



This work has been submitted to **NECTAR**, the **Northampton Electronic Collection of Theses and Research**.

Conference or Workshop Item

Title: Veiling and unveiling: Mansfield's modernist aesthetics

Creators: Wilson, J. M.

Example citation: Wilson, J. M. (2013) Veiling and unveiling: Mansfield's modernist aesthetics. Paper presented to: *Katherine Mansfield: Masked and Unmasked*, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, 08-11 February 2013.

Version: Presented version

<http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/5218/>



ABSTRACT

Veiling and unveiling: Mansfield's modernist aesthetics of impersonality

The wearing of a veil like other items of external apparel in Mansfield fiction -- parasols, hats and gloves, hair ribbons -- usually serves more than mere decoration, protection or fashion. Such accoutrements function symbolically to represent an intangible emotion or feeling, but can also be read as a form of disguise. More generally veils that create a filmic layer between the viewer and the external world, hint a disturbance in the field of vision and a different mode of seeing. Often this signals the necessary artifice that belongs to the craft of fiction-making and is associated with illusion, deceit and story-telling. In stories and sketches like 'Dark Hollow', 'The Escape' and the late, incomplete story 'Taking the Veil', Mansfield reworks the veil motif as an emblem of self impersonation and impersonality. Yet the act of metaphorically lifting the veil or curtain to reveal a greater reality or truth also became central to the aesthetic principle of 'the glimpse' and the author's power to veil and unveil, as in Murry's view of her art as offering 'those glimpses of reality that in themselves possess a peculiar vividness', and as stated in her own wish 'to lift that mist from my people and let them be seen and then hide them again'.¹ This paper examines how the veil imagery in several of Mansfield's stories becomes a significant motif in her modernist aesthetics with which she registers problems of sight and vision in relation to representation. As before, sight and vision can

¹ John Middleton Murry, *Discoveries: Essays in Literary Criticism* (London: W. Collins & Sons Co Ltd., 1924, p. 142; Vincent O'Sullivan and Margaret Scott (eds), *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield* Vol. 5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.331.

here be seen to call on temporality, (even if/especially if it is evanescent) for their effect, just as length of 'exposure' in film effects the final quality of the reproduction.

Veiling and unveiling: Mansfield's modernist aesthetics

This paper examines Mansfield's use of the veil, an item of women's apparel worn in Victorian and early 20th century society and valued for its diaphanous and transparent properties. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have commented on how veil imagery of 19th century literature is associated with confinement, related to the imagery of enclosure, that constantly threatens to stifle the heroines of women's fiction.... ' It is both potentially open and shut, holding out the mystery of imminent revelation'. Yet Mansfield's use of the veil goes further than the Victorian women writers who, according to G&G (473-4) associate the veiled lady with a strategy of survival in a male-dominated world. The veil in her work, along with other accessories like the muff, hat, parasol, gloves and scarf, constitutes a discourse about clothes and costumes, associated with women trying to escape the limitations of socially constructed stereotypes of the female through finding new images of the self. Arguably it signifies the limits of this search for identity and/or position in patriarchal society and the risks to the self.² The mechanisms of the veil being lifted or lowered delineate upper class women as partly visible and partly screened, moving between their public and private selves; sight and vision call on temporality for effect, for these movements/gestures are represented through moments or glimpses of unveiling in which other selves are revealed, and can be compared to

² Kate Fulbrook, in *The Fine Instrument*

the camera shutter that controls length of exposure. Mansfield exploits possibilities of theatricality and performance that are dependent on the viewing position and the moment of being seen.

At a darker level, however, the veil's attendant symbolism of shadow and mistiness can suggest the border between life and death, between being and non-being. Indeed, in being associated with the unknown, with its intermittent, flickering visibility within the known, the veil, like the mirror and mask, can be indirectly linked to the ghostly and hallucinatory elements of the uncanny in Mansfield's work, that I suggest influence her experimentation in narrative form. And I refer here to Derrida's theories in the essay *Spectres of Marx* (1994), of the 'spectre' as a figure that calls into question the boundaries of form itself, leading us to conclude that the visible is always already dependent on the invisible CHECK WOLFREYS, that the perceptible reality of any object owes its materiality to unseen, often repressed forces.³ And, in a less psychoanalytical way, perception changes depending from *where* one views the object.

