Katherine Mansfield Society

Essay Series

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‘Cast Aside’ – An Extra in the Pictures: Mansfield’s Modernist Representation of the Marginal
**Introduction**

Katherine Mansfield’s short stories ‘Pictures’ and ‘Miss Brill’ can be interpreted as representing the marginal figure in an unorthodox fashion. This unorthodox representation is achieved through Mansfield’s use of modernist literary techniques such as the epiphanic moment and free indirect discourse in the short story form. Marginal figures live on the sidelines, decentred and ‘othered’. Nicola Allen explains the margins from which they originate thus: “the margin” refers to a space occupied and peopled by communities who live on the fringes of society and describes those who are not permitted for some reason to express their authentic voice within mainstream discourse.¹

Taking this definition further, the marginal can be aligned with any persons perceived to be in an oppositional position to mainstream culture (in the West this would be patriarchal culture). Thus women, and in particular middle-aged women, fit into the definition of the marginal as they are not fully represented by youth-focussed patriarchal culture, another convention of the marginal figure highlighted by Allen: ‘The marginal is thus often described in terms of groups whose cultural practises are not represented or supported by the state’.² Alongside my interpretation of the marginal through Allen, which I apply to both Mansfield stories, I also engage with the performativity model known as dramaturgy, theorised by Irving Goffman. Goffman defines peoples’ everyday existence as series of performances, enabled by a number of ‘props’, which in turn help us to adapt our performance depending on the context or ‘stage’ that we find ourselves on and the ‘audience’ we find ourselves in front of. Blumberg and Hare summarise Goffman’s approach: ‘Goffman, and others following his lead, have focused on the ways in which an individual presents an image of self to others. […] Throughout the self presentation each individual must also be director, critic, and audience member as well as an actor in order to monitor and adjust the performance’.³
Goffman identifies two main types of performer, both of which are pertinent to my close readings of ‘Pictures’ and ‘Miss Brill’. In his first performer type, he notes: ‘At one extreme, one finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality’. Goffman then complements this with his second performer type: ‘At the other extreme, we find that the performer may not be taken in at all by his own routine. This possibility is understandable, since no one is in quite as good an observational position to see through the act as the person who puts it on’. Both of these performer types are useful in identifying and exposing Mansfield’s representation of the marginal in ‘Pictures’ and ‘Miss Brill’.

‘Pictures’

In the aptly titled ‘Pictures’, protagonist Miss Ada Moss is a singer-turned-actress who is struggling to earn a living from her profession. Ada can be interpreted as a marginal figure due to her status as an unmarried and middle-aged woman. Heather Murray identifies the connection between Ada’s ever-increasing age and its detrimental effect on her profession as an actress: ‘Ada Moss tries to shape the pattern of her own life and support herself by acting on the stage, but as she ages, her chance of doing this recedes’. This connection between Ada’s ageing and her success as an actress demonstrates how, with no income, she is unable to support herself. This situation, for a woman, results in further marginality from society since she now has no profession, home, money and thus status.

As a result, Ada is literally cast aside, in both her profession and her life in general. However, despite an inability to act on the stage anymore, ‘Pictures’ portrays Ada’s greatest performances in Goffman’s terms, as we witness her attempt to convince others that she is still a ‘star’ and not an ‘extra’ in her own production.
The reader perceives Ada attempting to convince those around her that her situation is better than reality. At the start of the story Ada has no money to pay her landlady so attempts a performance to earn herself more time in her accommodation. She does this by indicating that a rejection letter is in fact an acceptance calling her for an audition: “Well, Mrs Pine, I think you’ll be sorry for what you said. This is from a manager, asking me to be there with evening dress at ten o’clock next Saturday morning” (179). However, Ada’s attempt to fool Mrs Pine fails: she is mentally and physically too quick for Ada – snatching the letter from her and seeing through her performance. In this example, just like the second performer type that Goffman theorises, Ada is unconvincing in her own act.

Another example of Ada attempting a performance which fails, is when she tries to extract information from a younger actress about a part, while attempting to conceal her desperation for the work: “Oh dear, that was hard lines” said Miss Moss trying to appear indifferent. “What was it – if I may ask?” (182). Despite this performance, just as with Mrs Pine, the younger actress sees through Ada’s act: ‘But the dark mournful girl saw through her and a gleam of spite came into her heavy eyes. “Oh, no good to you, my dear”, said she. “He wanted someone young, you know – a dark Spanish type…”” (182). In her uncovering of Ada’s act, the younger actress targets some of Ada’s attributes that marginalise her – her age and appearance. When the actress states ‘you know’, it is possible that Ada does know that despite her attempts to resist it, she has been ‘cast aside’.

