

The Style of Katherine Mansfield

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Abstract

Being one of the most important literary figures in the modern period is the case with Katherine Mansfield Beauchamp (1888-1923). She is considered as the pioneer of the modern English short story. This paper tries to investigate the development of Mansfield's style. It tries to show how her style was influenced by certain writers until it crystallized to make "the same kind of directive influence on the art of the short story as Joyce had on the novel. After Joyce and Katherine Mansfield neither the novel nor the short story can ever be quite the same again," Ian Gordon remarks.

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From the other side of the world,
From a little island cradled in the sea bosom,
From a little land with no history,
(Making its own history, slowly and clumsily
Piecing together this and that, finding the patterns solving the
problem,
Like a child with a box of bricks)
I, a woman with the taint of the pioneer in my blood
Full of a youthful strength that wars with itself and is lawless
I sing your praises, magnificent warrior; I proclaim your
triumphant battle.

Katherine Mansfield, "To Stanislaw Wyspianski", in *The Letters and Journals of Katherine Mansfield: A Selection*, edited by C.K. Stead, (London: Cox & Wyman, 1977), p.38.

Mansfield attributes the adjective 'pioneer' to herself in the stanza above, of her poem "To Stanislaw Wyspianski", and a pioneer she is assessed of the British modern short story for her new moods and techniques in writing. Mansfield's works are translated into more than fifty-five languages.¹ Migrant Metaophors believes that Mansfield is among other expatriate and colonial literary figures that lived between London and Paris and participate effectively in creating modernism. Metaophors argues that the transformation of various cultural ideas, languages, and experiences that are mixed-up in an "open milieu of the new cosmopolitan city", formed "the cultural collage that was the modernist urban avant-garde."² However, Mansfield's earlier readings had a great role in cultivating her talents. Mansfield is influenced by Wilde, an aesthetic who believed in the 'credo' - "art for art's sake" - of his master in art Pater³. Saralyn R. Daly observes that much of Wilde's epigrams are easily found in her journals and letters for example, "To realize one's nature perfectly is what each of us is here for."⁴ The epigrammatic style can also be found in her fiction, even in her late stories, for example "The Fly"* published in 1922, she writes: "we cling to our last pleasures as the tree clings to its last leaves." (P. 274)

¹"Katherine Mansfield", URL: www.nasco.neuro.no.ip. Retrieved May 15, 2004.

²Migrant Metaophors, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, (Oxford: Cox & Wyman Ltd. 1995), p. 133

³"Oscar Wilde" in *Classic Library (CL6)* © 1996 Andromedia Interactive written by Nathaniel Cross

⁴As quoted by Saralyn R. Daly, *Katherine Mansfield*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1965), p. 9

*Subsequent reference to this story is: Katherine Mansfield, "The Fly", in, *An Anthology Of Short Stories*, compiled and introduced by Kawther Al-Jezairi and Su'dad N. Sesi. Al-Mustansiriyah University Press.

The New Zealander critic Vincent O' Sullivan, in his book *The Magnetic Chain*, summarizes the likenesses between Wilde's style and Mansfield's as the following: "Her way of describing flowers, her precision in parodying the language of aesthetes; the brittleness of much of the conversation of her fiction; those inversions which are a mark of her style always."¹ These affinities are clear in the following examples: In Wilde's story "The Nightingale and the Rose"^{**} there is a glowing picture of personified rose flowers talking to a female nightingale. The nightingale hears a young boy complain that his beloved girl will dance with him if he brings her one red rose. The time is winter and the boy cannot find any red roses. The nightingale decides to help him and to bring him a red rose. The nightingale starts to look for one red rose among different types of roses:

"Give me a red rose," she cried, "and I will sing you my sweetest song." But the tree shook its head.

"My roses are white," it answered; "as white as the foam of the sea, and whiter than the snow upon the mountain." (p. 2) The variation of colours and flowers that are harmonized in a beautiful picture of Wilde's story also could be gained when reading "In the Botanical Garden", a prose poem of Mansfield, published in 1907 or in the opening scene of her short story "At the Bay"^{*}:

A heavy dew had fallen. The grass was blue .Big drops hung on the bushes and just do not fall; the silvery fluffy toi-toi was limp on its long stalks, and all the marigolds and the pinks in the bungalow gardens were bowed to the earth with wetness. (P. 99)

