



# T I N A K O R I

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## Editor's Letter

From the seemingly endless sandy shores of the opening of 'At the Bay' to the ominous forbidden room in 'The Daughters of the Late Colonel,' Katherine Mansfield's stories are frequently concerned with the spaces that we share with (human and non-human) others. As Angela Smith notes in her introduction to the Oxford World Classics edition of Mansfield's *Selected Stories*, Mansfield's "characters suddenly feel themselves in danger where they thought they were safest, in the supposedly known world of home." Whether Mansfield's characters coexist amicably or in tension with others, we often witness drastic shifts in their relationships to spaces, people, and things.

The essays in this issue of *Tinakori* share an interest in exploring how Mansfield's characters inhabit spaces and co-habit with other people, animals, and objects. Justyna Kostkowska's essay draws on ecocritical and ecofeminist approaches in order to analyze the relationships between people and nature in 'At the Bay.' Kostkowska examines how Mansfield uses non-human perspectives and spaces in order to criticize masculinist norms. As Kostkowska argues, in 'At the Bay,' "all gestures of conflict with and rebellion against the patriarchal status quo take place outside of the house." Mansfield's female characters are empowered by entering into spaces where they can experience an empathetic natural world that physically and mentally frees them from the confinements of the domestic sphere.

Turning to a very different type of confining space, Sara Krolewski examines the boss's office in 'The Fly,' arguing that his office ensnares the boss as much as it empowers him. As the office constructs his identity, it allows the boss to feel powerful in front of the frail Woodfield, but also prevents him from grieving and moving forward from the death of his son. Building on the issue of simultaneous empowerment and confinement discussed by Krolewski, Sharon Gordon analyzes the role of the fox fur as both comforting and unnerving in Mansfield's 'Miss Brill' as well as in Violet Leduc's *The Lady and the Little Fox Fur*. Returning to the natural space of the *jardins publiques*, Gordon explores Mansfield's and Leduc's commentaries on the pitfalls of drawing comfort and identity from a version of nature that has been removed from its original context and made to appeal specifically to human tastes and fashions.

I hope that readers of this issue will find these essays as insightful and penetrative as I did. I also invite other scholars interested in Mansfield to submit their research to the next issue of *Tinakori*.

Illya Nokhrin  
*Tinakori* Editor



## Contributor Biographies

**Justyna Kostkowska** is Professor of English at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, TN and author of *Ecocriticism and Women Writers: Environmentalist Poetics of Virginia Woolf, Jeanette Winterson and Ali Smith* (Palgrave Macmillan 2013) and *Virginia Woolf's Experiment in Genre and Politics 1926-1931: Visioning and Versioning The Waves* (Mellen Press, 2005).

**Sara Krolewski** is an M.Sc. candidate at the University of Edinburgh, where she studies Literature and Modernity, supported by the Witherspoon Scholarship. She graduated summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa from Princeton University with an A. B. in English (Highest Honours) and a certificate in French Language and Culture. At Princeton, she received the Class of 1859 Prize for highest achievement in the English concentration. She wrote her undergraduate thesis, advised by Professor Diana Fuss, on depictions of the Paris café in modernist memoirs, fiction, and poetry, and she is writing her M.Sc. dissertation on space and identity in the short stories of Katherine Mansfield and Robert McAlmon.

**Sharon Gordon** is an independent scholar and lives in Edinburgh. She taught in High School for many years. Her Master's dissertation is on *The Use Modernist Aesthetic Strategies in the Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf*. Her PhD is on *Feminist and Lesbian Consciousness in the Poetry of Isabella Blagden (1817-1873)*.

## ‘All Sorts of Lives’: Katherine Mansfield’s Eco-poetics in ‘At the Bay’

Justyna Kostkowska

Katherine Mansfield lived most of her short life in self-imposed exile in England and in Europe, where she searched for a better climate and a cure for her illness. Like her ex-patriot contemporary James Joyce, who took Ireland with him wherever he went, Mansfield continued to carry New Zealand in her heart. ‘At the Bay,’ the opening story of *The Garden Party and Other Stories*, contains the exotic vegetation, free roaming sheep, and the vast Crescent Bay landscape characteristic of Mansfield's home country. But at the same time as it gives homage to local biodiversity, the story encompasses a whole ecosphere of species and gender issues, making its local microcosm global.

This essay argues that Mansfield's work's fundamental ecological and ecofeminist sensibility transcends not only national and cultural divisions but also the limiting hierarchies of gender and species. Mansfield's environmentalism is never proclaimed directly but instead permeates all levels of the text. Her eco-poetics involves the story's formal patterns that carry inherent environmentalist fundamentals, such as individual subjectivity (both human and nonhuman) flourishing on interconnection, interaction, and interdependence. ‘At the Bay’ is a convincing example of functional eco-poetics: of narrative's potential to embody multicentrist philosophy and other environmentalist values.

Eco-poetics has emerged as a hybrid of poetics, a field of study that ‘attempts to reveal the inner logic of a work of art in an examination of its formal and constituent features,’ and ecological philosophy.<sup>1</sup> This relatively new branch of ecocriticism studies how fictional form can function to further ecological values without expressing them directly in the way explicit, self-proclaimed ‘nature writing’ does. Christopher Arigo reflects this approach in his attempt to define ‘eco-poetry’: ‘If eco-poetry is not necessarily Nature poetry, then what is it? Most often, nature manifests itself in the work indirectly—often in the shape of a dominant worldview in the work.’<sup>2</sup> Arigo continues, ‘Can eco-poetics then be a site of reclamation of our lost connection with the natural world? Or is it the result of the severed/interrupted connections? [...] I think it is worth stating outright that the eco-poem has the potential for reshaping thinking about ecological issues.’<sup>3</sup> I argue that Arigo's last point extends beyond poetry to all literary texts. In this sense, ‘eco-poetics’ is the poetics of ecophilosophy: a set of authorial decisions that formalise ecological/environmental fundamentals. It is not merely writing about nature but replicating natural forms and principles in the text’s underlying fabric.