These examples of failed performances from Ada serve as epiphanic moments in the story for the reader, as they discover the truth of Ada’s marginalised position in society. They are a convention of Mansfield’s stories, as Gerri Kimber notes: ‘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’. In the cases of Ada’s failed performances, they alert the reader to the
profound realisation of her marginal position.

Another reason for the failure of Ada’s performances is the poor condition of the ‘props’ (in Goffman’s terms), used to enable them. Such an example is Ada’s powder-puff. Its description as lifeless and aged symbolises its inability to function correctly: ‘Miss Moss, taking out an old dead powder puff’ (181). This lack of functionality which the powder-puff possesses, affects Ada’s appearance, and, as we learn from her encounter with the younger actress, in acting appearance is everything. A connection can also be drawn between the powder-puff and Ada, as both are ageing and unable to perform their roles successfully anymore.

Conforming to Goffman’s second performer type, Ada’s failed performances are evidence that she has an awareness of her marginalised and ‘cast aside’ position. Throughout the story, Ada attempts to conceal from others what she already knows – that she is no longer a star but has been ‘cast aside’ and marginalised, both literarily and metaphorically in both her profession and life. Murray notes Ada’s acting to help herself and its failure: ‘Ada Moss seems to act to help herself, but the opposite is the case: whatever independence she had kept is now lost irrevocably’. In both the professional and in Goffman’s sense of the term, it is clear how Ada has awareness of her marginalisation and attempts to act to help herself out of her position but fails.

Ada’s awareness of her position is evident, as when Kimber talks of Ada’s ability to ignore her situation: ‘Miss Moss deceives the reader by being so constantly cheerful and optimistic that we forget, or rather ignore, as she does, her true plight’. Kimber’s highlighting of Ada’s deception of the reader underpins Goffman’s second performer theory where characters’ performances fail because they do not believe in them. Ada’s deception indicates that she is already aware she is not what she is performing. Furthermore, when
Kimber states Ada ignores her situation, this suggests further awareness – for to ignore something one must, on some level, have awareness of its presence in the first place.

Ada’s awareness of her situation is further highlighted when the reader perceives her telling herself she is ‘up against it’: “Well, old girl”, she murmured, “you’re up against it this time, and no mistake” (180). Ada is aware of the struggle she faces and the true depth of the situation she is in. In keeping with Goffman’s second performer type, comments like the one above reveal that Ada does not believe the performance she is about to undertake. It is a combination of her lack of belief and the poor quality of ‘props’ she uses, that result in her performances failing.

After a series of failed performances, Ada comes to accept her ‘cast aside’ and marginalised status. This is evident in the conclusion of the story where it is indicated that Ada works as a prostitute: “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’ (185). Ada finally has to accept defeat and adopt a performance more suitable to the marginal role society has forced her to occupy – that is, prostitution. Moreover, the shift in performances Ada undertakes is symbolised in the new pulsating feeling she experiences as she goes from her actress role to that of a prostitute: ‘Miss Moss blushed until a pulse at the top of her head that she never had felt before pounded away’ (184).

‘Miss Brill’

Just like Ada Moss, Miss Brill, from the story of the same title, is also a marginal figure. Miss Brill is female, unmarried, middle-aged and is, in patriarchal culture, marginal. Her older, unmarried status is identified by Sylvia Berkman: ‘In ‘Miss Brill’ Miss Mansfield presents an elderly spinster who ekes out a narrow living in Paris by genteel, in-consequential work’. Berkman’s reference to Miss Brill’s ‘narrow living’ can be interpreted as a living on
the margins – a result of her marginal status due to her gender, age and marital status.

Murray shares my situation of Miss Brill on the margins of society: ‘Miss Brill lives on the periphery; she has no security or resource other than her own resilience’. 12

Despite sharing Ada’s marginal status, unlike Ada, Miss Brill is unaware of it – she does not think she has been ‘cast aside’. Miss Brill is convinced that she is a star and even refers to being on stage: ‘They were all on stage’ (253). Miss Brill interprets the park and all the others there to being part of a play: ‘It was like a play. It was exactly like a play’ (253). Finally, Miss Brill looks for assurance that she is part of this ‘play’ – this performance: ‘she was part of the performance after all’ (253).