I.

From the beginning, in her work, the veil is associated with the role of the artist, who in singing her song, sacrifices her life to the ghostly powers of creativity: One of Mansfield's earliest stories, 'Die Einsame (The Lonely One)', written in 1904 concerns the soul of the child who lives alone and turns to the sea at night, calling upon her God. When a vision of a boat with a spectral 'Figure (i.e. God or saviour)

³ Stephen Levin, 'Narrating remainders: Spectral Presences in Ali Smith's Fiction', **Essay collection on Ali Smith.**; Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic the Uncanny and Literature* (London: Palgrave 2002).

waiting for her' appears on the sea's horizon, she wades out, when the boat mysteriously disappears, she turns back to shore, but strikes her foot on a rock and vanishes. Die Einsame's liminal position between sea and land, desire and fear, life and death, is signalled by her hair which '**streamed out behind her like a veil**'.. as she seeks an alternative, transcendent homecoming.

Her hair hung loose and streamed out behind her like a veil. Her face was white, white as her dress and her eyes were like misty stars. She sang with her arms out to the sea. Sang with a passionate longing, a wild, mad entreaty. [...] ever she sang the same song

'All, all alone God, yes all alone,
No one at all, God, I pray and moan.
Take me father, I cannot stay:
God, my God, can't hear me pray?
All, all alone God, yes, all alone,
No one to hear me cry and moan.'⁴

As Sylvia Berkman points out, this story as well as and other early stories which frequently celebrate childhood as a Wordsworthian romantic realm (and to which this one obviously contrasts) lay down the foundations for Mansfield's later development: the oscillation between advance and retreat is seminal, as Berkman says 'Always she sought to find the gateway to Eden ; always she fell back from an impenetrable wall'. This realm of frustrated desire and inevitable bodily collapse, is one which many of her female heroines also occupy.⁵ 'Die Einsame' also anticipates the presence of the uncanny in Mansfield's later work which as Clare Hanson and

⁴ *The Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield*. ed. Gerri Kimber and Vincent O'Sullivan,. 2 vols (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), I, *The Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield 1898-1915* , pp. 20-22 (20). All subsequent references to Mansfield's work will be to this edition and included parenthetically in the text.

⁵ Sylvia Berkman, *Katherine Mansfield, A Critical Study* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1951), pp. 12-13.

others have noted, is associated with the Freudian pleasure principle that is linked to a consciousness of death in life, and the death drive, staged as a symbolic search for the state from which the character has departed and to which they long to return.⁶

II.

In Mansfield's more mature work, the veil, as usually worn by upper class women, is a signifier of class and influence. Dramatically the material veil functions as a prop, as well as a fashion accessory. In 'The Tiredness of Rosabel' it is a goad to fantasies about upward mobility. Rosabel's desire to supercede her working class status begins through doubling and mirroring as she assists her fashionably attired client, accompanied by her escort, out of the hat she arrives in, and then tries on the new hat her client is destined to purchase.

'What exactly is it that I want, Harry?' she said as Rosabel took the pins out of her hat, untied her veil and gave her hand mirror.