My particular interest in eco-poetics lies in its focus on how the mechanics of a literary work may parallel and suggest the ‘mechanics’ of nature, and how by virtue of such poetics literature has the potential of creating a more ecologically conscious society. I see the extent to which those parallels can be said to be intended/planned by the author to be of secondary importance. Sometimes authorial intention (personal environmental values and philosophy) can be traced to the life and direct statements made by the author in letters, personal writings and interviews, as is the case with Mansfield. But such evidence is not essential to appreciating ecological principles at work in her fiction. Mansfield was an environmentalist because she made ecologically-conscious statements in her private writings, but, more importantly, because her works’ mechanics and forms exemplify and embody ecological principles and values.

Ecofeminist philosophy's multiple brands generally share a view of the world as comprised of a plethora of beings that are diverse, equal, and interrelated, as defined by Karen Warren in her germinal 1990 essay 'The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism': 'A moral community based on loving perception of oneself in relationship with a rock, or with the natural environment as a whole [...] which acknowledges and respects differences, whatever 'sameness' also exists.<sup>4</sup> Anthony Weston describes the wide scope of the ecofeminist 'multicentric' world:

Around us are not merely a multitude of humans or of conscious centers and not merely a multitude of other mid-sized and discrete 'force-fields' like rocks and trees, but a multitude of other *kinds* of "force-fields" like tectonic plates, bacteria, nebulae[...]. Instead, in place of the notion of 'universe' itself, it is high time to speak instead, following William James, of the "Multiverse." To speak of multicenteredness, then, is to invoke *a world thick with many sorts of presence* [my italics], in which we move amidst and within other or larger force-fields or centers of gravity.<sup>5</sup>

Paraphrasing Karen Warren, Jasmin Sydee and Sharon Beber state further that

Ecofeminists speak of reality being like a patchwork quilt, for example, in which there are boundaries, but no absolute story within. Simple patterns and mosaics of pieces that individuals and groups have contributed will form the interior. These boundaries are defined by the lack of domination, contextualism, pluralism, diversity, the championing of marginalised voices (eg. the experiences of women), and an emphasis on understanding oneself in relationship to others.<sup>6</sup>

Mansfield's writing positions itself in deep concordance with these ecofeminist ideas. It subverts the anthropocentric and patriarchal order of the world that conceptualised humans, particularly men, as separate from and superior to nature, which was to be subjugated and exploited according to their needs. Instead, she creates a space for what was regarded by the patriarchal culture as minor, inferior, and secondary in importance: women, children, animals, plants. Like a balanced ecosystem, the story's world is multi-centered on many levels, especially those of character point of view and narrative form, where the nonhuman has a presence equal to the human. Multiple narrative centers are presented without hierarchy that breeds domination. Meaning is often conveyed through gesture, silence, and understatement instead of, or with equal importance to, the verbal expression unique to humans. As if in anticipation of material feminism, elements of the physical world are active and endowed with meaning to a significant degree. Mansfield insists on presenting the story's world as a diverse interactive space where all featured human or natural entities have presence and agency, and characters and their environment co-constitute, mirror, and explain each other. This essay will focus especially on the story's structure that gives space and voice to all participants, the physical world and its agency and language, and free indirect discourse narrative method that reaches out to the 'world' of the reader.

Mansfield's early poetic and personal writings predating 'At the Bay' evidence an acute environmentalist sensibility. In her 1918 poem *The Butterfly*, she describes a short but brave life of a butterfly who refuses to stay on one side of the garden lane ('What an idea! Never to go out into the open?/Never to venture forth?')<sup>7</sup> and falls victim to a dog's snap. The butterfly's subjectivity is expressed in depth, and her life and death are mourned throughout the surrounding world: 'Little fleck of cerise and black /She lay in the dust./ Everybody was sorry except the

Bracken/Which never cares about anything, one way or the other.<sup>8</sup> Mansfield presents the many members of the garden's ecosystem as endowed with agency and emotions, communicating and interacting. Elise Brault-Dreux notes that

Unlike the Lawrentian "I," who was struggling not to merge with otherness, Mansfield tended to fuse with Nature. In "Now I am a Plant, a Weed" (1917), which contains Lawrentian echoes, she twice identifies with it:

Now I am a plant, a weed  
 Bending and swinging  
 On a rocky ledge  
 And now I am a long brown grass  
 Fluttering like flame  
 I am a reed  
 An old shell singing  
 For ever the same  
 A drift of sedge  
 A white, white stone  
 A bone  
 Until I pass  
 Into sand again  
 And spin and blow  
 To and fro, to and fro  
 On the edge of the sea  
 In the fading light [...]
 For the light fades.<sup>9</sup>

Like 'The Butterfly,' the poem imagines the life of other natural entities with a great deal of experiential detail and empathy. Mansfield's copious and intimate notebooks also contain declarations of what we now call an ecological vision. She defines personal health as being a part of the outside world and a capacity to understand another's experience. She emphasises empathy as essential to a fulfilled life:

By health I mean the power to live a full, adult, living breathing life in close contact [with] what i love—the earth and the wonders thereof, the sea, the sun. All that we mean when we speak of the external world. I want to enter it, to be part of it, to live in it, to learn from it, to lose all that is superficial and acquired by me and to become a conscious, direct human being. I want, by understanding myself, to understand others [...] so I may be a child of the sun.<sup>10</sup>

Mansfield was especially interested in the experience of empathy while writing. At seventeen, she asks her cousin: 'Would you not like to try all sorts of lives—one is so very small—but that is the satisfaction of writing — one can impersonate so many people.'<sup>11</sup> On November 3, 1920 she writes to John Middleton Murry: 'Ive *been* this man, *been* this woman. Ive stood for hours on Auckland Wharf [...]. Ive been a seagull hovering at the stern and a hotel porter whistling through his teeth. It isn't as though one sits and watches the spectacle[...]. But one IS the spectacle for the time.'<sup>12</sup>