Though Mansfield and Wilde describe the same thing, yet Mansfield's sentences are more fluent and her diction precise but not astonishing.² Her image is animated but his is static. Another example which shows the fluency and animated picture of Mansfield is to compare Mansfield's description of the ^{*}: "His fine...straight eyebrows, and his hair grew back from his ^{*} man in "The Tiredness of Rosabel" forehead with just the slightest suspicion of crisp curl, his laughing, disdainful mouth" (P. 6), with Wilde's description of Dorian in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "and this young Adonis, who looks as if he was made of ivory and rose leaves. ... The harmony of soul and body," or his description of the boy in "The Nightingale and The Rose": "His hair is dark as the hyacinth-blossom, and his lips are red as the rose of his desire; but passion has made his face like pale ivory, and sorrow has set her seal upon his " Bowen thinks that Mansfield's style is elastic that she could subject her lyrical language to the .brow

¹As quoted by Sydney Janet Kaplan, *Katherine Mansfield and The Origins of The Modernist Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 33

^{**}Subsequent reference to this story is: Oscar Wilde, "The Nightingale and The Rose" in *Classic Library* (CL6] © 1996 Andromedia Interactive written by Nathaniel Cross.

^{*}Subsequent reference to this story is: Katherine Mansfield, "At the Bay", in, *Stories By Katherine Mansfield*, Elisabeth. Bowen (editor) (New York: Vintage Books, 1956).

²Elizabeth Bowen, editor of , *Stories By Katherine Mansfield*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), p, p, xii.

^{*}Subsequent reference to this story is: Katherine Mansfield, "The Tiredness of Rosabel", in, *Stories By Katherine Mansfield*, Elisabeth. Bowen (editor) (New York: Vintage Books, 1956).

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rules of prose narration. But when the 'context' of the story requires she could change her 'style' to be "curt, decisive, factual", besides she uses no strange tactics¹.

However, Kaplan thinks that Mansfield's experience with Walter Pater and the French symbolists, whose styles are examined as many other writers in Arthur Symons's book **Studies in Prose and Verse** (1904), is more important than her experience with Wilde.²

Pater's style is assessed as 'decorative' in which words, meanings, and rhythms are in harmony, because he believed that "prose to be as difficult an art as poetry."³ Yet the sophistication of his writings is not the thing that attracts Mansfield, because her style is marked by simplicity and fluency since her earliest attempts in *Queen's* magazine.⁴ Kaplan argues that Pater influences Mansfield by the ability of his language to have multifaceted meanings, a trait caused by the use of: dreams; memories; 'longings'; feelings, a meaning "only expressible through the interaction of human emotion and physical object." Kaplan adds that Pater uses dreams and memories as an artistic means to show the development of his characters—their interiority—rather than speculates about psychological theories, and that what Mansfield comprehends and evolves in her fiction.⁵

Both Mansfield and Pater are talented in portraying their characters precisely, but Pater's characters are 'static' that the reader cannot understand them but through Pater's description, states Perry Meisels. For Mansfield's characters the situation is different. She 'dramatizes' her characters enabling the reader to understand them through their interaction with each other and with their environment.⁶ Mansfield refreshes her readers' minds to make them deduce and think all over the story to reach estimated results rather than stuffing their minds with absolute facts.

Throughout Symons' book, Mansfield learns about Tolstoy's concentration on the insignificant events of life that may occur every day and only be appreciated after their termination. She also seems to learn from Guy de Maupassant's saying in the same book:

*The first aim of art, no doubt is the presentation of things as they are. But, then, things are as our eyes see them and as our minds make them, and it is thus of primary importance for the critic to distinguish the precise qualities of those eyes and minds which make the world into imaginary literature.*⁷

¹Ibid, p. xii

²Kaplan, pp, 56, 60.

³"Walter Pater", in *Classic Library* (CL6)© 1996 Andromedia Interactive written by Nathaniel Cross.

⁴Kaplan, p. 60.

