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Not Minor But Major: Critical (Mis)Interpretation in the Fiction of Katherine Mansfield

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The 'Decadent Era' in France, spanning the period between the Commune of 1871 and the Great War, has come to represent a specific literary period, out of whose complexities was to emerge much of twentieth century European Modernism. Literary turmoil and innovation were intertwined with political and social upheaval. The term *fin-de-siècle* can claim a looser time scale than one would imagine; for Bernard Bergonzi it, 'clearly points to the preoccupations of the last years of the nineteenth century, without being limited to a single decade, and which can cover such particular manifestations as 'aestheticism' and 'decadence'.¹ He goes on to state:

In so far as *fin de siècle* refers to a serious and consistent cultural attitude, it has two essential characteristics: the conviction that all established forms of intellectual and moral and social certainty were vanishing, and that the new situation required new attitudes in life and art (p. 19).

This literary climate of innovation allowed experimental writers like Katherine Mansfield, one of the main innovators of the Modernist short story, to flourish. Yet Mansfield's own unique form of Modernism was not derivative of other contemporary writers. This paper will demonstrate how her Modernism was, in fact, partly a product of her early symbiosis of specifically French late-nineteenth-century techniques and themes. From her late teens onwards, when her tastes and preferences started to take shape, she began, with the Symbolists and the Decadents as her dominant influences,

for the most part introduced through her reading of Baudelaire, to write the sort of fiction which was committed to the possibilities of narrative experimentation.

Mansfield herself knew that she was searching for the new, the experimental, but did not know herself what to call it:

The form I would choose has changed utterly. I feel no longer concerned with the same appearances of things [...] The plots of my stories leave me perfectly cold [...] but especially I want to write [...] perhaps not in poetry.

No, perhaps in Prose – almost certainly in a kind of special *prose*.²

Through a close reading of one of Mansfield's stories, this paper will demonstrate how the influence of the poetic genius of Baudelaire extended even to female, New Zealand colonial short story writers, in the early part of the twentieth century. I shall highlight the way this influence manifested itself in her work and reveal how it enabled Mansfield to find a way of extending the boundaries of her own prose expression.

Antony Alpers, in his biography of Mansfield, describes her in London in 1908, aged twenty, as, 'a girl in a hostel writing things, struggling quite alone to discover a form, with no idea where to turn for the critical guidance that every young writer needs'.³ Sydney Kaplan believes that:

Unlike many older writers who had learned their craft through imitation and refinement of traditional narrative conventions, Mansfield – at the very beginning of her career – began, through the dominant influence of the symbolists and decadents, to write fiction committed to the possibilities of narrative experimentation.⁴

She was certainly one of the first ‘modern’ women writers, attempting a writing career in a field dominated by men, whilst living alone in a foreign city at a young age. For Alpers, her main difficulty at this time was precisely this struggle with trying to find a unique form of her own:

She was not by nature a novelist – she had nothing to offer to publishers of books. [...] Her aim was something else – to ‘intensify the so-called small things’, [...] ‘so that truly everything is significant’. The short story in that sense did not exist in England yet. There was no place for what [...] she wished to do. No place, either, for what young Joyce had been up to, over in Dublin (Alpers, p. 81).

Sixty years previously in his essay ‘Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe’, Baudelaire had made the following observation, acknowledging his own personal preference for the short story:

La *Nouvelle* [...] a sur le roman à vastes proportions cet immense avantage que sa brièveté ajoute à l’intensité de l’effet. Cette lecture, qui peut être accomplie tout d’une haleine, laisse dans l’esprit un souvenir bien plus puissant qu’une lecture brisée, interrompue souvent par les tracasseries des affaires et le soin des intérêts mondains. L’unité d’impression, la *totalité* d’effet est un avantage immense qui peut donner à ce genre de composition une supériorité tout à fait particulière.⁵

