Kyle Knickelbein
200601890
English Honours: Literary Theory
Lecturer: Dr. Dianne Shober

October 7, 2010

A Feminist Surveillance of Katherine Mansfield’s Selected Short Stories of the “New Dawn”

Essay
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“I am a writer first and a woman after” – Katherine Mansfield

Two important constituents which Katherine Mansfield would embrace throughout her life was that she was an authoress and a woman – two fundamentally immense features which, collectively, have proven to be the keystone of her own life and has subsequently been revealed throughout her fictional characters – their circumstances, suffering, grapples and experiences in the numerous short stories written by her. Despite the numerous themes central to modern writing, Mansfield is noted as a celebrated writer who, by means of her short stories, captures the essence of modern Western society, particularly the class and gender struggles which have become synonymous to her own adulthood, by essentially bringing her reader to the realization of the need for the emancipation of language and literature as both an edifying and enlightening agent.

During her ephemeral life, Katherine (Kathleen) Mansfield Beauchamp (1888 – 1923) had been gifted with the ability to articulately devise strong narratives with characters so real and scenes so pertinent and habitable that one cannot help but appreciate the reason for the iconic status of her work and why it is still renowned today. From her New Zealand roots in Wellington, Mansfield had been afforded with a financially contented family, yet she is seen to have had somewhat of a rebellious nature towards society and the many people who had come to grow close to her throughout her life. Mansfield’s modern writing allows for the exploration of various meanings and underpinnings, which is why her work can be analysed according to a number of different interpretations and theories. Thus, it is with the deportment of this nature that this essay will endeavour to explore four of Katherine Mansfield’s famous selected short stories, namely *The Daughters of the Late Colonel*, *Her First Ball*, *Bliss*, and *The Garden Party*, with the appreciation of the Feminist literary criticism which arguably forms an important and illustrious argument to the intention of these particular literary works in view of the role, place and attitude of women amidst the impudence of patriarchy in the modern society.
Katherine Mansfield sought to create her own identity right from an early age. Mansfield clearly did not feel obliged to conform to her original name Kathleen Beauchamp, nor her common law name, Kathleen Murray. She appeared to be happy with her pseudonym which was arguably the only concrete aspect of her identity as, according to Jones, “Katherine, often unsure of her own identity, liked to present a sharply defined focus” (web). She is an individual of self-actualization who desired and adored the notion of independence. Born in 14 October 1888, Mansfield would traverse to England and France and would encounter several bungled relationships throughout her time, leaving her with no progeny, but at least an astoundingly supportive family who would pay visits to her in Europe, despite her unsavoury social reputation. Perhaps the most influential people in her life would help flourish her literary career as she had been closely affiliated with John Middleton Murray, a “Socialist and former literary critic, who was a tenant in her flat, then her lover” (Liukkonen, web), D.H Lawrence and his wife Frieda and even Virginia Woolf. Nevertheless, Mansfield had been regarded as possessing a rather forthright character, even in her treatment of characters, there arguably appears to be the ‘black’ and ‘white’ character personalities, leaving no grey areas in her work. Her extreme-related nature meant that she was "always outspoken, she was once turned out of an omnibus after calling another woman a whore; the woman had declared that all suffragettes ought to be trampled to death by horses" (Liukkonen, web). Mansfield was clearly different to other women of her society. She seemed to have an experimental nature and was suburban in her ways. Despite her ill health, mainly owing to Tuberculosis, Mansfield’s work had acquired high recognition and appealing literary status just three years before her death on the 9th of January 1923. Her work does not conform to particular linear structures, but rather, Mansfield takes the ordinariness of modern society and juxtaposes it with unconventional or unforeseen circumstances, leaving her reader to interpret the various meanings portrayed in her work. It is regarded that Mansfield is “considered one of the best short-story writers of her period, frequently included in short-stories anthologies, have written stories with themes ranging from class consciousness, loneliness, women’s rights,
Maoris, reality versus appearances, relationships and to childhood” (Begotti and Conrado 2).