Rosabel turned to the mirror and placed it on her brown hair, then faced them. 'Oh Harry isn't it adorable,' the girl cried, 'I must have that!. She smiled again at Rosabel, 'It suits you beautifully'. (135)

The movement towards fantasy is prompted by masculine appraisal of women's beauty, when the young man' comments that Rosabel ought to be painted, as 'You've got such a damned pretty little figure.' But in her reverie about becoming a princess the veil remains as an unchanging image of upper class femininity: 'She

⁶ Clare Hanson, 'Katherine Mansfield's Uncanniness', in *Celebrating Katherine Mansfield; A Centenary Volume of Essays*, ed. Gerri Kimber and Janet Wilson (London, Palgrave 2011), pp. 115-30 (117-19). Citing S. Freud (1987[1919]), 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'. J. Strachey (trans.), Freud Pelican Library, 11 (Harmondsworth, {Penguin), p. 291

would sit down before the mirror and the little French maid would fasten her hat and find her a thin white veil and another pair of white suede gloves' (136) . The question that the lady of fashion asks -- 'What exactly is it that I want?' (recalling Freud's exclamation what do women want and the question that is asked in Chaucer's Wife of Bath's tale) -- is one that Rosabel seemingly answers in her reverie, but the related question about how individual female identity can be constructed apart from preordained class roles is here subordinated to the reproduction of the male-dominated stereotypes of female luxury and privilege.

Mansfield seems to move towards a more self determining mode of behaviour In 'The Dark Hollow', written in c 1915, when she was ostensibly searching for a new prose style to commemorate Leslie's death (Notebooks, II, 18-23). Here in the heroine's bid for freedom and assertion of power over her circumstances, the veil's properties of concealment and obscuring are metaphorically linked to lies, disguise and deception (and hence to artifice in fiction). The character is marked by solipsism and bogus self esteem, signalling the inevitable futility of the quest because impersonation inhibits any engagement with problematic issues of self and identity. The story opens with the narcissistic heroine, Nina, a Russian actress, praising her image in the mirror, saying, 'You're a sweet creature, aren't you?', and to the anonymous man lying in bed, 'I've done with you', she throws herself out of the bedroom, after 'grubbing [in a drawer] for a little black lace veil'. Donning the veil therefore marks this crisis caused by abandoning the domestic milieu, and her lover, and the invention of a newly vulnerable self,

wounded by the mistakes of the past.⁷ The narrative stress on imitation, performance, repetition and doubling suggests a discourse of liminality and provisionality, imaging vagrancy as related to loss of fixed identity and belonging. Nina copies other passers-by in the streets, 'pretending', she hears a faint voice from 'the dark hollow' into which her thoughts have dropped, saying: 'This has happened to you before and will happen again and again and again' (463)]. Louise, her rescuer, whom she encounters by a flower stall and who knows her of old, pre-emptively Nina's lies and duplicity saying-- "'don't bother to explain. You'd only make up a story, you know, and neither of us would be any the wiser'" (464) -- and is possibly her alter-ego. The story moves between impersonation and confession, as Kaplan has noted of Mansfield work in general. Nina congratulates herself on her own deception and falls in love with the way she makes impersonation overlap with 'truth': "'But the crying. I did not put that on. No I could not help that. How I sobbed!' she thought admiringly" (466). Yet Louise's comment -- 'You're such a little beauty. You *are* a lovely little being' (466) -- closes the circle of self referentiality, returning us to Nina's opening affectionate self appraisal in front of the mirror, suggesting that there is no self beyond that of the mirror (La Belle, 129), and further that the idea of the self is no more than a mirage, a construction. [This metafictional dimension suggests that Mansfield is developing the image of the narcissistic false artist that she will later perfect in her portrait of Raoul Duquette for whom appearance and reality become one, who prefers contrivance over substance (New 95-6)]

⁷ See Jenijoy La Belle, *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass* (Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 92-3.

In 'The Escape', Mansfield goes further in exploiting the possibilities of the veil as a mask, a theatrical prop and plot device to show the inability of the middle class woman to identify herself outside her preordained role. Together with the parasol, a symbol of male power, it images the tensions between a seemingly ill-suited couple, who thwart each other's expectations and misrepresent each other in order to evade responsibility for their mistakes. Here a gendered discourse plays out Mansfield's exploration of marital entrapment wherein the upper middle class heroine lashes out against her husband who, while passively conceding to her, later has an epiphany under a tree in which silence (from her voice) descends like a gift. But despite this moment of apparent liberation through identifying with nature, he no more than she, is unable to escape the marital impasse.