Significantly, she dissolves the boundary between the observing subject and the passive object, and allows for one to become the other. She contemplates the unique power of a writer to become more than oneself, to empathise, that is to feel with beings outside of the self. She is interested in not only human but nonhuman lives:

When I write about ducks I swear that I am a white duck with a round eye, floating in a pond fringed with yellow blobs and taking an occasional dart at the other duck which the round eye, which floats upside down beneath me. In fact the whole process of becoming the duck [...] is so thrilling that I can hardly breathe, only to think about it [...] . There follows the moment when you are *more duck, more apple, more Natasha* than any of these objects could ever possibly be [...]. I don't see how art is going to make that divine *spring* into the bounding outlines of things if it hasn't passed through the process of trying to *become* these things before recreating them.<sup>13</sup>

This underlying philosophy of the world as a unity comprised of diverse, interrelated beings is manifested through her narrative practice. Instead of adopting a single, omniscient, and all-knowing narrative center, Mansfield uses a complex narrative point of view that features many centers: like Weston's 'multiverse' and Sydee and Beber's patchwork quilt.

'At the Bay' is a long story divided into twelve sections, each functioning as a space to feature a character or character group. These are in order: a view of the environment and the nonhuman inhabitants of the bay, Stanley Burnell and Jonathan Traut's morning swim, Stanley's breakfast in the house with the family, Beryl the teenage daughter's interaction with Mrs. Kember, Linda Burnell's questioning of her marriage and motherhood, Little Kezia's conversation with her grandmother about death, Alice the servant's lunch outing, Lottie and Kezia's playdate with the neighbors' children, Jonathan and Linda's talk about his desire to be free, and Beryl's final encounter with Mr. Kember. Assigning each of the focalisers or focalising groups their own section acknowledges them as equal members of the story's ecosystem, and underscores their unique subjective positioning. Hierarchical divisions of gender, age, economic status, and species are challenged and destabilised. In the little village at Crescent Bay, men and women, adults and children, bosses and servants, humans and animals are each given a narrative voice.

The first paragraphs of the story describe daybreak at the seashore, with little signs of human presence. The line between the sea and the beach is blurred and invisible, and the only human-related elements, paddocks and bungalows, appear indistinguishable from the 'bush-covered hills.'<sup>14</sup> Ian Reid notes that 'The problematic nature of categorical differences [for example, between the sea and the land, the cultivated and the wild areas] is adumbrated throughout the story.'<sup>15</sup> Importantly, the sheep, the sheep dog, and the cat are each given agency and point of view, becoming focalisers as they pass through the countryside. Consequently, the focalizing perspective switches multiple times, from the generalised 'you' who is invited to view the scenery, to the 'sleepy sea,' on to the dog 'thinking of something else[...], ashamed of his levity,' the trotting sheep, and finally the cat Florrie.<sup>16</sup> We follow the sheep' first bored, then excited point of view, concentrating on what sheep typically pay attention to: the road surface, nearby landmarks and smells:

For a time they seemed to be always on the same piece of ground. There ahead was stretched the sandy road with shallow puddles; the same soaking bushes showed on either side and the same shadowy pailings. Then something insane came into view; an



enormous shock-haired giant with his arms stretched out. It was the big gum-tree outside Mrs. Stubbs's shop, and as they passed by there was a strong whiff of eucalyptus. (6)<sup>17</sup>

The multiple members of the story's ecosystem are introduced with their respective perspectives, equally valid and important.

In the same introductory section, Mansfield blurs the boundary between the human and the nonhuman in endowing the old sheep dog and Burnells' cat Florrie with thought and verbal expression. Florrie the thinking cat and her complex reactions bring into question the primacy of the human intellect and the self-aggrandizing positioning humans assume in the universe. Florrie has feelings and preferences, she is impatient, and the dog is not her favorite. Unlike Florrie, Wag the dog is portrayed as stereotypically benevolent and easygoing. However, to highlight and parody the hierarchical divisions espoused by humans, Mansfield gives him with a species, age, and gender bias ('He thought her [Florrie the cat] a silly young female '(7). In that respect he resembles some human inhabitants of the Bay appearing later in the story. I see Mansfield's use of animal viewpoints and anthropomorphic parody of human attitudes as her statement for the reclaiming of the continuity between the human and the nonhuman. Notably, Val Plumood describes reestablishing such continuity as essential in de-legitimising of the human/nature divide:

The first step in the evolution of human/nature dualism is the construction of the normative (the best or ideal) human identity as mind or reason, excluding or inferiorizing the whole rich range of other human and non-human characteristics or construing them as inessential. The construction of mind or reason in terms exclusive of and oppositional to nature is the second step. The construction of nature itself as mindless is the third step, one which both reinforces the opposition and constructs nature as ineluctably alien, disposing of an important area of continuity and overlap between humans and animals and nonhuman nature.<sup>18</sup>

While the sections function as separate narrative spaces where the characters can focalise their experience, the story progresses chronologically within one day, from daybreak to night, emphasizing the organic, embedded quality of their existence within a larger, shared system. By virtue of this descriptive narrative framework we are always aware of a larger natural world surrounding the characters, a perspective making them and their problems diminished in the boundless expanse of the surrounding sea and sky. The mysterious feeling one of the initial narrators describes ('what was it?- a faint stirring and shaking, the snapping of a twig and then such a silence that it seemed someone was listening' )<sup>19</sup> is felt throughout the length of the story. Critics note that this silent listener/witness presence is nonhuman: 'The 'silent character' she [Mansfield] was called on to present[...] was not a human society but the lack of one. The silent character was the stillness of the bush, the disdain of the lofty islands for their huddled little pockets of colonial intruders, the silence of the vast sea-desert that encircled them.'<sup>20</sup>

Mansfield features the nonhuman world as more than merely listening, but interacting and empathizing with the human characters. (As I will discuss later, this expansion of the narrative space can be seen as reaching as far out as the reader, 'listening' to the specific narrators.) Her natural world is much more than a setting: it is a presence, itself a character, even multiple characters. In these respects the story can be said to illustrate ecofeminist theorist Donna Haraway's concept of self in relationship, where individual identity, other than self-determined and fixed, is

relational and ever fluid, formed through 'co-constitutive relationships in which none of the partners preexist the relating, and the relating is never done once and for all.'<sup>21</sup> As Haraway explains, the connections between the 'natural' and the 'human' that have been severed by Western rationalist philosophy can be reestablished by changed, imaginative thinking.<sup>22</sup> Re-imagining the world as interconnected is exactly what 'At the Bay' achieves.

