a chair and pointing out that feather boa to Constantia and telling her that it was a snake that had killed their mother in Ceylon' (2/281).

War and Death

In 1919, Mansfield, criticising writers whose work she considered remained unchanged by the Great War, wrote to Murry:

And yet I feel one can lay down no rules; It's not in the least a question of material or style or plot. I can only think in terms like 'a change of heart'. I can't imagine how after the war these men can pick up the old threads as tho' it never had been. Speaking to *you*, I'd say we have died and live again. How can that be the same life? It doesn't mean that Life is the less precious or that the 'common things of light and day' are gone. They are not gone, they are intensified, they are illumined. Now we know ourselves for what we are. In a way it's a tragic knowledge. It's as though, even while we live again we face death. But *through Life*: that's the point. We see death in life as we see death in a flower that is fresh unfolded. Our hymn is to the flower's beauty – we would make that beauty immortal because we *know*.¹⁸³

For Mansfield, the war altered everything. It killed her beloved only brother and many of her dearest friends, including Frederick Goodyear. In the story 'An Indiscreet Journey', written in 1915, whilst borrowing Francis Carco's flat in Paris, her horror of the war permeates through into her narrative technique.¹⁸⁴

The story – a eulogy to the suffering of the soldiers of the Great War – is worth quoting from at length since Mansfield's skills as a writer, including her syntax and imagery, adroitly enact her themes:

The café slowly filled. [...] In the din the door sounded again. It opened to let in a weed of a fellow, who stood with his back against it, one hand shading his eyes.

'Hullo! You've got the bandage off?'

'How does it feel, *mon vieux*?'

'Let's have a look at them'.

¹⁸³ *Letters*, 3, p. 97 (16 November 1919). Kaplan takes a Modernist view of Mansfield's stance on the Great War: 'In some ways Mansfield appears to be in agreement with other modernists about the alienation and decay of the post war world, but that does not mean that she would ever have taken the same political direction as her friend D. H. Lawrence, for example, let alone that of T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound. Mansfield's deepest suspicions were aroused by authoritarianism in any form, as her lifelong critique of male dominance gives clear evidence. In this respect she resembles some of the other female modernists, particularly Woolf and H. D., whose writings evidence strong opposition to authoritarianism. But Mansfield's growing personal isolation – although caused by her increasingly debilitating illness – reflects as well her disassociation from politics and from efforts for social change, a severance that may have resulted from her association with Murry and her exclusion from the dominant centers of cultural power. Despite her sense of alienation from political life, however, she was far more ambivalent about the notion of modern civilisation as the 'waste land' than some of her male contemporaries. She expressed an alternating (or perhaps simultaneous) awareness of "joy" and "hopelessness", and both of these were bound up with her self-definition as a writer'. Kaplan, *Modernist Fiction*, p. 190.

¹⁸⁴ Not all critics are unaware of the importance accorded to this theme by Mansfield as demonstrated by Dunbar's comment: '[...] though she never wrote about the Great War – of which she had no personal experience'. Dunbar, p. 67.

But he made no reply. He shrugged and walked unsteadily to a table, sat down and leant against the wall. Slowly his hand fell. In his white face, his eyes showed, pink as a rabbit's. They brimmed and spilled, brimmed and spilled. He dragged a white cloth out of his pocket and wiped them.

[...]

His comrades watched him a bit, watched his eyes fill again, again brim over. The water ran down his face, off his chin on to the table. He rubbed the place with his coat-sleeve, and then, as though forgetful, went on rubbing, rubbing with his hand across the table, staring in front of him.

And then he started shaking his head to the movement of his hand. He gave a loud strange groan and dragged out the cloth again.

[...] 'Ooof!' groaned the man with the eyes, rocking and mopping. But nobody paid any attention to him except Madame. She made a little grimace at her two soldiers.

'*Mais vous savez, c'est un peu dégoûtant, ça*', she said severely.

'*Ah, oui, Madame*', answered the soldiers, watching her bent head and pretty hands, as she arranged for the hundredth time a frill of lace on her lifted bosom.

'*V'là monsieur!*' cawed the waiting-boy over his shoulder to me. For some silly reason, I pretended not to hear, and I leaned over the table smelling the violets, until the little corporal's hand closed over mine.