In her belief that the world around her is a play and she part of it, Miss Brill literalises Goffman’s Dramaturgy theory. Furthermore, unlike Ada, Miss Brill’s belief in her performance places her in alignment with Goffman’s first performer type – one who believes in their own performance. Berkman supports Miss Brill’s disillusionment regarding her position through her identification of the character as ‘intensely absorbed in the limited happenings which make up her life’. 13 These ‘limited happenings’ further support her lifestyle as marginal and her ‘intense absorption’ in it only adding to this end and suggesting her lack of awareness of it. Miss Brill is ‘part of the performance’, but as an extra, not the star, she thinks she is.

Whereas in ‘Pictures’ we witness a series of failed performances that eventually reveal to the reader Ada’s marginalised status, in ‘Miss Brill’ we witness a series of failed performances, but it is Miss Brill who learns of her marginalisation from them. Just as with Ada’s powder-puff, Miss Brill’s fox fur wrap is the prop that enables the performance in Goffman’s terms: ‘She had taken it out of its box that afternoon, shaken out the moth-powder, given it a good brush, and rubbed the life back into the dim little eyes’ (251). The
fact that Miss Brill has to literally rub the life back into the fur indicates its lifelessness; her ‘rubbing the life’ into it is a performance which does not convince the reader.

Just as in ‘Pictures’, it is through epiphanic moments in the story that Miss Brill finally realises her marginal position and her failed performance. The most decisive of these epiphanies is Miss Brill’s encounter with the young lovers on the bench: “‘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?’” (254). Just as with the younger actress in ‘Pictures’, the young couple here attack all the attributes of Miss Brill that marginalise her – her age, appearance and gender. In this epiphanic moment the young couple reveal the ‘play’ that Miss Brill believed she was a part of; however in their own version she is merely an extra – and, moreover, a hindrance to the performance of their own parts.

The encounter with the young couple serves as an epiphanic moment for Miss Brill as she is forced to come to terms with her marginality. This is evident when she fails to conform to her usual routine of stopping for a cake, but instead rushes home and quickly pack the fur away: ‘She unclasped the necklet quickly; quickly, without looking, laid it inside’ (254). Since the fur is one of the props enabling her (failed) performance it makes sense that Miss Brill now packs it away. It no longer can be worn, as in accepting her new marginalised status and accompanying role, the fur is no longer a suitable or relevant prop. It is the fur, as an enabling force for the former performance and role, that is now rejected by a newly aware Miss Brill, and which can be heard crying. The crying is a symbolic act of Miss Brill’s marginalised status and new found awareness of it: ‘But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying’ (254). It is significant that the fur and not Miss Brill cries; Miss Brill in packing away the fur is accepting her new marginalised role and thus does not mourn what she can no longer be.
Both of these representations of the marginal are enabled through modernist literary techniques employed by Mansfield. Examples of these techniques are listed by Barry in his description of modernist literature, in which he claims there is ‘a rejection of traditional realism (chronological plots, continuous narratives relayed by omniscient narrators, “closed endings”).’

Another modernist literary technique is free indirect discourse, which Mansfield employs freely in her stories – as for example when we learn that Miss Brill thinks the activities in the park are seemingly part of a play performance: ‘Oh how fascinating it was! How she enjoyed it! How she loved sitting here, watching it all! It was like a play. It was exactly like a play’ (253). Here, the reader is taken straight into the mind of Miss Brill without the problematic use of an omniscient narrator. Miriam Mandel comments upon the use of free indirect discourse and its effect of enabling the reader to achieve Miss Brill’s perspective: ‘We not only see what Miss Brill sees, but how she sees what she sees, as it is reported in her own language (free indirect discourse).’

Through the use of free indirect discourse Mansfield achieves an unorthodox representation of the marginal. This is because the reader is taken into the mind of the marginal to hear their opinions/thoughts/feelings without their marginal status questioned as a result. For Allen, ‘[a]s soon as that voice [one from the margins] gains even a little representation in the novel form its claim to being truly marginal would seem to become strained’. Mansfield overcomes this problem that Allen highlights through a combination of the modernist convention of free indirect discourse with its effect of resisting problematic omniscient narration, in order to allow the reader into the marginal mind as well as the form of her fiction – the short story. In writing in the short story form Mansfield overrides the issue Allen identifies, which is more an issue connected to the realist novel.

Through a combination of modernist literary techniques and the use of the short story...
form, Mansfield is able to give the marginal – Ada Moss and Miss Brill – starring roles, without undermining their status as such in the process. Mansfield makes two different marginalised performers, in Goffman’s terms, stars for being marginalised, by accessing the perspective of the extra or ‘cast aside’.

Notes

2 Allen, p. 31.
5 Goffman, p. 28.
9 Murray, p. 107.
10 Kimber, p. 18.
12 Murray, p. 62.
13 Berkman, p. 162.
16 Allen, p. 30.