Almost every section of the story starts with the outside world, showing where the focalisers are grounded. Nonhuman nature watches, reacts, and empathises. Some of the prominent examples occur in the ending section when innocent Beryl is lured by Harry Kember's seductive voice. Significantly, Beryl is warned by the different appearance of the moonlight shadows, which look like 'like bars of iron,' as if to prevent her from walking further. The fuchsia bush has 'a little pit of darkness beneath,' also to slow Beryl down and suggest a hidden danger. When Kember leaves and the threat passes, the whole natural world relaxes and the sea changes its sound: 'In that moment of darkness the sea sounded deep, troubled. Then the cloud sailed away and the sound of the sea was a vague murmur, as though it waked out of a dark dream. All was still.'<sup>23</sup> The scene illustrates Mansfield's vision of a world ecosystem where everything that happens is felt by everyone, and no one exists in isolation. The world of 'At the Bay' is truly one world, and characters who try to divide it are parodied, as is Stanley who tries to own his part of the sea for his swim, and the dog who puts down the cat for her gender (7).

Mansfield conceptualises all space to exist in a signifying, interactive relationship with the living characters. The inside of the house, for example, is the space of the strict patriarchal order. Stanley, the male bread-winner, passes through the rooms in the morning, leaving almost nothing undisturbed in his wake. He 'drops in the chair,' demands sugar and bread for his breakfast, and has everyone looking for his walking stick, shoes, and his bowler hat. Stanley's demanding self-centeredness is parodied with humor and exaggeration, and everyone in the house breathes out in relief when he departs. When after his day's work Stanley comes back, we do not see him enjoying the outside very much. He jumps over the flower bed, and says 'Let's go in' to his wife' (34). Similarly, other characters who are afraid to oppose or question the patriarchal status quo, long for the order, familiarity and safety of the inside. Alice the servant ventures out of the house on her journey of discovery, but she is described as very wary and tentative during her walk to Mrs. Scrubbs' house. After the difficult lunch interaction challenged her emotional comfort zones, she longs for the safety of her 'kitchen.' Alice is portrayed as an unquestioning member of the patriarchal system, and her fear of the new and unknown is visible in how uncomfortable she is outside of the familiar boundaries and hierarchies of the Burnell's house space.

Significantly, all gestures of conflict with and rebellion against the patriarchal status quo take place outside of the house. Stanley's wife Linda, struggling with her prescribed roles as a woman and mother, literally comes to life in the garden, and cannot pass a bed of flowers without physically interacting with them. She can only form her true feelings into words when she escapes under the protection of the big manuka tree: the only place where she can reminisce about the time before she was married to Stanley. She affectionately returns to the time when her father talked about going away with her as 'two boys together' because she liked being called a boy. In that fleeting moment, she could postpone the inevitable gender identity that her marriage to Stanley would seal. The garden is the only place where Linda can shed her female role and say to her son what no mother dared say out loud: 'I do not like babies' (20). This 'loosening' out of her gender and her roles of a mother and a wife is possible only outside of the walls of Stanley's house (20).

Open air is also the claimed space of the other patriarchal misfits. Jonathan Trout, who is extremely unhappy in the strong male role, feels at home in his element, the sea. He relishes the

outside, as we see during his morning swim, and lingers on his way to pick up the children to the point of being late. By contrast, the office where he works to provide for his family as a father and a male is described as his prison: 'It's all wrong; all wrong[...] it's not the scene, not the setting for[...] three stools, three desks, three inkpots and a wire blind' (p32). 'He is a weed,' Linda thinks of him, using this term as an epitome of freedom, since he resents his forced 'cultivation' (33). Mrs. Kember, the primary female rebel (she is childless and enjoys cigarettes) is only seen outside. She is one with the beach like a 'piece of tossed-up driftwood,' described as other animals: a rat, a turtle (15). She crosses over genders ('the way she treated men as if she was one,' is sexually free and not ashamed of her bodily sensuality (15). She lives outside of the social codes and others' opinion. Appropriately, she is never seen inside walls of any kind.

The physical world of the story not only watches and empathises but and also speaks through its own 'body' language. Ecofeminist philosophy discredits Western Rationalism's concept of identity as based on the thinking mind and its verbal expression. Ecofeminism contends that the linguistic criterion is anthropocentric and false, since the languages other beings use are often inaccessible to human perception. Instead, ecofeminists posit a diversity of 'languages' beyond verbal language: the different ways all beings' bodies interact within the world around them. Watching body language is the source of understanding:

Contra Heidegger, [Elizabeth] Costello suggests that being in the world is defined not by consciousness or language, but by something more fundamentally rooted in the physical: of moving, interacting, perceiving, and feeling [...] not of inhabiting another mind but of inhabiting another body.<sup>24</sup>

The attention and meaning attached to characters' interaction with their physical environment is Mansfield's hallmark. She writes: 'I like always to have a great grip on Life, so that I intensify the so-called small things-so that truly everything is significant.'<sup>25</sup> In a letter to J. M. Murry dated November 16, 1919, she explains her preference for this method:

But, of course, you don't imagine I mean by this knowledge let-us-eat-and-drink-ism. No, I mean 'deserts of vast eternity.' But the difference is (perhaps I'm wrong) I couldn't tell anybody *bang out* about those deserts: they are my secret. I might write about a boy eating strawberries or a woman combing her hair on a windy morning, and that is the only way I can ever mention them. But they *must* be there. Nothing less will do.<sup>26</sup>