'Shall we have *un peu de charcuterie* to begin with?' he asked tenderly. (1/447-8).

Here we find, in fiction, and possibly for the first time, a description of the after effects of gas poisoning on a soldier and added to the story of her escapade.¹⁸⁵ It is most probable that she witnessed the effect of this gassing (chlorine gas having only been introduced by the Germans for the first time on 22 April 1915 at Ypres), whilst residing in Paris in May of that year at Carco's flat – for it was to Paris that the dying and injured from the trenches were brought in their thousands – and thus that she was able to incorporate what she saw directly into a story which perhaps might be more correctly termed 'literary journalism'.

This excerpt is remarkable on many levels. The description of the sick soldier is almost clinical in its detail – vivid and unforgettable and made to seem even more awful by the sobriety of her laconic account; she lays the situation bare with a dispassionate scalpel. This is a man in considerable pain and discomfort – who may indeed be dying – initially acknowledged by the other soldiers in the bar, but soon forgotten as they return to their card game and their flirting, until he is reduced to little more than an object of disgust by the

¹⁸⁵ Alpers states that, 'her horrific portrayal of a gassed French soldier in a café [...] must have been based on something seen very recently, in Paris'. Alpers, *Stories*, p. 554.

proprietress, whereupon the other soldiers wholeheartedly agree with her – she is a much prettier and coquettish sight than their sick comrade. Even the two main characters, engrossed in each other, ignore the plight of the stricken soldier – they are more interested in what is on the menu. It is obvious that even at this early stage of the war, Mansfield was able to appreciate and describe its inhuman consequences, and yet to show how it is a human defence mechanism to be perceived as carrying on ‘as normal’. The story itself, beneath the superficiality of the plot, opens a window onto the aftermath of war, exposing the long shadow that it casts over people’s lives. As J. Lawrence Mitchell observes:

There are other tellingly compressed details within the story – details that speak once again to the acuity of Mansfield’s observation: cemeteries full of soldiers’ graves; wounded men sitting in the sun outside Red Cross stations; a soldier’s coat ‘fastened with some rusty safety-pins’; and a woman train passenger with two prominent mourning rings, who struggles to digest the contents of a letter. Incidentally, Mansfield had caught a disquieting glimpse of what might await her brother at the front.¹⁸⁶

Though only two of Mansfield’s stories deal directly with the war and its consequences – ‘An Indiscreet Journey’ and ‘The Fly’ – nevertheless, for Mansfield, life could not and should not ever be the same again. Indeed, Alice Kelly notes: ‘[o]ne thing that we are prompted to consider whilst reading is the extent to which Mansfield’s wartime experience not only influenced, but also provoked her literary experimentation’.¹⁸⁷ Celebrating the minutiae of daily life, the joy to be found in simple things, was her tribute to those – including her brother – who had lost their lives (and was also in keeping with her premise that ordinary people in ordinary surroundings provided the best subjects). The beauty of life, the *life* of life, needed exposing and celebrating because of the war, in order to demonstrate that death had not got the upper hand. Every story she wrote during and after the war was a hymn to life. It encouraged her, in the light of her brother’s death to bring their shared

¹⁸⁶ J. Lawrence Mitchell, ‘Katherine Mansfield’s War’, in Gerri Kimber, Todd Martin, Delia da Sousa Correa, Isobel Maddison and Alice Kelly, eds, *Katherine Mansfield and World War One* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 27-41 (pp. 30-1).

¹⁸⁷ Alice Kelly, ‘Introduction’, in Kimber et al., pp. 1-10 (p. 9).

childhood in New Zealand back to life, as a tribute to him. For Ian Gordon, ‘her whole work emerges as a kind of *recherche du temps perdu*, a remembrance of things past in a distant dominion’.¹⁸⁸ To pretend that the war had never happened made a mockery of the sacrifice of the dead. The experience of the war freed up Mansfield’s writing, made her reckless, made her desire to be courageous in her own profession. Bates states that after the Great War, ‘[w]riters [...] found themselves less fettered than at any time in history. They had suddenly a free pass to say and see and do and describe anything they wanted. No subject was now barred to a writer, to the last limit of physical experience’.¹⁸⁹ Flora is entirely in agreement with this premise, stating:

The war was as stimulating and devastating an event for Mansfield as it was for every other young person with a mind open to experience [...]. Mansfield could have meant ‘Prelude’ to counter the international and personal horror [...]. She is never directly political in her stories, rarely even makes references to matters in the so-called larger world, but the domestic ‘Prelude’ is such a complete, beautiful, and fully human a world as to make international battle seem a very passing phenomenon indeed.¹⁹⁰

Death is a constantly recurring theme in Mansfield’s stories. As Françoise Defroment asserts, ‘[w]ritten as they are in an elusive style that relies on impressionistic touches, Katherine Mansfield’s short stories radiate an atmosphere of light and lightness. Yet underneath this aerial world the inexorable sweep of the sickle of death can be perceived’.¹⁹¹ We see its mark in ‘The Garden Party’, ‘The Daughters of the Late Colonel’, ‘Life of Ma Parker’, ‘Six Years After’, ‘At the Bay’, ‘The Child-Who-Was-Tired’, ‘The Fly’ and ‘The Canary’. Though each death described has already taken place, for Flora they, ‘look at death in its living aspect, grief. Wedged between her brother’s death and her own, these stories represent an interesting compromise between being awash with grief in life and coming to

¹⁸⁸ Ian A. Gordon, *Katherine Mansfield*, Writers and Their Work, no. 49 (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1954), p. 7.

¹⁸⁹ Bates, p. 133.

¹⁹⁰ Flora, p. 68.

¹⁹¹ Françoise Defroment, ‘Impossible Mourning’, in Dupuis and Michel, p. 157.

terms with it, however briefly, in art'.¹⁹² One should also not forget that Mansfield was driven not so much by sales figures as by a search for health, and a resolve to cheat the early death everyone predicted for her. As a result, like her friend D. H. Lawrence, who also spent his life on the move, seeking respite for his tuberculosis, she never lost the talent for taking pleasure in simple things.

As mentioned previously, Mansfield has a specific agenda in portraying the death of a 'carter' in 'The Garden Party', not just as a tribute to her literary hero Oscar Wilde and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Mansfield explained her philosophy behind the story in a letter:

[T]hat is what I tried to convey in The Garden Party. The diversity of life and how we try to fit in everything, Death included. That is bewildering for a person Laura's age. She feels things ought to happen differently. First one and then another. But life isn't like that. We haven't the ordering of it. Laura says 'But all these things must not happen at once' and Life answers 'Why not? How are they divided from each other'. And they *do* all happen, it is inevitable. And it seems to me there is beauty in that inevitability.¹⁹³

Mansfield finds it easy to slip into the world of children – their idiomatic expressions, their actions – all are portrayed to perfection; but children are used in a Blakeian way – as symbols, as messengers, as a contrast between the dividing realms of innocence and experience. In Mansfield's manipulative grasp, they are used as weapons of exposure. This is Mansfield's description of the dead carter, through the eyes of Laura, who has come to pay her respects and bring a basket of leftovers from the garden party:

There lay a young man, fast asleep – sleeping so soundly, so deeply, that he was far, far away from them both. Oh, so remote, so peaceful. He was dreaming. Never wake

¹⁹² Flora, p. 75.

¹⁹³ *Letters*, 5, p. 101 (11 March 1922). Mansfield's mission behind the writing of this story was not perceived by some critics for many years. Nathan wrote in 1988: "The Garden Party" could be called 'The Doll's House', part 2. It is very much an enchanted kingdom, and, until the climax of the story, its inhabitants are entirely engaged in play, or in this case, playacting. Their artifice is so natural to their station, their expectations, and customs, that the reader is gulled into empathy by the very charm of their lives. It is not until ugliness intrudes and provokes some uncharming reactions that one is aware of just how much falseness is embedded in their nature'. Nathan, *Katherine Mansfield*, p. 41. I believe this 'artifice' is transparent from the very beginning of the story, and was certainly intended to be so as Mansfield outlines above.

him up again. His head was sunk in the pillow, his eyes were closed; they were blind under the closed eyelids. He was given up to his dream. What did garden parties and baskets and lace frocks matter to him? He was far from all those things. He was wonderful, beautiful. While they were laughing and while the band was playing, this marvel had come to the lane. Happy . . . happy. . . . All is well, said that sleeping face. This is just as it should be. I am content.