Elaine Showalter observes how, at this time, ‘In contrast to the sprawling three-decker, the short story emphasised psychological intensity and formal innovation’.⁶ Thus, in writing her short stories, Mansfield was emulating a *fin-de-siècle* convention, which in

itself, had been endorsed many years before by Baudelaire. Indeed, her early experimental prose poems reveal the influence of the French Symbolists, for whom a city landscape best represented their view of the modern consciousness. She developed a youthful infatuation with the Aesthetic movement and especially the works of Oscar Wilde, which matured into a lifelong admiration; his influence on her writing was considerable.⁷ *The Picture of Dorian Gray* introduced her to the seminal decadent text *A Rebours* (referred to in Wilde's novel as 'The Yellow Book'), which had been translated into English by Havelock Ellis in 1903.⁸ She also read and absorbed the works of Arthur Symonds, in particular his *Symbolist Movement in Literature*.⁹

Plants, and especially flowers, are constantly recurring symbols in Mansfield's stories; Sam Hynes, for example, comments that: 'It is not strange that Miss Mansfield chooses to state this theme [of lost innocence] most frequently in flower imagery; flowers are beautiful, delicate, and transitory – like the innocence of childhood'.¹⁰

A short story written in 1917, 'Carnation',¹¹ reads on the surface as Mansfield reminiscing on her school days, in a semi-jocular, quasi-innocent fashion. In fact, the piece is one of Mansfield's most sexually charged stories, convincingly read as a Baudelairean intertext, taking a shard of time in an adolescent's summer and producing a polished meditation on an evolving self. The carnation referred to in the title is a 'deep, deep, red one that looked as though it had been dipped in wine and left in the dark to dry' (664). It is brought into a French class by a school girl named 'curious Eve'. The story is recounted by another girl – Katie – Mansfield's own name.

The day is hot – too hot to work. M. Hugo decides that instead of taking notes the girls will listen to him reading some French poetry. Mansfield prepares the reader for what is to come with a sexually charged description of how M. Hugo read to the girls:

He would begin, softly and calmly, and then gradually his voice would swell and vibrate and gather itself together, then it would be pleading and imploring and entreating, and then rising, rising triumphant, until it burst into light, as it were, and then – gradually again, it ebbed, it grew soft and warm and calm and died down into nothingness (666).

This may be plausibly read as a covert description of a male orgasm, exposed through the characterisation of M. Hugo, and preceding a female orgasm experienced by Katie. The latter is overwhelmed by the scent of the carnation: ‘Oh, the scent! It floated across to Katie. It was too much’ (666). Her eyes wander out of the window to the stable yard below, where a workman is cleaning some carriage wheels, pumping water into a bucket: ‘as he worked the pump [...] a great gush of water followed’ (666).

The burgeoning sexual references now become more and more obvious, as the young girl is overcome by the heat, the smells (even the French room ‘always smelled faintly of ammonia’ (666)),¹² and the scene in front of her eyes:

She saw him – simply – in a faded shirt, his sleeves rolled up, his chest bare, all splashed with water – and as he whistled, loud and free, and as he moved, swooping and bending, Hugo–Wugo’s voice began to warm, to deepen, to gather together, to swing, to rise – somehow or other to keep time with the man outside (Oh, the scent of Eve’s carnation!) until they became one great, rushing, rising, triumphant thing, bursting into light, and then –

The whole room broke into pieces (667).

The orgasmic nature of the writing, the building up to a crescendo, the rhythmic pattern of the words and phrases, the repetition of ‘bursting into light’ from the previous

description, together with the connotations of the words themselves – all this leads the reader towards an understanding that Katie has undergone a sexual experience – an ‘orgasm’. And Mansfield, underlining this covert sexual explanation, terminates the story with the following sentence: ‘And, “Keep it, dearest,” said Eve, “*Souvenir tendre*,” and she popped the carnation down the front of Katie’s blouse’ (667). Eve – the archetypal sinner, is here responsible for the metaphorical ‘deflowering’ of her friend, and this notion is carried through in the choice of flower in the title itself, since the carnation is, of course, the paradigmatic *fin-de-siècle* symbol for homosexuality, used repeatedly by Wilde, Huysmans and others and here by Mansfield herself. Bisexual in her youth, some critics maintain that Mansfield was sexually attracted to other women throughout her life,¹³ and indeed this story reverberates with an undercurrent of half-suppressed lesbian sexuality.