Consequently, rather than speaking, the characters of 'At the Bay' often express themselves nonverbally, through gestures and other interaction with the physical world. As we observed, Stanley's patriarchal entitlement is visible through how he inhabits the world around him. He wants to possess it as he possesses things in the house: his stick, his hat, later his gloves, and his wife. His identity is defined by ownership, by what he sees as his all-important patriarchal role. The way he chooses to console himself for the hurried morning is by acquiring a new possession—a pair of gloves—that, notably, would insulate him from and sanitise his contact with his immediate environment even further. His morning swim is also a hurried, joyless, and self-serving exercise in what he calls '*his* part of the sea.'<sup>27</sup> Stanley refuses to interact with Jonathan, and says that the latter 'ruins his swim' by trying to engage him in conversation. In contrast, Jonathan's swim is about opening out, reflecting a desire to free himself of all kinds of defining boundaries: 'He floated, gently moving his hands like fins, and letting the sea rock his long, skinny body' (8). His

body is presented as that of a water animal's, one with the motion of the water. He belongs in the sea and is joyfully present there, in contrast to the office. There he feels imprisoned, forced into a foreign space by his roles of a husband and a father. Mansfield builds the elements of the outside world as much more than traditional setting or passive symbols: they take part in the events as active accomplices, their silent language bringing out what is not verbalised by the human characters.

Like the dog and the sheep who watch the road surface and surrounding landmarks to find their way, we as readers take clues from how and when the characters move their bodies, what they look at, what objects they interact with and in what manner. When the grandmother is at a loss for words answering little Kezia's questions about death, she instead 'pulls out a long piece of yarn,' and is described as focused on her knitting. Alice the servant girl expresses her feelings through the way she washes the breakfast dishes: 'she plunged the teapot into the bowl and held it under water even after it had stopped bubbling, as if it was a man and drowning was too good for them' (11). In contrast and response to Stanley's loudness and upheaval, his mother-in-law draws her peace and calm from nature. She smiles and takes time to look out of the window, refusing to be rushed:

The old woman paused, her hand on the loaf of bread, to gaze out of the open door into the garden. The sea sounded. Through the wide-open window streamed the sun onto the yellow varnished walls and bare floor. Everything on the table flashed and glittered. In the middle there was an old salad bowl filled with yellow and red nasturtiums. She smiled, and a look of deep content shone in her eyes. (10)

Mrs. Fairfield remains silent, but meaningfully seeks out the presence of nature outside of the window and the flowers inside the house to counterbalance the turmoil Stanley's demands are creating.

Physical expression is what humans share with other beings, and what unites us with the world. Mansfield's method furthers ecofeminist principles because it lessens the role of spoken language and builds meaning and identity through the characters' bodies instead: using the physical world for communicating meaning is a deeply philosophical gesture underscoring that we are related to the rest of the world, not separate from it. Her method is anticipating material feminists' insistence on what Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman call 'beginning with the co-extensive materiality of humans and non-humans.'<sup>28</sup> 'Thinking through the co-constitutive materiality of human corporality and nonhuman natures offers possibilities for transforming environmentalism itself.'<sup>29</sup> By positioning silent physical interaction as equally, if not more important than speech and linguistic expression, Mansfield can also be said to subvert the centuries long privileging of mind over the body. She shifts the focus from the world as discourse-constructed to 'real' and 'agentic' the way contemporary material feminists do:

Rather than perpetuate the nature/culture dualism, which imagines Nature to be the inert ground for the exploits of Man, we must reconceptualise Nature itself. Nature can no longer be imagined as a pliable resource for industrial production or social construction. Nature is agentic — it acts, and those actions have consequences for both the human and nonhuman world. We need ways of understanding the agency, significance, and ongoing transformative power of the world-ways that account for a myriad of 'intra-actions' (in Karen Brad's terms) between phenomena that are material, discursive, human, more-than-human, corporeal, and technological. Since the denigration of nature and the disregard for

materiality cannot be entirely disaggregated, material feminism demands profound — even startling — reconceptualizations of nature.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, Mansfield's ecopoetic view of the world as one whole is created by the complex narrative voice that binds the characters and the reader together. From the beginning paragraphs, the narrator addresses an outside 'You,' therefore expanding the space of the story through the awareness of the reader. The narrator effortlessly reaches across the seemingly impermeable boundary between the story's and the reader's worlds, inviting us to take part in the events: 'You could not see where they [the hills] ended'; 'Perhaps if you had waked up in the middle of the night.'<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, the second person address is also used within each character's personal musings, where they turn to an outside 'you' (the reader) to explain their internal conflicts: 'It is true that when you are by yourself and you think about life, it is always sad. All that excitement and so on has suddenly a way of leaving you, and it's though, in the silence, somebody called your name, and you heard your name for the first time. 'Beryl!' (35). The fact that Beryl uses 'you' instead of 'I' is very significant environmentally: it marks a reaching to the outside (to a silent listener, even as far as the reader) rather than inside of herself to comprehend who she is. This use of second person pronoun in Free Indirect Discourse reinforces the interactive ecofeminist model where beings and identities are defined and strengthened in interaction. Even if we read this specific configuration as a self-referential 'You,' it is still a gesture undermining the consistent central 'I' of many fictional narrators. Here she, I, and you are merged, one. As Peter Mathews comments, 'The 'self' of Mansfield's narrators belongs not to a single identity but instead contains multitudes, articulating a voice that simultaneously foregrounds and parodies an anthropocentric understanding of the world.'<sup>32</sup> Monika Fludernik explains that such use of the 'Narrative *you* has as its distinguishing trait the closeness to generalizing *you* and the *you* of self-address, and for this reason its initial distancing effect—'Is this me, the reader? Or is this a character?'—can develop into an increased empathy effect, with the figural *you* (particularly in present tense texts) achieving maximum identification on the reader's part.<sup>33</sup> We are personally called and brought closer to the characters: '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.'<sup>34</sup>