But all the same you had to cry, and she couldn't go out of the room without saying something to him. Laura gave a loud childish sob.

'Forgive my hat', she said.

[...] At the corner of the lane she met Laurie.

[...] 'Was it awful?'

'No', sobbed Laura. 'It was simply marvellous. But, Laurie –' She stopped, she looked at her brother. 'Isn't life', she stammered, 'isn't life –' But what life was she couldn't explain. No matter. He quite understood.

'Isn't it, darling?' said Laurie (2/413).

The final sentence is also the last line of the story. I believe this ending encapsulates Mansfield's approach to the twin themes of War and Death as expounded in the first quotation from this section. The war, for Mansfield, *had* to be seen as a beginning, not as an end: 'Our hymn is to the flower's beauty – we would make that beauty immortal because we *know*',¹⁹⁴ and here, death is certainly perceived as a thing of beauty. The notion is encapsulated in the specific words used to describe the corpse: 'asleep', 'sleeping' (twice), 'peaceful', 'dreaming', 'dream', 'wonderful', 'beautiful', 'marvel', 'happy' (twice), 'content'. These are not words which describe the dead; they describe the *living*. The carter's beauty is now immortal. He speaks to Laura and to the reader: 'Never wake him up again'; 'Happy . . . happy. . . . All is well'; 'This is just as it should be. I am content'. Laura feels that she should have a standard response to the dead man – 'But all the same, you had to cry [...] she gave a loud, childish sob'. This story charts the development from childhood to adulthood and this scene is the culmination of that journey for Laura. This is her epiphanic moment. She cannot put her newfound feelings into words. She knows she should be feeling one emotion, but strangely finds herself feeling quite another: 'But what life was she couldn't explain'. Laurie, her brother, with his twin-like name, pulls her through from one moment of being to

¹⁹⁴ *Letters*, 3, p. 97 (16 November 1919).

another, ‘*Isn’t it, darling*’. He understands; he does not condemn. It is of course significant that it is a juvenile adult, the brother, who witnesses this epiphanic moment and understands it – the character of the brother Laurie is here a depiction of Leslie, Mansfield’s own dead brother. An older person, used to a life of ritualistic responses, would be uncomprehending of Laura’s outburst, ‘it was simply marvellous’. Corpses and scenes of bereavement are not normally ‘marvellous’. But for Mansfield, this had to be her response to the war: ‘It doesn’t mean that Life is the less precious or that the “common things of light and day” are gone. They are not gone, they are intensified, they are illumined’.¹⁹⁵

In her essay on ‘The Garden Party’, Christine Darrohn confirms my reading of this story as a ‘war’ story.¹⁹⁶ She writes:

Like the men who perished in the mass, industrialized killings of the Great War, the carter, whose horse shies at a traction engine, falls victim to mechanized modernity. [...] In ‘The Garden-Party,’ Mansfield creates a story that depends on a man’s violent death even as it erases the traces of injury from his body. After the Great War, to imagine a beautiful corpse might seem either a grotesque act of escapism or a courageous feat of imagination. However, if we resist such simplistic reactions, the beautiful carter can give us insight into the way a society recovers from a war that jeopardizes the integrity of physical bodies as well as the stability of social categories.¹⁹⁷

Thus, we can read the story as a hymn to Mansfield’s beloved dead brother, blown to bits by a faulty hand grenade on 6 October 1915, before he ever got to the Front itself. Mitchell affirms that ‘the key to understanding the special bond between Mansfield and her brother is surely to be found in what they alone in the family shared – an androgynous nature’.¹⁹⁸ Her way of coping with this unimaginable death, is to recreate him as Laurie, the brother of the protagonist Laura, their twin names reinforcing their attachment and similarity of outlook.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Christine Darrohn, ““Blown to Bits!”: Katherine Mansfield’s “The Garden-Party” and the Great War”, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 44: 3, 1998, pp. 513-39.

¹⁹⁷ Darrohn, p. 513.

¹⁹⁸ Mitchell, p. 37. He goes on to note how ‘Antony Alpers was also the first biographer to point out Leslie’s “strong resemblance” to his sister and how he was even mistaken for her at a fancy-dress ball (p. 37).