Feminism is seen to play a particularly vehement role in the way certain texts are analysed and deduced. An inescapable concept to which analysts and critics deduce a certain piece of work is closely related to the sex of the author and the particular background of the author. In view of the thematic representations within her work, it is noted that “Katherine Mansfield was part of a ‘new dawn’ in English literature with T.S. Elliott, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. She was associated with the brilliant group of writers who made the London of the period the centre of the literary world” (Katherine Mansfield House, Web). The definitive luminosity of the Modern Era proves that women had emerged from the confines of dominant male writers in that their voice had been shared with not only the literary world, but more importantly, the literary heart of the world, by being recognised among numerous renowned male authors during the time. The ‘new dawn’, as Katherine Mansfield House refers to, can be understood in view of feminism and the role it plays in literature, serving not only to condemn the dominance of masculinity, but also to liberate the ascendancy within literature during the time. In light of feminism and women’s movements, Rivkin and Ryan argue that

the subject of feminism was women’s experience under patriarchy, the long tradition of male rule in society which silenced women’s voices, distorted their lives, and treated their concerns as peripheral. To be a woman under such conditions was in some respects not to exist at all (765).

To break through this ‘tradition’ of masculinity ultimately meant that female writers, in particular due to the power of words and literature, would have to take immensely bold steps that could leave them with the extremity of harsh admonition and disregard by society. In fact, Kimber expounds that the “early literary historians of Modernism concentrated on a select band of male authors, such as Eliot, Pound and Joyce in England, and Gide and Proust in France, ignoring the work of the female writers of the time, believing them to be of little or no interest” (23). In already harsh conditions against female writers, it appears that writers had nothing to lose anyway and so feminism would concentrate on the expression of particular ideologies and structures of
the unreserved feminine whilst investigating the deficiencies and limitations of patriarchal values and dogma, as portrayed in social institutions and its leadership. The awareness of consciousness of feminist debate arguably relies on the consistency and audaciousness, and perhaps audacity, of bold female icons to establish, to at least the greatest degree, a phenomenal realization that, despite the fact that accessible woman movements had not yet been established during Mansfield’s time, “the tradition of women’s modernist writing is established, not just as separate and (at least) equal, but also as a crucial part of the complex, multifaceted historical phenomenon of Modernism” (Levenson 192). The silencing of women had come to the point where language and literature were targeted as manipulative mediums in which reconstructive principles about female roles could now be broadcast. Ideally, feminism is seen to be a modern institution in itself, having acquired the collective consciousness of “literary commentary and polemic devoted to the defence of women’s writing or of fictional female characters against the condescensions of a predominantly male literary establishment” (Drabble and Stringer 247). The dominant perspective of the modern society is that which had been created by conservative followers who appeared to be content with dominion of power. The concept of female writing evidently shows that the sacrifice of the contentment with female submissiveness would unavoidably lead to the reviling of the social transformation of the modern era whilst reverting to structures of the preceding era, the Victorian period. To extend on this, Bassnett explains that “much of the discussion in English on translation in theory and practice in the first half of the twentieth century notes the continuation of many of the Victorian concepts of translation – literalness, archaizing, pedantry and the production of a text of secondrate literary merit for an elite minority” (73). Yet, quite conversely, this does not appear to be the case for female writers, such as Katherine Mansfield who undoubtedly has the ability to, despite the terseness of her literary works, provide and paint a succinct inspiration (from targeting aspects of capitalism and class structures, the role of women and the elderly), and also provide an acute scenery and a precise meaning to the aspiration behind each story. The idea of feminism is arguably to elicit an enquiry about the patriarchal stereotypes of women in society (and literature) and to question why women had still been subjected to the scrutiny and overwhelming dominance of men despite the vast
social reformations which had taken place at the onset of the modern era. That which
has emerged from feminism is feminist criticism, which

has thus become a varied field of debate rather than an agreed position [such as
Marxism, for instance]. Its substantial achievements are seen in the readmission
of temporarily forgotten women authors to the literary canon, in modern reprints
and newly commissioned studies by feminist publishing houses such as Virago
(1977) and the Women’s Press (1978), in anthologies and academic courses
(Drabble and Stringer 247)