The rift between them is evident in the anger the lavishly attired heroine vents against her husband for having made them miss the train (as she sees it), and the scene she invents in which he has her telling the porters what to do by pointing at them with her parasol -- a fantasised gesture of self-conscious imperial authority associated with masculine control. When he suggests she raise the parasol against the dust that threatens to cover her she claims she is too exhausted, and he tosses it into the back of the carriage in which they are now travelling. In the story's climax, the parasol falls from the carriage, she makes the driver stop and walks back to retrieve it from the road and simultaneously her husband experiences his epiphany. By contrast the veil signals her switch of mood, her inner division and vulnerability, when she lifts it to dab her eyes, speaking to herself as mother to child, and then reigniting the domestic contretemps. Lowering the veil once more as a form of

artificial protection against nature's encroachment in the form of the dust (a type of natural 'veil'), suggests finality and stasis, as the repetitive action images their impasse.

William New has drawn attention to the theatricality of this story, the setting which conveys the illusion of a stage set, the props of parasol and veil, the mask of the heavily made up woman beneath her veil, symbolised by the rouge, powder etc in her handbag, the conscious acting out of a role, especially on her part. For 'The Escape' strongly manifests consciousness of artifice in behaviour, parallel to that in fiction making, and this is reflected in the narrative form itself, as New notices, which points to the ways that reality is evaded and even foreclosed through an epiphany. That is if epiphany suggests mystical dissolution in the whole, it also might be a form of experience that at the same time ignore the particular truths of human relationships (so of questionable value). In the contrast between what New notes as the desire to escape from reality which this story details and the implied desire to change it, the veil is associated inevitably with confinement, constraint, and silence, the inability to articulate meaning. Its distinctive narrative structure, which uses symbol, contrast, and epiphany points to a buried discourse underpinning the superficial state of togetherness as the end,

III.

The activity of the veil, therefore, both concealing and disclosing through being raised and lowered, extends to the image of mist by which Mansfield depicted her writing about New Zealand, Her point of departure in 'At the Bay' and 'The Garden

Party' is the unveiling of the natural world at dawn, as she wrote to Dorothy Brett in October 1917, saying about the change of form of her new style

Well in the early morning there I always remember feeling that this little island had dipped back into the dark blue sea during the night only to rise again at gleam of day, ... I tried to catch **that moment** with something of this sparkle and its flavour. And just as on these morning white milky mists rise and uncover some beauty and then smother it again and then again disclose it, I tried to lift that mist from my people and let them be seen and then to hide them again. (*Letters*, I, 174)

The mist's lifting and falling images for her the artist's power to reveal and describe through momentary glimpses. More specifically these mechanics represent access to that vision achieved through psychic reconnection with her dead brother: she speaks of herself as a medium, of crossing over into the next world to find his soul in order to write of their life together:

'It is with you I see and that is why I see so clearly. [...] My brother I had doubted these last few days. I have been in dreadful places. I have felt that I could not come through to you. But now, quite suddenly, the mists are rising and I see and I know you are near me. You are more vividly with me now this moment than if you were alive'. (*Notebooks*, II, p. 59).

The spatial and temporal transitions to a moment of revelation, shed some light on Mansfield's technique in her late work 'Lifting the Veil' in which the heroine dons a succession of new roles, and ever more absurd and extravagant constructions of the self. The centrepiece -- her imagined death and 'resurrection' — consciously exposed as a mirage, suggests familiarisation with ideas of love, death and mourning. Performance and spectatorship are here triggers for fantasy, a new strategy in using artifice. Edna's revelation about true love occurs at a play; but its essential falseness is ironically implied: she falls in love with the actor at the

moment he is struck blind. This impossible infatuation is followed by an assumption of religious spirituality upon visiting the Catholic convent in Hill St, Wgtn where in an epiphanic moment Edna sees her future, as Sister Angela. An ever mounting fantasy of death, commemoration and sainthood, culminates in the grieving of her real life fiancée and parents, and finally, as the implications of her day dreams come home to her, she returns to earth, dreams of the children she will have when she marries and claims to now know what love really is: i.e. grounded in domesticity, and family.