⁵Ibid, pp. 56, 60

⁶Ibid, p. 61

⁷As quoted by Kaplan, p. 62

Mansfield seems to be influenced by Tolstoy's notion and Maupassant's together with Chekhov's notion of the significance of employing everyday events in fiction as Chekhov writes:

Why writing about a man getting into a submarine and going to the South Pole to reconcile himself to the world, while his beloved at that moment throw herself with a hysterical shriek from the belfry? One must write about simple things: how Peter Semonovich married MarriaIvanova. That's all.¹

Thereby Mansfield could innovate what Edward Hancock calls the technique of the 'modern anti-plot'. This technique abandons the sacred unity of Aristotle in which there are: exposition, rising action, 'climax, falling action, or denouement. Instead, Mansfield revolves round the 'psychological moment and the character's response to the apparently insignificant stimuli that onset the conflict. She precisely registers each response in the character's actions, speeches, or gestures. She never forgets the setting that mostly is in harmony with the atmosphere of the story, and the protagonist's state of mind. She thinks that Sheila Kay Smith's novels cannot gain any success, because of Smith's insistence on the abstract plot, neglecting the character "whether they speak, feel, or think. Nothing is gained by it. They are just what they are. The plots; the things."²Mansfield expresses her notion about the plot as the following:

I think the only way to live as a writer is to draw upon one's real familiar life--to find the treasure in that ... And the curious thing is that if we describe this which seems to us so intensely personal, other people take it to themselves and understand it as if were their own!³

The conflict in Mansfield's plots may be placed between the protagonist and any antagonistic force represented by another character, social norms, or the protagonist him/herself.

Mansfield's story "The Fly" is a good example for this technique. The conflict starts when the naïve old Mr. Woodifield talks carelessly about the two graves of his own son and the Boss's son, who have been killed six years ago. Old Woodifield talks about how the flowers are ornamentally planted on the graves and shifts to talk about the expensive hotel that cost his family a lot of money during their visit to the cemetery. The Boss's conflict with himself is marked by "only a quiver of his eyelids showed that he heard" (P. 242). Then the psychological conflict turns him to be "dodged in and out of his cubby-hole like a dog that expects to be taken for a run" (P. 242) -- probably indicating the rising action.

*Symons in his book **The Symbolist Movement In Literature** (1899) elevates the position of the artist to something like a prophet when he considers the employment of symbolism as "a kind of religion with all its duties and responsibilities of the sacred ritual"⁴, defining symbolism as "a form of*

¹As quoted by Edward Hanook, *Techniques for Understanding Literature*, (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1972), p. 18.

²Marvin Magalaner, *The Fiction of Katherine Mansfield*, (London: Feffer & Simons, 1971), p. 15

³"Katherine Mansfield", URL: www.nscs.neuro.no.jp. Retrieved May 15, 2004

⁴As quoted by Kaplan, p. 65

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expression, at the best but approximate, essentially but arbitrary, until it has the force of convention, for an unseen reality apprehended by the consciousness."¹ However, Symons' thoughts about the function of symbolism are not related to Mansfield's intention of representing social life honestly condemning its unfair norms according to her own point of view. Yet this is not the first obstacle she faces and passes successfully in her life.

"The Fly" is one of the stories in which the psychological, the symbolic, and the realistic presentations are mixed up in one context. Each word in the text has its function what David Lodge calls 'particularity'². The particularity of each vocabulary in the text of "The Fly" forms what Bowen calls a 'living tissue' or what Kaplan calls an 'organic unity'³.

The reader of "The Fly" does not know the first name of Mr. Woodifield. His last name is always preceded by an adjective 'old' that might represent his senility, and his tired body. The name itself suggests an image of a barren field a notion of his senselessness. Mansfield does not mention the first name of the protagonist. She names him the 'Boss' so as to generalize the theme of the story among men, to demonstrate his masculinity and dominance-- a man "still at the helm" (P. 243), who is selfish even in the midst of his agony-- , and to state an irony for the word 'Boss' loses its significance when the man forgets the incidents he has experienced at the end. Thus, the word 'Boss' serves as a symbolic device and as a usual word in the realistic presentation of the text.⁴

In "The Fly" Mansfield personifies the fly's legs "Help! Help, said the struggling legs," (P. 248) producing what Kaplan calls 'cinematic visual effect'⁵. This cinematic quality in her works perhaps results from her "interest in film and her occasional work as a film extra in England."⁶

Daly states that Mansfield innovates the technique of the interior monologue. She uses the interior monologue in "The Tiredness of Rosabel" which is written in 1908, before the publication of Joyce's **Dubliners** in 1914, or the publication of Virginia Woolf's first novel in 1915, and Mansfield seems not to have read any of Chekhov's works.⁷

The interior monologue is:

One of the techniques for presenting the STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS of a CHARACTER. It records the internal, emotional experience of the CHARACTER on any one level or on combinations of several levels of consciousness, reaching downward to the nonverbalized level where images must be used to represent