It is also significant that there are repeated references to France and the French and the fact that it is whilst the teacher is reading aloud *French* poetry that the ‘orgasms’ occur. The girls are in a ‘French Room’ (665), M. Hugo speaks French to the girls, ‘Un peu de silence, s’il vous plaît’ (665), he reads them, ‘French poetry’ (665); the word ‘French’ occurs five times in a story barely three pages long, and it is Eve who closes this story with the French words ‘*Souvenir tendre*’.¹⁴ Though this is only conjecture, I believe Mansfield leaves enough clues – even to the title itself – for us to come to an understanding that M. Hugo is reading out poems from *Les Fleurs du mal* to his female pupils as one of them undergoes an involuntary sexual experience.

Indeed, Baudelaire’s poem, ‘Parfum exotique’, from *Les Fleurs du mal*, has uncanny similarities with Mansfield’s story, replicating identical vocabulary and themes.¹⁵ Firstly, the all-pervading sense of smell: ‘je respire l’odeur’, ‘ton odeur’, ‘le parfum des verts tamariniers, /Qui circule dans l’air et m’enfle la narine,’ The sense of smell in Baudelaire’s poem is heady with sexual connotations. In Mansfield’s story we

find, 'Katie turned away to the dazzling light outside the window', 'the dazzle outside'; in Baudelaire we find, 'Qu'Éblouissent les feux d'un soleil monotone'. The effect of 'Des hommes dont le corps est mince et vigoureux,' is similarly reproduced in Mansfield's story by the half naked workman, 'his chest bare, all splashed with water [...] as he moved, swooping and bending.' Similarly, 'Et des femmes dont l'œil par sa franchise étonne', is replicated in Mansfield's story by the calculated look of Eve, 'her eyebrows raised, her eyes half veiled, and a smile that was like the shadow of her cruel little laugh'. Even Baudelaire's nautical theme and water symbology, 'la vague marine', finds its way into Mansfield's story, '[a] whistling that skimmed over the noise of the water as a bird skims over the sea.' There is also the obvious Baudelairean connection with the idea of 'ennui' or 'spleen', encapsulated in the stifling boredom of the French class, the ensuing 'spleen', culminating in an epiphanic moment of sexual release. The entire last verse of 'Parfum exotique' epitomises the essence of the story 'Carnation': the perfume of a plant fills the air, intoxicates, and has a subconscious effect, whilst the poetic reading of the French teacher ebbs and flows in a deliberately musical fashion.

This lyricism of the words in 'Carnation' owes much to the Symbolists and Decadents, with their notion of expressing the inexpressible. Baudelaire himself writes, in his introduction to *Le Spleen de Paris*:

Quel est celui de nous qui n'a pas, dans ses jours d'ambition, rêvé le miracle d'une prose poétique, musicale sans rythme et sans rime, assez souple et assez heurtée pour s'adapter aux mouvements lyriques de l'âme, aux ondulations de la rêverie, aux soubresauts de la conscience?¹⁶

Mansfield's interest in Decadent literature, her experiments with various writing techniques and styles, and certainly the content of some of her stories, would have

placed her firmly in what many male outraged critics of the time termed 'literary degenerates' (Showalter, p. ix). Showalter continues:

New Women and decadent artists were linked together as twin monsters of a degenerate age, sexual anarchists who blurred the boundaries of gender. Thus, decadent art was unmanly and effeminate, while New Women's writing was unwomanly and perverse (p. x).

Mansfield however, deliberately conceals the subversive undercurrents of 'Carnation', so that the reader is therefore not immediately alerted to its risqué themes.

Mansfield's contiguity with the French Symbolist and Decadent movements shows in her creative life, where we see how some of her finest stories would not have come into being without her knowledge of Decadent and Symbolist texts. Sydney Kaplan confirms this viewpoint in concluding that:

Mansfield's devotion to the '90s went deeper than fashionability and had a permanent effect on her literary career. [It] provided her with an ideal of the city which became linked with her own intensifying sense of sexual ambivalence and urge toward sexual experimentation. She had perceived that the world of the decadents was one of sexual ambiguity, a place where sexual boundaries broke down for the pure artist, where experience led to artistic creation (Kaplan, p. 72).

This world of sexual ambiguity and the breaking down of sexual boundaries is encapsulated in the three brief pages that comprise Mansfield's story, 'Carnation'.