The second person address, the dialogic 'you,' is employed by all focalizing characters as well as the authorial narrator. Throughout the story, this method creates a uniform feeling that the reader is part of the story's world, as if another layer of atmosphere. The sense of reader inclusion is another aspect of Mansfield's method, where the characters are not enclosed in personal ego-pods often created by the stream of consciousness internal monologue, but communicating and interacting within one shared world. Diane Blakemore describes how Free Indirect Discourse (Free Indirect Speech) narrative creates a communicative space between the characters and the reader:

FIS contains features that enable the author to establish the illusion of a direct line between the reader and the character whose consciousness he is representing, or, in other words, a sense of affective mutuality between reader and character, which is unmediated by the presence of the author. Thus one can say that in many cases the effort invested in the interpretation of an FIS text is rewarded by an increased sense of intimacy between reader and character, even though the guarantee that this effort will be rewarded derives from the author's act of ostensive communication.<sup>35</sup>

Mansfield's use of Free Indirect Discourse creates a space in which the reader moves closer (empathy: for Linda, Beryl, Jonathan) or further (parody of Stanley) from the character. It generates a dynamic, kinetic communicative world where other narrative points of view techniques, such as omniscient and traditional third person, put up a boundary.

Katherine Mansfield defined her concept of health as being one with the outside world, and a capacity to be someone else. She saw empathy and interaction as essential to a fulfilled life. Those are the values she shared with modern ecofeminist philosophy and infused into her writing.

In 'At the Bay' Mansfield renounces the traditionally male, single, and all knowing point of view associated with patriarchal society and its literature and creates multiple perspectives, equally important as centers of subjectivity: women, children, servants, a dog, a cat. The male figures of patriarchy that are present in the story are satirised (Stephen) and their positions questioned (Jonathan). The natural/physical environment becomes a character than does not only passively watch, but remains in an active relationship with the human characters, sharing in the bodily communication. The story portrays the world as an ecosystem, undermining the traditionally held divisive notions such as nature/civilization, human/nonhuman, male/female, child/adult, and character/reader. It exposes them as artificially constructed and obfuscating the underlying shared unity of life.

Whether or not we are familiar with Mansfield's views expressed in her letters and personal writings, the story by itself stands as an environmentalist statement. It at the same time constitutes and represents a microcosm of a world working seamlessly, organically. 'At the Bay' is a rich example of ecopoetics: a fictional form which advances ecological philosophy inherently, without making it an overt point of the narrative. It can be argued that this sort of approach is perhaps most effective since it does not heavily tilt the balance to one side. Katherine Mansfield should be celebrated as one of its forerunners and masters.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rad Borislavov, 'Poetics' <https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/poetics>.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Arigo, Notes Toward an Ecopoetics: Revising the Postmodern Sublime and Juliana Spahr's *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* [https://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/vol\\_3\\_no\\_2/ecopoetics/essays/arigo.html](https://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_2/ecopoetics/essays/arigo.html)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Karen J. Warren, 'The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism.' *Environmental Ethics* 12.2 (1990), p.138.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Weston, 'Multicentrism: A Manifesto.' *Environmental Ethics* 26, 2004, p.30.

<sup>6</sup> Jasmin Sydee and Sharon Beder, 'Ecofeminism and Globalism.' *Democracy and Nature*, July 2001, p.282.

<sup>7</sup> Katherine Mansfield, *Notebooks*. Editor: Margaret Scott. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002. Vol. 2, p.126.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.126.

<sup>9</sup> Elise Brault-Dreux, Responding to Non-Human Otherness: Poems by D.H. Lawrence and Katherine Mansfield. *D. H. Lawrence Review* 37:2, (2012), p.39.

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- <sup>10</sup> Vincent O'Sullivan, *Katherine Mansfield: Selected Stories*. New York: WW Norton, 2006, p. 287.
- <sup>11</sup> *The Letters of Katherine Mansfield*. Vol.1. Editor: John Middleton Murry. London: Constable and Company Limited, 1930, p.19.
- <sup>12</sup> Vincent O'Sullivan, *Katherine Mansfield: Selected Stories*. New York: WW Norton, 2006, p. 326.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.322.
- <sup>14</sup> Katherine Mansfield, *The Garden Party and Other Stories*. New York: Penguin, 1997, p. 5.
- <sup>15</sup> Ian Reid, 'Always a Sacrifice': Executing Unities in Two Stories by Katherine Mansfield,' *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 4 (Spring 1985), p.87.
- <sup>16</sup> *The Garden Party*, p.6.
- <sup>17</sup> This description has a different quality than typically anthropomorphic: the observations are limited to the sheep's sensory perceptions such as sight, smell and touch and their immediate concerns such as the depth of the puddles.
- <sup>18</sup> Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London: Routledge, 1993, p.107.
- <sup>19</sup> *The Garden Party*, p.5.
- <sup>20</sup> Peter Mathews, 'Myth and Unity in Mansfield's 'At the Bay.'" *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 23:2, (2005), p.60.
- <sup>21</sup> Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003, p.12.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9-11. Sydee and Beder discuss the broader consequences of Haraway's concept of 'self in relationship':
- What is meant by "self in relationship to others" is that we must recognize the integrity of our own personal centre, ie. our own body and consciousness, and in doing so we can recognize and value that of others. Furthermore, just as we can understand and learn about ourselves and who we are through our relationships with other people (family, friends, loved ones, colleges, even enemies) so too we can understand that we are also in relationships with the natural world and those things it entails. We can learn about ourselves through our interactions and relationships with those entities, both living and non-living, and their relationships with each other as well. In this way an ecofeminist image of nature is also an image of society, as the two are intrinsically linked. In contrast to deep ecology, the two are defined by ecofeminists as separate entities, but they are also symbiotic. Nevertheless, nature's autonomy is recognized. (182)
- <sup>23</sup> *The Garden Party*, p.37.
- <sup>24</sup> Onno Oerlemans, A Defense of Anthropomorphism: Comparing Coetzee and Gowdy *Mosaic: a Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature (Univ. of Manitoba, Winnipeg)* 40:1, (Mar 2007), p.186.
- <sup>25</sup> O'Sullivan, p. 318.
- <sup>26</sup> *Letters* 1, p.288.
- <sup>27</sup> *The Garden Party*, p.7.
- <sup>28</sup> Alaimo, Stacy and Susan Hekman. *Material Feminisms*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008, p.9.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.
- <sup>30</sup> Alaimo and Hekman, pp.5-6.