¹As quoted by Kaplan, p. 65

²David Lodge, *The Language of Fiction*, (London: Routledge&Keganpaul, 1984), p. 274

³Kaplan, p. 3

⁴Lodge, p. 275

⁵Kaplan, p. 17

⁶"Katherine Mansfield", URL: www.nsko.neuro.no.ip. Retrieved May 15, 2004

⁷Daly, p. 24

*sensations or emotions. It assumes the unrestricted and uncensored portrayal of the totality of interior experience on the levels being represented.*¹

The technique of the interior monologue is related to Impressionism which emerges against Realism and Aestheticism, as a reaction to the innovations of the Industrial Revolution such as: the appearance of the camera and cinema that make precise copies of objects. These modern methods of representation have been enough impulses for the painters to think of new ways of representing their works until they find a process in which “the visible world became less definite more fluid, resolving into the light and color”². Mansfield has been there in a postimpressionist exhibition in London 1910 watching a painting of Van Gogh (1853-1890). Documenting her impression she writes to her friend Dorothy Bret in 1921:

*Yellow flower-brimming with sun in a pot. I wonder if it is the same. That picture seemed to reveal something that I hadn't realized before I saw it. It lived with me afterward ... They taught me something about writing, which was queer- a kind of freedom- or rather a shaking free ... I can smell them as I write.*³

In "The Tiredness of Rosabel" the events pass through the mind of the protagonist and the voice of the author is only heard at the end. Mansfield develops the interior monologue into a dramatic one. In "Je Ne Parlé Pas Français", published in 1918, the whole narration of the story passes out of Raoul Duquette's mind who is sitting in a café. He is the main character as well as the director of the whole events, which are not set out chronologically as Mansfield uses the technique of flash-back. Throughout his interior monologue there are various characters, their dialogues, their actions, in addition to Raoul's own comments and feelings. Mansfield's manipulation of Raoul's point of view is an 'elusive' and 'ironic' one. Though the entire narration is set out of Raoul's interior monologue, the narration declares his abnormality, banality, and meanness. The narration mocks Raoul and satirizes him with each level of his consciousness for there is an “elusive narrative gap between what a character says and what a text intends us to hear.”⁴

Both Mansfield and Joyce employ the technique of epiphany in their fiction, but some critics believe that it does not result from mutual influence as much as it results from a parallel development. Berkman thinks of an approximate “chain of influences--Turgenev, Chekhov, Mansfield, and Turgenev, George Moore, [and] Joyce”⁵. Besides, both Mansfield and Joyce are very conscious of the persecution and victimization of human beings as in Joyce's Dubliners. Also they share that sense of the importance of the moment. For Mansfield it is not only a matter of influence but rather a matter of experience of a

¹C. Hugh Holman & William Harmon, *A Hand Book to Literature*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company,1986) p. 258.

²"Impressionism", in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1994-2002, Inc

³As quoted by Kaplan, p. 204

⁴Sarah Henstra, "Looking The Part: Performative Narration in Djuna Barnes's 'Nightwood' and Katherine Mansfield's 'Je Ne Parle Pas Français'" in *Twentieth Century Literature*. Pp. 125-149. Copyright©2000.

⁵Daly, p. 115

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sick woman who appreciates the rareness of the moment. Burgan believes that there is a continuous sense of “finitude ... shared by the doctor and the poet”¹ creates an inclination in Mansfield to express herself in a lyrical form. Thus she makes her stories plot-less, liberating them from the restrictions of ‘plotted narratives’ and sometimes of ‘causality’². Mansfield’s alternate rule is the moment of revelation--epiphany that sums up the whole idea and opens a wider space of recognition to the character who suffers that moment. Epiphany is defined as:

An event in which the essential nature of something—a person, a situation, an object—was suddenly perceived. It is thus an intuitive grasp of reality achieved in a quick flash of recognition in which something, usually simple and commonplace, is seen in a new light, and as Joyce says, ‘ its soul, its whatness leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance’³

The epiphany may be located at the beginning or at the end or even in the middle of the story, such as Raoul’s epiphany in “Je Ne Parlé Pas Francais”. The epiphany leaps to his mind when he sees the same phrase—Je ne parlé pas Francais*—the English woman has said, written on a paper in the café. He starts to remember when that English woman (Mouse) comes with his friend to Paris for the first time. His friend betrays her and leaves her alone in the hotel with him and he promises her to come again and help her. She tells him that she cannot speak French and she cannot go back to England, because she has told her friends there that she has married while she has not. But Raoul never come back.⁴