Mansfield in Detail¹⁹⁹

In 2012, for the first time, a fully annotated two volume collection of all of Mansfield's extant fiction writing was published.²⁰⁰ Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this edition is that it permits us to see – for the first time – the genesis of Mansfield the writer. We can watch her development, and see germs of ideas, first drafts, tentative beginnings, transformed into some of her most recognisable and important works.

One fascinating discovery is the number of times notions of the fey and the fairy appear. In volume 1 which has its cut off at the end of 1915, although there are only two stories with the word 'fairy' in the title, 'A Fairy Story' from 1910 and 'The Green Tree – A Fairy Tale' from 1911, fairies, elves and other fairy tale creatures or descriptions of the fairy-like make regular appearances. An analysis of the frequency of the use of the word 'fairy' uncovers interesting results.

Volume 1 –'Fairy'
In 'My Potplants' written in 1906 there is a description of an other-world creature: 'I thought her a fairy , or a Goddess of the wood' (1/33).
'In a great white room she lay, my fairy of the woods, dressed in the old white gown with her sweet hair all about her, and her hands were filled with sweet dewy primroses. I bent over her and kissed her. 'Are you the Queen of the Snow?' I whispered, 'or one of my white white lilies?' (1/34).
In an autobiographical passage from 'Juliet' (also 1906), we read: 'Because she was the youngest she expected the most. She had vague notions that it was always, would always be the third who was the favourite of the Gods. The fairy tales that she devoured voraciously during her childhood helped to stimulate the thought'. (1/39)
'Vignette: Sunset Tuesday' (1907): 'I stand in the manuka scrub, the fairy blossom'

¹⁹⁹ One part of the section 'Mansfield in Detail' was first published in the special issue, *New Zealand's Cultures*, of the *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 31: 2, (2013), pp. 122-44, in the article 'Reconfiguring the National Canon', by Gerri Kimber and Janet Wilson.

²⁰⁰ Kimber and O'Sullivan.

(1/93).
‘The Education of Audrey’ (1908): ‘Audrey,’ said Max, ‘Audrey, you child, don’t you know, dear, that you have not spent one atom of the gold of your youth, that you are still walking along the little white road of childhood, fighting lions with your fairy wand?’ (1/106).
‘In Summer’ (1908): ‘You must always remember that you are a Fairy Child, and that one day, the Great Pedlar, Fate, will come knocking at the door, and you must not say him nay.’
‘The Thoughtful Child: Her Literary Aspirations’ (1908): ‘They must learn, too, that there are no such things as dolls – they are fairy babies living for a little time with Thoughtful Children to be treated ever so kindly’ (1/120).
‘The Thoughtful Child’ (1908): ‘...she put her arms round the Mother’s neck. Now, it always happens that, if a fairy does that, she is not a fairy any more’. (1/124)
‘The Thoughtful Child and the Lilac Tree’ (1908): ‘In this Spring weather a bird in the lilac tree on the lawn sings each day – a little brown bird – its song is about a fairy stream running through a dream forest. (529)
She is on tiptoe now – more than half fairy child herself . . . (1/530)
‘The Tiredness of Rosabel’ (1908): ‘Rosabel looked out of the windows; the street was blurred and misty, but light striking on the panes turned their dullness to opal and silver and the jewellers’ shops, seen through this, were fairy palaces.’ (1/133)
‘Youth and Age’ (1908): ‘See,’ she cried to Age, ‘see the kisses of Summer, the golden leaves from the fairy book of Spring’. (1/139)
‘Mary’ (1910): ‘And yet, when she was well she was elfishly gay and bright – danced like a fairy and sang like a bird’. (1/168)
‘A Fairy Story’ (1910): He was certainly an unsophisticated old man, with no eye to the future. But he had been brought up on fairy tales and felt, keenly, the necessity, the duty, of <i>acting his part</i> . So he folded the baby man-child in his arms and walked home. The woodcutter’s wife was not pleased. ‘Fie upon your Grimm and your Andersen ,’ she cried, ‘go, read in the books of Ibsen and of Shaw, ¹ and learn the error of your ways,’ and she burnt his supper of fried onions.’ (1/199)
‘The Green Tree: A Fairy Tale’ (1911): ‘This is a fairy child’ said the Moon. ‘He belongs to us now.’ (1/256)
And he sang of how it clung to its last golden leaves, as though afraid of the subtle beauty of nudity, and of how the golden leaves had floated into his bosom and lay there, fairy gold, always shining. (1/258)