The feminist view of Mansfield’s short stories poses an interesting argument in the
manner in which feminists appear to be convinced that female writers should be seen to
restore the image of women, by way of portraying restorative female characters and in
understanding the multifaceted role of women being equal to that of men. To expound
on this, Luce Irigaray argues along the lines of women and imitation, that “to play with
mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by
discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it.” (Ryan and Rivkin 795).
Apart from the feminine qualities attributed to her descriptions of characters, the
weather, and other forms of scenery in short stories, Mansfield presents a strengthened
female character in the form of Laura Sheridan in The Garden Party. She is not only a
sympathetic individual, but she is seen to take charge over the servants and even the
florist and the organizing of an immensely elaborate party which is to take place in their
garden – “she loved having to arrange things; she always felt she could do it so much
better than anybody else” (Mansfield 1). Even Laura’s mother, Mrs. Sheridan, appears
to have some an avant-garde attitude towards Laura’s personality as a strong-willed
female character when she retorts “My darling child, you wouldn’t like a logical mother,
would you?” (Mansfield 4). Yet, the death of their neighbour, Scott the carter, a young
man is the reason for Laura’s initial intention to cancel her ornately planned garden
party. The role of this particular young man in Mansfield’s story leaves to question the
high regard of the role of men in that he had left behind his wife and five children,
spartanly showing that he is the breadwinner and head of the family. Nevertheless,
Laura is perhaps the only character throughout the entire narrative that comes to show
the generosity of the feminine, by taking a basket of food over to their poor neighbours, and the realization of contentment with the issue of death as a melting pot and a reality for all people. Mansfield describes Laura’s thoughts toward the dead man as “Happy…happy…All is well, said that sleeping face. This is just as it should be. I am content.” (12). On the other hand, Mansfield also utilises other, less central characters, to portray the stereotypical nature of females and the blinkeredness, or close to blindness of women who had been oppressed by the patriarchal system. As Salas explains, “Mrs. Sheridan is the most direct transmitter of social prejudice and represents the prototype of the woman who internalizes patriarchal values to become her most fervent defendant.” (4).

In a general understanding of what has been deemed „Mansfield’s feminism”, there appears to be a universally distinct treatment of female characters by the writer. Although there emerges from the literature a distinctive exposition of the oppression by paternal and patriarchal forces against women, as in the case of The Daughters of the Late Colonel, Mansfield cannot simply, to all intents and purposes, be identified as a „burning bra’ feminist writer. In fact, to add to this notion, Kathleen Wheeler argues that Mansfield’s “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” (133). Josephine and Constantia are seen as two young women who are entrapped by their father’s patriarchal legacy. They cannot make their own choices and remain indecisive about the straightforward aspects in their lives. They remain haunted and daunted by their father’s bequest of suppression; even despite his passing, Mansfield presents the weakness of two young women who have become so dependent on a man to make decisions for them that they are weary of doing or proposing anything of their own accord – “Father would never forgive them. That was what they felt more than ever when, two mornings later, they went into his room to go through his things.” (Mansfield 7). Even the housemaid, Kate, from a lower social status in comparison to the financially well-endowed sisters, is described in a more favourable and elaborate fashion – “And proud young Kate, the enchanted princess, came in to see what the old tabbies wanted now.” (Mansfield 3). Of course, Mansfield portrays this social phenomenon of the modern woman in a comic
augmentation of reality, thus bringing emphasis to understanding more clearly the demoralizing ramification of patriarchy. The sisters are spinsters whose lives are left to remain somewhat wasted, to be left unmarried in their obsession with their father’s militant control. Mansfield reflects the thoughts of the sisters – “If mother had lived, might they have married?” (17).

In return to the notion that Mansfield had never portrayed herself and her writings as a devout feminist, there remains the simplistic representation that, despite her marriage to George Bowden in 1909, Mansfield had never essentially followed the conventional ‘itinerary’ of the modern woman. Driven by her indistinct liberal nature, Cooper elucidates that for Mansfield, experiences of feminism probably led to an ambivalent attitude towards the opportunities which such an enlightened approach could bring. Throughout her life, she was to vacillate between the desire to reject the conventional feminine role, and a desire to accept it. Her identification with this role borders on self-annihilation (15).