Vincent O'Sullivan points to the fact that, 'One 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' (O'Sullivan, p. 144). He goes on to argue that sexuality and sexual issues are, 'a feature of Mansfield which any perspective must include' (p. 145), though most do not. A 'Decadent' reading of Mansfield brings this issue to the fore in the story 'Carnation'.

Mansfield's use of symbols increases the emotional and intellectual capacity of a story, working on the reader in a powerful yet subliminal way. This story and others like it never harden into anything as clear-cut as allegory, but nevertheless, they resonate with suggestiveness. Sydney Kaplan believes that:

By importing symbolist devices into realistic fiction, Mansfield exemplifies how the male-bonded nineteenth-century aesthetes became absorbed into the twentieth-century feminist consciousness. Some of her brilliance lies in her realisation that the symbolism of the aesthetes could be joined, as well, to a twentieth-century epistemology – partially Freudian, partially feminist (Kaplan, p. 64).

Lisa Downing postulates that for certain commentators, 'Baudelaire is best remembered as a pioneer of poetics, experimenting with subject matter and prosody, giving birth to Symbolism, and developing the prose poem form'.¹⁷ I would extend this notion and claim for Baudelaire a place as a primary stimulus of the twentieth-century Modernist short story, as exemplified in the narrative aesthetic of Katherine Mansfield.

NOTES

¹ Bernard Bergonzi, *The Turn of a Century: Essays on Victorian and Modern English Literature* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1973), p. 18

² Katherine Mansfield, *Notebooks: Complete Edition*, 2 vols, ed. by M. Scott (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), vol 2, pp. 32–33, 22 January 1916.

³ Antony Alpers, *The Life of Katherine Mansfield* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980), p. 80.

⁴ Sydney Janet Kaplan, *Katherine Mansfield and the Origins of Modernist Fiction* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 83.

⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, *Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires*, trans. and intro. by Charles Baudelaire (Paris : Folio, 1972), pp. 18–19.

⁶ Elaine Showalter, ed., *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin-de-Siècle* (Rutgers University Press, 1993), p. ix. (Huge numbers of new periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic were also creating a market for short fiction.)

⁷ Vincent O’Sullivan states that, ‘Wilde’s presence she left behind, but his traces will be in her work for the rest of her life. Her way of describing flowers, for instance; her precision in parodying the language of aesthetes; the brittleness of much of the conversation in her fiction; those inversions which are a mark of her style always.’ Vincent O’Sullivan, ‘The Magnetic Chain: Notes and Approaches to K.M.’ in Jan Pilditch, ed., *The Critical Response to Katherine Mansfield* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996), pp. 129–153, (p. 131).

⁸ Enid Starkie is of the same mind, stating that, ‘*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which was inspired by *A Rebours*, became for England what Huysman’s novel had been for France, its aesthetic bible, the book which gave the most perfect picture of the Decadent. There is no doubt that the ‘yellow book’ which leads Dorian Gray to perdition is *A Rebours*.’ Enid Starkie, *From Gautier to Eliot: The Influence of France on English Literature 1851–1939* (London: Hutchinson, 1960), p. 105.

⁹ Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1899).

¹⁰ Sam Hynes, 'The Defeat of the Personal', in Pilditch, pp. 66–70, (p. 68).

¹¹ Published posthumously in 1924. Katherine Mansfield, *Something Childish and Other Stories* (London: Constable, 1924). The page references for 'Carnation' refer to the *Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield* (London: Constable, 1945) and are placed directly after the quotation.

¹² Ammonia has a smell sometimes associated with bodily emissions such as sweat and urine.

¹³ See Alison J. Laurie, 'Queering Katherine' in *Women's Studies*, Victoria University of Wellington, 2001.

¹⁴ This was the title of a popular waltz in the early part of the last century composed by Thomas J. Hewitt.

¹⁵ Charles Baudelaire, XXII 'Parfum Exotique', *Les Fleurs du mal*, ed. by Enid Starkie (Oxford : Blackwell, 1966), pp. 22–23.

¹⁶ Charles Baudelaire, *Le Spleen de Paris : Petits poèmes en prose* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997), p. 5.

¹⁷ Lisa Downing, *Desiring the Dead: Necrophilia and Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Oxford: Legenda, 2003), p. 67.

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