‘Tales of a Courtyard’ (1912): ‘Terrified, she started to run and she did not stop running until she came to the bridge where she and Mark used to linger on their way home, leaning over the parapet and watching the fairy fishes in the water – the long, wavering lights. Tonight the river was dark. It was dead. So were the fairy fish. (1/282)
‘Old Tar’ (1913): ‘Wot d’you mean?’ asked the little boy one day, sitting, his legs straight out, making finger gloves of the fairy trumpets. (1/341)
‘The Little Governess’ (1915) ‘In spite of the ice cream her grateful baby heart glowed with love for the fairy grandfather’. (1/431)
‘The Aloe’ (1915) ‘Oh, how tired I am very tired’ – she shut her eyes a moment but her lips smiled – her breath rose and fell in her breast like fairy wings. (1/480)
There were clumps of fairy bells and cherry pie and all kinds of geraniums...’ (1/493)
Plan of ‘Maata’ (1913): ‘How could you know – you fairy godmother?’ (1/522)

In volume 2 the number of appearances is considerably reduced. There is one story with fairy in the title: ‘A Suburban Fairy Tale’ (1919). Other instances:

Volume 2 – ‘Fairy’
‘Prelude’ (1917): ‘There were clumps of fairy bells, and all kinds of geraniums’. (2/72). [Interesting to note that the ‘fairy wings’ from ‘The Aloe’ disappear.]
‘A Dill Pickle’ (1917): ‘And you listened, and your eyes shone, and I felt that you had even made the little Christmas tree listen too, as in a fairy story.’ (2/101)
‘Revelations’ (1920): ‘This was the first time he had ever not been there to hold the chair for her, to take her hat and hang up her bag, dangling it in his fingers as though it were something he’d never seen before – something fairy ’. (2/216)
‘There is No Answer’ (1920): ‘She almost felt that the flowers, in some fairy fashion, changed into wreaths and garlands and lay on her lifting bosom’. (2/285)
‘A Cup of Tea’ (1922): ‘She was going to prove to this girl that – wonderful things did happen in life, that – fairy god-mothers were real...’. (2/463).

One might expect this diminution of frequency to a certain extent, given Mansfield’s growing maturity and the focus of her stories altering with the passage of time, but the resonance of

the fey remains to the end of her life, as demonstrated above. There is considerable research potential in these findings.

As noted above, perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the new edition is that it permits us to see for the first time, the genesis of Mansfield the writer. Most readers of this book will be familiar with the ending of ‘The Doll’s House’ (1922): ‘I seen the little lamp,’ she said, softly. Then both were silent once more’ (2/420). But that ‘little lamp’, which appears so magnificently and so unforgettably here, is the mature fruit of a seed that was sown many years before. There are 63 uses of the word ‘lamp’ in volume 1 alone and 36 in volume 2. If we narrow this down to ‘little lamp’:

<p>‘Little lamp’ Volume 1 ‘Les Deux Étrangères’ (1906): ‘The house was very quiet. Only the nursery clock went on doing arithmetic and the little dark lamp with its one bright eye had no conversational powers. (1/35).</p>
<p>‘Vignettes’ (1907): ‘Down below, in the Mews, the little lamp is singing a silent song. It is the only glow of light in all this darkness’. (1/78).</p>
<p>‘The House’ (1912): She stripped off her gloves and sat, hands folded in her lap, looking up at the green blistered door, and a little octagonal lamp hanging over the doorway. (1/305)</p>
<p>‘The Aloe’ (1915): ‘Ooh!’ Kezia flung out her arms – The Grandmother had appeared on the top step – she carried a little lamp – she was smiling. (1/477)</p>
<p>Volume 2 ‘Prelude’ (1917): ‘Ooh!’ cried Kezia, flinging up her arms. The grandmother came out of the dark hall carrying a little lamp. She was smiling.</p>

Throughout both volumes, lamplight is gentle, calming, seductive, comforting, warming, a metaphor for security and ‘home’, which reaches its apotheosis in ‘The Doll’s House’, whose defining, most memorable feature is its ‘little lamp’.