Like many of her other characters who grow old and self-reflect on their role in life, Mansfield provides an existential view on how the feminine has been concealed and how this void has turned into bareness and austerity. For instance, in Bliss, the story about a woman who shares a sexual connection to both her husband and her husband’s lover, Pearl, Cooper explains how “Claire Hanson brings to light the question of Mansfield’s own bisexuality probably led to sexual ambivalence which in turn produced a stronger, more direct kind of fiction. She comments that “woolf was shocked by Katherine Mansfield’s exposure of the emptiness behind stereotypical female role-playing in the story, Bliss” (15). Mansfield’s portrayal of Bertha Young in Bliss serves as a realization of the trepidation of feminine naivety to conform to patriarchal values and suppression in light of the concealment of what it means to be a woman and how the feminine role should transpire from the depths of patriarchy and male domination. Bertha is seen to appreciate her husband and “his passion for fighting – for seeking in everything that came up against him another test of his power and of his courage” (Mansfield 7), yet, Bertha comes across as a shallow, powerless and menial character
who is left to “have some purple ones [grapes] to bring the carpet up to the table” (Mansfield 2). Yet, this is the particular social norm of women which Mansfield exaggeratingly and creatively reproaches. All is not perfect in Bertha Young’s patriarchal world, in fact, Wheeler unreservedly proposes that, in Bliss, Mansfield’s “satire [is] modified by pathos and compassion which she employed for her knifelike criticisms of conventional relationships and social forms of behaviour, simultaneously revealing subtleties of behaviour and feeling” (122). Even Bertha’s husband, Harry, embodies a disinterest in his daughter by explaining to his dinner guest, Mrs. Knight, “don’t ask me about my baby. I never see her. I shan’t feel the slightest interest in her until she has a lover” (Mansfield 10). There still remains hope, however, by the end of the narrative, that Bertha can and should revive her concealed femininity and that through her sexual hesitance, has come to realise her husband’s infidelity.

The most alluring aspect, in terms of the feminist literary criticism towards Mansfield’s works, is the suggestion that age appears to be an omnipresent theme in her works, portraying women through their ages and how their relationships with others have either renewed their strength and virtue or has led them to their demise. In Her First Ball, Leila is the protagonist who, despite the condescending conversation she endures from an old fat man, is able to overlook the age-old patriarchal influence of gloomy kismet talk. Leila undoubtedly becomes melancholic for a brief moment after the dance, which would imply that her spirits had been dampened by the patriarchal fat man, who had “been doing this kind of thing for the last thirty years” (Mansfield 6). The fat man is never named, he is simply described by Mansfield in terms of his bodily characteristics and age – “Leila looked at his bald head, and she felt quite sorry for him” (Mansfield). This would suggest that, despite he plays a central role in the story for a significant period, he is nevertheless deduced to be an insignificant character whose pessimism does not supersede the youthful Leila.

Mansfield’s own life is curiously exemplified in her narratives, often illustrating her remembrances of a life she knew would somehow end untimely. It is without speculation then that Mansfield declared in her (1908) Journal, “I must experience first, how can I write about things if I don’t experience them” (quoted in Katherine Mansfield House,
web). In the contextual analysis of feminism and its literary argument, it is pertinent to note that “the general tendency in literary criticism has been to label Katherine Mansfield a feminine and trivial writer, partly due to the purifying myth extended by her husband John Middleton Murry. As a result, the subtle but potent feminism that underlies her work has been silenced for years” (Sandley 11). The response of this kind then arguably sets into motion the necessity to both understand and appreciate that the experiences of her male counterparts has consistently added to the feminist view of Mansfield’s writings, not to mention the evidential Marxist underpinnings of some of her renowned short stories in which class and economic status are core issues which Mansfield deals with. Mansfield’s life may have been short, but the breadth of her five page chronology proves that she has added a significant voice to both the modern literary world as well as the foundation of contemporary feminism which has come to portray how discourse can both incarcerate and emancipate the stereotypical role of women in society.

In conclusion to this essay, one has come to learn how Mansfield’s short stories are not a replication of her idyllic world, but rather a reflection of the bona fide issues and realities which women face in society and how contemporary feminism has come to interpret the numerous conjectures which can be made from Mansfield’s works. Despite the verity that has come to substantiate that Mansfield is not a crusading feminist of her time, there remains an intricacy in the manner in which Mansfield handles the compelling grapples of the patriarchy which remains consistent throughout her short stories. Moreover, her elucidation is clear in that the reader is to experience his or her own revelation of what the stories have to offer. In a balanced manner, Mansfield is neither a staunch feminist nor Marxist – she simply exposes the injustices of the modern era and occasionally over exaggerates or over expands on certain characters personalities or portrayals so as to reinforce the impression of inhibition and containment which her characters have to suffer under. The central theme of individuality remains an imperative outlook for each character, despite the fact that she does not portray female characters as totally ineffective, immobilised and crushed under the credence of men. The most important understanding of Mansfield’s literature, in light of the feminist exploration of her short narratives is that the reader is offered a choice, in much the same way in that her characters are not portrayed as being ruthlessly bound to conform to patriarchy. In surveying the ideals and traditions which have emerged from Modernism, it has become fascinating to comprehend how
contemporary feminist writers have been influenced by Mansfield’s work and how it continues to survive and add towards the critical thinking behind feminist literary criticism right into the twenty-first century.
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