But then, quite suddenly, at the bottom of the page, written in green ink, I fell on to that stupid, stale little phrase: *Je ne parle pas francais*. There! It had come—the moment—the geste! and although I was so ready, it caught me, it tumbled me over; I was simply overwhelmed. And the physical feeling was so curious, so particular. It was as if all of me, except my head and arms, all of me that was under the table, had simply dissolved, melted, turned into water. Just my head remained and two sticks of arms pressing on to the table. But, ah! the agony of that moment! How can I describe it? I didn't think of anything. I didn't even cry out to myself. Just for one moment I was not. I was Agony, Agony, Agony**.

The character may experience a transformation in his/her action after that moment of recognition or may not. Raoul’s epiphany and his sense of “agony” have nothing to do with his actuality. Though he becomes conscious of the reality of himself as to be selfish, mean, and a 'gigolo', he seems to be so entrapped in that actuality that he cannot elevate himself to be a classical hero who can

¹Burgan, p. 169.

²Ibid, p, 169

³Holman & Harman, p. 181

*In English: I do not speak French.

⁴Henstra, pp. 125-149

**Subsequent reference to this story is: Katherine Mansfield, “Je Ne Parle Pas Francais” in *Bliss and Other Stories* by Katherine Mansfield. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920. pp. 71-115.

save Mouse. Thus, there is no transformation from the perspective domain to the action domain.¹ The same is what Eveline has experienced in Joyce's short story "Eveline", whose protagonist Eveline discovers herself "a helpless animal."² She cannot get rid of her fears and her responsibilities and thus cannot act for her happiness, and travel with the man whom she loves. In 'Prelude' Mansfield develops her technique for she grants a voice for each character to narrate his/her speeches or interior monologues, while Mansfield's voice is totally absent. Mansfield impersonates each character. Her intention is to be less narrative, more dramatic. But this complete fusion between her voice and the characters' she impersonated makes her stories difficult and sometimes ambiguous. There is fluidity between the speech of the characters and their own stream of conscious.³

Mansfield's stories have no privileged centre of consciousness, whether that of character or of narrator. Indeed, they have no "consciousness" as such at all, since the focus is on personality's "unconscious" and, by definition, on its links to common structures, particularly ideological ones, that gird all the "slaves" fashioned under given socioeconomic regimes.⁴

Mansfield's characters take the dimensions of her experience and observation in life. Most of the characters of 'In a German Pension', are 'caricatures' to lampoon German traditions she has observed in Bavaria. The characters of France and London are much obvious, until she creates the characters of New Zealand, who lack no dimension.⁵

Mansfield detached herself from her characters. What helped her to gain that detachment were many things: the first was her being an expatriate, an outsider who watched and reported; the second was her ability of impersonation, which was a personal trait of Mansfield who had various names with various appearances. One of her friends claimed that she had a new personality with each appearance⁶; the third was the numerous painful experiences she faced in her relatively short life. However, her impersonation of her characters was consciously done. She wanted to be honest with the character she drew. Clarifying this idea, she wrote in her journals after finishing her story "The Stranger":

I've been this man, been this woman. I've been stood for hours on the Auckland Wharf. I've been out in the stream waiting to be berthed -I've been a seagull hovering at the stern and a hotel porter whistling through his teeth. It is not as though one sits and watches the spectacle...But one IS the spectacle for the time.⁷

¹Ibid, pp 125-149

²James Joyce, "Eveline", in, *Dubliners*, (New York: Dover Publisher, INC, 1991), p, 23

³Daly, p. 64

⁴Perry Meisel, "Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf: A Public of Two, by Angela Smith is reviewed," in *Modern Philology*, Vol 100, number 1, August 2002, Pp. 160-164

⁵Bowen, p. xxii

⁶Andrew Bennett, "Hating Katherine Mansfield", in *Angelaki, Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, vol. 7, issue, 3, December, 2002, Pp, 3-16

⁷As quoted by Marvin Magalaner, *The Fiction of Katherine Mansfield*, (London: Feffer & Simons, 1971), p. 14

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In her mature works, Mansfield's voice is absent. The language of the characters is in harmony with their ages, level of education, and condition. For instance, the language of children is 'staring', 'concrete' and direct, while the effeminate speech and diction of Raoul suits him as a deviant.¹

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¹Daly, p, 120

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