The story of ‘The Doll’s House’ also has a much earlier origin, now clearly discernible in ‘The Tale of the Three’ from 1906:

Vera Margaret, Charlotte Mary and K.M. were cleaning out the doll's house. There were three dippers of water on the floor, three little pieces of real monkey brand and in their hands they held three little rags – of various degrees of dirtiness. They were being systematic thorough little souls and their cheeks were flaming, their hands aching with the exertion.

'It's the chimleys' said K.M., polishing these articles with tremendous verve. 'All the dust seems to fly into them.'

'On them' corrected C.M. in her careful cool little voice. 'They haven't got any reglar insides you know.'

Vera Margaret was working at the windows, trying to clean the little square of glass without washing away the thin red line of paint which was the dividing line between the bottom and top panes.

'How pleased all the family will be' she said 'to find everything so fresh and neat.'

Outside the nursery window the rain was falling in torrents. They peeked through and saw the long wet garden, the paddocks, and far away the bush-covered hills were hardly to be seen – – – Early in the morning when they had been allowed to put some sacking over their heads and run across the courtyard into the feedroom to see Pat and get the clean boots, he had called the day a 'Southerly busted' and they knew that meant 'a big wetness and then a blow' as K.M. graphically described it. (1/ 64-5)

This fragment is clearly a distant anticipation of 'The Doll's House' (1921), as well as 'Prelude' (1917). Here Mansfield uses the names of her actual sisters in what is a memoir as well as a story. A 'Southerly buster', is the often gale-force southerly wind that frequently strikes Wellington. It too makes a reappearance in 'A Birthday' (1911), and then in 'Autumns II' (1915), a story told in the first person, published in the *Signature*, and signed 'Matilda Berry'. Mansfield would go on to revise the story for the *Athenaeum* in 1920 into 'The Wind Blows', now transcribed into the third person. For the first time, this genesis and development can be followed and analysed in one place.

Equally exciting is the amount of Maori-related themes /words /characters revealed, particularly in volume 1.

Stories with Maori references
Volume 1
'A True Tale' (1903): There were no white people living there, but tall, stately, copper coloured men and women, who sailed all round their country in great, carved canoes, and hunted in the woods for game, and very often, I am afraid, human people, whom they killed with aké-akés. (1/15)
“‘I was never happy”, Huia said’ (1906): ‘I was never happy’, Huia said, leaning back wearily and closing his eyes. Radiana laid her hand lightly against his face. ‘That is because you do not know the secret’

she said. [...] The scent of the flowering jessamine clung round them with almost mystical sweetness.

‘Summer Idylle’ (1907):

‘See, Hinemoa, it is hair, and know you not, should a warrior venture through the bush in the night they seize him and wrap him round in their hair and in the morning he is dead. They are cruel even as I might wish to be to thee, little Hinemoa’. (1/69)

‘Vignette: Sunset Tuesday’ (1907):

A young Maori girl climbs slowly up the hill – she does not see me, I do not move. She reaches a little knoll and suddenly sits down native fashion, her legs crossed under her, her hands clasped in her lap. She is dressed in a blue skirt and white soft blouse. Round her neck is a piece of twisted flax and and [sic] a long piece of greenstone is suspended from it. Her black hair is twisted softly at her neck, she wears long white and red bone ear-rings. (1/93)

‘Vignette: By the Sea’ (1908):

Across the blue sea a boat is floating with an orange sail. Now the Maori fishermen are sailing in, their white sail bellying in the wind. On the beach a group of them, with blue jerseys, thick trousers rolled to their knees. The sun shines on their thick crisp hair, and shines on their faces, so that their skins are the colour of hot amber. It shines on their bare legs and firm brown arms. They are drawing in a little boat called ‘Te Kooti’,⁴ the wet rope running through their fingers and falling in a mystic pattern on the foam blown sand. (1/112)

‘Rewa’ (1908):

Rewa heard the sweet wild song of the pipiwharau. She walked rapidly, her head thrown back. She tore off a great branch of briar berries and swung them in one hand. (1/28)

‘The Woman at the Store’ (1912):

‘The only people who come through now are Maoris and sundowners!’ (1/272)

‘How Pearl Button was Kidnapped’ (1912):

There were some men on the floor, smoking, with rugs and feather mats round their shoulders. (1/286)

‘Old Tar’ (1913):

‘By gum!’ the old man would mutter, lifting his worn head. ‘It’s a durn fine place . . . it’s a place to shake yer lungs out in – yer know, boy, my Pap bought this from the Maoris – he did. Ye–es! Got it off Ole Puhui for a “suit of clothes an’ a lookin’-glass of yer Granmaw’s.”’ (1/341).