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<sup>31</sup> *The Garden Party*, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Mathews, p.49.

<sup>33</sup> Monika Fludernik, 'Second person fiction. Narrative *You* as addressee and/or protagonist.' AAA — Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik. Band 18 (1993) — Heft 2. Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen, p.227.

<sup>34</sup> Anthony Stepniak, 'Cast Aside': A Extra in the Pictures. Mansfield's Modernist Representation of the Marginal. 'Tinakori: Critical Journal of Katherine Mansfield Society. Issue 1: July 2017, p.20.

<sup>35</sup> Diane Blakemore, 'Parentheticals and point of view in free indirect style.' *Language and Literature* 2009, 18(2), p.149.



## The Boss's Office: Space, Power, and Trauma in Katherine Mansfield's 'The Fly'

Sara Krolewski

Katherine Mansfield's 1922 short story 'The Fly' is widely heralded for its fierce, bracing perspective on grief and masculinity in the aftermath of war. Though historically Mansfield has not been viewed as a war writer, a growing body of scholarship has begun to consider Mansfield's literature and aesthetic techniques in light of her experiences with war, drawing on biographical details and the socio-political context surrounding her fiction, including 'The Fly.' Notably, Alice Kelly posits a 'political Mansfield' whose explicit and implicit responses to war, evident in her short fiction, demonstrate the complex and often subtle ways in which the war contacted literary modernism.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Mansfield's innovations in the modernist short story seem uniquely suited to rendering the traumas, disunities, and psychological injuries of war. Mansfield's stories consist of fractured perspectives and plotlines, and the suggestive obliqueness with which events, memories, and personal details are revealed in these narratives hints at an overarching – and overwhelming – sense of repression. Mansfield's characters, including 'the boss,' the central character in 'The Fly,' experience moments of profound insight that shatter emotional inhibitions, but these brief glimmers of expression, revelation, and individual realisation do not often last, replaced instead by passivity, stoicism, and disillusionment. Even in stories in which warfare is not explicitly mentioned, biographical and historical contexts relevant to Mansfield suggest that war could be seen as an agent that heightens repression and frustrates attempts at communication within these arresting narratives.

This essay responds to a significant body of research on space and modernism, drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of the 'heterotopia' – a space that, as its name suggests, integrates qualities of other spaces, becoming a site of heterogeneity and contradiction – to read 'The Fly' through the lens of its singular setting, one that is emblematic of both corporate power and emotional repression. As a complex, multifarious space, the office-heterotopia serves to repress the boss even as it figures him as an icon of societal power, imprisoning him in a timeless, material world and preventing him from coming to terms with the traumas of his past – and thus ultimately heightening his spiritual anguish.

Recent perspectives on 'The Fly' have drawn upon trauma theory and models of mourning and witness to develop readings of the story attentive to emotional repression and psychological fragmentation after war, drawing on Mansfield's personal experiences with war and her frequent allusions to this historical backdrop.<sup>2</sup> Mansfield wrote 'The Fly' in a Parisian hotel she had previously inhabited during a First World War bombing four years before, in 1918. Memories of the war, as well as the death of Mansfield's brother, Leslie Beauchamp, in 1915, undoubtedly formed an undercurrent during her writing process. Further, both Erika Baldt and Angela Smith have pointed to other war narratives that Mansfield echoes in 'The Fly' – Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and Wilfred Owen's 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young' – thus definitively placing the story in a canon of war literature.<sup>3</sup> Crucially, though, the battlefield, where the son of 'the boss' perishes, is only invoked through memory and explanatory exposition in 'The Fly.' Given the overwhelming importance of war to the plot of the story, little critical attention has been paid to the space in which the story is actually set: the boss's office, a room in which all of the narrative's events take place.

The office is an unusual interior for the modernist short story. As Claire Drewery asserts, the modernist short story tends to be set in 'transitional areas like hotels, waiting rooms and railway carriages'; Mansfield's stories engage with these sorts of liminal settings (horse-

drawn carriages and the seashore also figure prominently in her fiction) but also with the more normative space of the home and its associated environs.<sup>4</sup> With its rigid boundaries and emphasis on strict productivity, the office seems antithetical to the fluidity and transgression so regularly evoked in modernist short stories, which often involve wandering, transient journeys, and crossings between disparate settings, though it does occasionally feature in modernist literature: in Joyce's 'Counterparts,' in *Dubliners*, Henry James's *In the Cage*, and Willa Cather's *Office Wives*, a collection of stories set in newspaper and magazine offices. Yet in 'The Fly,' the boss's office is far from monolithic or rigid. It is strange, contradictory, and mercurial – hardly the dull, crippled newspaper office visited by Leopold Bloom in the 'Aeolus' episode of *Ulysses*, where journalist employees talk idly and aimlessly about the forgotten triumphs of Ireland's past, foregoing economic opportunities for empty rhetorical gestures. Though no work is completed in the boss's office over the course of narrative action in 'The Fly,' this space does not inflict paralysis and stasis in the way that the office of the Freeman's Journal in 'Aeolus' does. Rather, the boss's office actively facilitates destruction: even as the office provides an architecture for the boss's wealth, power, and success, it simultaneously enables his mental degradation by enforcing emotional repression that leaves him psychically damaged, unable to recover from trauma. Though the space of the battlefield clearly impacts character psychology in the 'The Fly,' the heterotopic space of the office is equally impactful, affording insights into identity, power, and the societal structures that create war and perpetuate trauma.