As in 'Die Einsame' the veil does not exist as a tangible object, but is a metaphor/image for these transitions: the title, 'Taking the Veil,' refers not just to pious self denial and sacrifice in a religious order, but the predisposition towards illusion that compels Edna's fantasies. This then, is a story about vision itself in which a series of imaginary roles, the heroine moves increasingly away from reality, acting out the denial and incarceration of the self that metaphorically underpins many of Mansfield's stories, and then reversing this. (March Russell 97). As one of Mansfield's last stories it owns that flickering quality which Vincent O'Sullivan has noted of her late work, conveying the sense of impermanence and transitoriness of image making and an obsession about mortality and immortality. Like 'Die Einsame' it is concerned with performance, illusion, the artist's entrapment between contending forces of fantasy and reality, and the death drive. But by contrast to 'Die the earlier story's finale of silence, 'Taking the Veil' offers a more assured exploration of the relationship between fiction making and death, playfully reinterpreting this vision of death.

CONCLUSION

Veils –alongside mirrors and masks-- play an important role in Mansfield's aesthetics of artifice. Their presence and distinctive mechanics suggest the constraint women experienced at that time, when interlocking relationships made them always dependent when they most wanted to lift themselves above them; encountering in the struggle more darker and more threatening forces both within the self. . Yet Mansfield's experimentation also points to to the inadequacy of the material veil which can appears to halt the ravages of time by covering and seemingly protecting objects., but ultimately cannot prevent time's passing . Ultimately in ironic knowledge of this 'truth', the veil as material object can only be metaphorically unveiled, and reassembled as narrative device, existing as no more than a rhetorical, iterative trope.or metaphorically represented in an idiomatic phrase, to suggests the dangers of illusion.

Finally it is worth mentioning Mansfield's difference from her contemporaries, especially male writers., who believed that craft could banish the darker forces. Richard Aldington (quoting Remy de Guirmont), writes in his preface to the imagist poetry of H.D. (1915):

Individualism in literature, liberty of art, abandonment of existing forms [...]
The sole excuse which a man can have for writing **is to write himself down, to unveil for others the sort of world which mirrors itself in his individual glass.**

(*Some Imagist Poets*, Boston, 1915, vi; Cited by David Punter, 'Hungry Ghosts and Foreign Bodies' in *Gothic Modernisms*, ed. Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace Palgrave 2001, 11). This might evoke V Woolf's stream of consciousness within which, moments of perception, like flies in amber could be securely embedded and

displayed for inspection. And Mansfield did claim that the writer should lift the veil on the mystery of life—should not hold back (M Murry, *Novels and Novelists*, 94-5). But David Punter's comment, on Aldington's view 'Unveiling and mirrors offer the suggestion that the dark other can be banished, the opacity which trembles at the centre of the gaze penetrated and pen snatched back by the owner.' (Punter 11-12) **could** never be true of Mansfield. After 1915, and as a consequence of the war, she aimed to bring the two into dialogue—the dark vision of death, with the celebration of life. Her use of the veil was pre-eminently as a prop/vehicle marking that boundary between the visible world and the presence of darker forces in her characters and narratives, forces which were always with her, becoming magnified during her short life, and so contributing to the development of her narrative form and her aesthetic.

If you are looking for an integrating theory, one more comprehensive than simply the artifice of cover and disguise and hence, un-truth/fiction; then you may want to triangulate this quite acceptable binary with the factor of time. **Like veils, dust-sheets cover an object from the ravages of time. They attempt to muffle and interrupt time. Yet that interruption, which gives the impression of something static and free from motion, is a deceit, as the surroundings cannot disguise their own decay.** Therefore what contributes to Mansfield's ironic knowledge of this 'truth' is the sense that the veil must be pierced and then immediately put back together – this time as narrative device – a purely rhetorical, iterative (repetitive, performative) figure.