‘Young Country’ (1913):

‘Hallo, Mrs Bead’ said Rachael. She buried her head in the Maori woman’s neck and put her teeth in a roll of soft fat. Mrs Bead pulled Ray between her knees and had a good look at her. (1/368)

‘The Beautiful Miss Richardson’ (1915):

We are making cheap flannelette chemises for the Maori Mission. They are as long as nightdresses, very full, with huge armholes and a plain band round the neck – not even a lace edging. Those poor Maoris. (1/434)

‘The Aloe’ (1915):

He had one saying with which he met all difficulties. ‘Depend upon it, it will all come right after the Maori war.’ (1/486)

Volume 2

‘Toots’ (1917):

I don’t want the poor soul to feel that he has fallen amongst absolute Maoris. (2/16)

Again, it’s clear to see that Maori characters are prevalent in early stories but have completely disappeared by 1913, except for minor generic references. In those early stories, Mansfield’s sense of place, of her roots in her native New Zealand are striking. These are real characters being drawn here, with Mansfield’s acute eye detailing clothes, surroundings, shapes, to bring them to life. And of course there is the tentative incomplete novel, ‘Maata’, replicating the name of her childhood friend Maata Mahupuku, where Mansfield herself takes on the Maori persona of the protagonist. Mansfield’s father had been an amateur Maori linguist and she herself had been on a six week camping trip to the Ureweras in the North Island of New Zealand in 1907, where she had experienced at close hand the life of the Maori in the bush, almost the last place in the North Island at that time which colonial expansion had not yet touched. Perhaps these stories reveal Mansfield’s search for the authentic, in a world where she increasingly felt herself isolated and ‘false’. It is only in the *Collected Fiction*, that the significance of this Maori-inspired thread can be discerned. All of these discoveries offer fascinating material for future scholarship.

Conclusion

In this book I have demonstrated how Mansfield’s narrative art encapsulates many significant themes, encoded within a deceptively simple genre. Bates was an early critic who was not able to decode the message:

Mansfield, catching at a couple of dozen types, these mostly young girls and women, can nowhere challenge the greatness of Tchegov’s range. Her art in fact lacked –

because she was ill, because her personality was never fully resolved, because she died young – the Russian’s final objective strength. Time and circumstance limited its development, leaving it supremely personal, as it were soft-boned, with a certain rosy delicacy, but in all final tests of comparison immature.²⁰¹

Mansfield criticism fought this sort of misogynistic viewpoint for many years after her death.

Frank O’Connor was one of her most antagonistic critics, renowned for naming her, ‘the brassy little shop girl of literature’.²⁰² He remarks:

There is one quality that is missing in almost everything that Mansfield wrote – even her New Zealand stories – and that is heart. Where heart should be we usually find sentimentality, the quality that seems to go with a brassy exterior, and nowhere more than with that of an ‘emancipated woman’.²⁰³

I hope this book has served to illustrate how this sort of criticism has no foundation in fact.

Mansfield’s narrative technique was carefully crafted and encapsulated a personal philosophy which evolved and grew with her own development as a writer, culminating in the production of sharp and polished prose. Her symbolism was constant, echoing recurrent themes; her personal philosophy remained mutable. At her death she had evolved into a confident writer, unafraid to confront human frailties, using various scenarios to examine the nature of memory and personal interpretations. Mansfield challenged her reader to look beyond face values, to confront superficiality, to despise cruelty, to deny false values, to revert to the notions and viewpoints of children, and through this reversal to overthrow the rules of society and to recreate laws governing life, which are more spontaneous and less bigoted. Whilst never offering a direct theoretical manifesto, her stories nonetheless reinforce her status as one of the twentieth century’s most gifted short story writers.

²⁰¹ Bates, p. 131.

²⁰² Frank O’Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (London: Macmillan, 1963), p. 136.

²⁰³ *Ibid*, p. 131.

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