At the climax of 'The Fly,' the boss tortures and kills a fly who has become trapped in an inkwell on his desk, repeatedly paralysing it with ink until it suffocates; this event is the culmination of his own melancholic reflections on his son's death during the First World War. According to Claire Drewery, through the killing of the fly the boss, shattered by devastating grief, 'reestablish[es] his own power,' attempting to reassert 'his subjectivity within society through an act of violence'; perversely, this violent act of obliteration – which is simultaneously, and ironically, an act of self-preservation – mirrors the destructive force of warfare inflicted on the boss's son, and 'the fly thus becomes a metaphor, not only for the dead son, but a generation of lost soldiers.'<sup>5</sup> Disposing of the fly's corpse, the boss experiences a 'grinding feeling of wretchedness,' yet he cannot 'for the life of him' remember what 'he had been thinking about before' killing the fly.<sup>6</sup> The boss restages the brutality his son suffered on the battlefield on the anthropomorphic body of the fly, described in terms that evoke the physical, human struggles of warfare: the fly 'drag[s] itself forward,' 'stunned' and 'afraid to move.'<sup>7</sup> Thus, he becomes symbolically complicit in the system of violent domination that led to his son's death – among the thousands of other soldiers who perished in the Great War – and to his own misery. Yet in forgetting his grief, the boss fails to recognise what we can see quite clearly: that he has deferred this grief by performing the very sadistic violence that has fractured his psyche in the first place.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note that this painful irony makes 'The Fly' 'a startling anti-war story' that expresses Mansfield's 'outrage at the sacrifice of a generation of sons by their fathers, the architects of the war.'<sup>8</sup> Crucially, the boss's weapons – an inkwell and pen – are tools of corporate authority, wielded for executive decisions. Thus, the boss's violence, which he performs as a symbolic 'architect of war,' is inextricably bound up in capitalist power. Further, his lack of a personal identity (he is only ever referred to as 'the boss') suggests that he functions as a representative of corporation, or, as Drewery argues, as a symbol of 'the greedy, manipulative forces of [...] money, control, and power,' forces that themselves enable warfare and heighten trauma, even within the narrative itself. The boss's visitor, Woodifield, a man who has also lost his son to the war, comments on the high prices charged to bereaved visitors by hotels bordering on war cemeteries in France. Woodifield's name evokes the

‘woody fields’ in France, such as Flanders Fields, where many soldiers died, suggesting that he too represents the destructive violence of warfare to which his son has been sacrificed.<sup>9</sup>

At the outset of the story, the boss revels in his office space, which he likes to have ‘admired,’ especially by a visitor as frail as Woodifield, who, though younger than the boss, has already retired and is confined to his home by his ‘wife and girls’ (357). The boss is ‘proud of his room’: it gives him ‘a feeling of deep, solid satisfaction to be planted there in the midst of it in full view of [Woodifield,] that frail old figure in the muffler,’ and he emphasises its modern, extravagant features to his fogyish visitor, noting its ‘bright red carpet with a pattern of large white rings,’ its ‘new furniture’ and ‘electric heating’ (357). Though only a small room, the office is impressively outfitted and filled with material comforts, including cooking utensils – ‘five transparent pearly sausages glowing so softly in the titled copper pan’ – a ‘massive bookcase,’ and a ‘table with legs like twisted treacle’ (357). It is a gaudy, ostentatious space: Woodifield sits in a ‘great, green leather armchair’ that clashes with the red-and-white carpet, the dark, ‘treacle’-like table, and the ‘pearly sausages’ in the ‘copper pan’ (357). This intense, variegated colour scheme suggests an inherent opposition to the sobriety and melancholy that the boss will later experience while reflecting on his son’s death; the office’s bright, dramatic colours seem to distract from an atmosphere of national mourning. Expensively decorated and elaborately handsome, the boss’s office and its accoutrements represent only wealth and corporate achievement, excluding emotional vulnerability. Whereas the weak, emasculated Woodifield is confined by his wife and daughters to his own home, the boss has his own space, one in which to act as a highly masculine, independent, and financially powerful individual.

Moreover, because no work is completed in the office during the story – which consists solely of the boss’s meeting with Woodifield and his subsequent encounter with the fly – the office assumes qualities of different spaces. In addition to the ‘pearly sausages,’ the boss presents Woodifield with expensive whisky, which he has been told by ‘the man from whom [he] got it’ comes ‘from the cellars at Windsor Cassel’: the whisky’s dubious provenance suggests the boss’s desire to maintain high social standing, even through possible deception (358). Though it was hardly unusual for executives of this era to serve and store alcohol in their offices, the boss’s office becomes equal parts bar and restaurant, sites geared towards consumption and social gathering. These functions are wholly antithetical to the notion of an office – an individualised space of production and focus – yet they allow the boss to act out an identity based on the social status he gains from material acquisition, and from displaying these material objects to another individual in a social setting. The boss is effusively ‘proud of his room,’ of the electric heating that cooks his sausages, and the whisky that he presents ‘lovingly’ to his visitor, all of which suggest his affluence and success – especially in comparison to the destitute Woodifield – by demonstrating his capacity to participate enthusiastically in conspicuous consumption (358).

Michel Foucault’s seminal 1967 work ‘Of Other Spaces’ (translated by Jay Miskowiec in 1986) provides a useful lens for reading the boss’s office as a complex space of power that juxtaposes sites of social gathering within an incompatible site of corporatism. Foucault argues that ‘the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space,’ pointing to ‘heterotopias,’ or multi-layered, composite spaces, ‘capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible,’ as environments that exemplify spatial fluidity.<sup>10</sup> Foucault draws on Gaston Bachelard’s theory of topoanalysis in *La Poétique de l’Espace* (*The Poetics of Space*, 1958), which posits inhabitable space such as the home as space imbued with intimate, individualised significance, made significant by relations we have with the site: the experiences and emotions it imposes on us, and the experiences and imaginative associations we impose on it. Building on Bachelard, Foucault asserts that we live in ‘a space thoroughly imbued with quantities,’ as opposed to ‘homogeneous and empty space’ (23). In Foucaultian spatial theory, space becomes a way to understand the social apparatus, as

well as the diverse relations of power that support this apparatus. ‘For Foucault, space *is* power, and power is always spatially located somewhere within society: social relations of power infuse all spatial sites and concepts,’ summarises Andrew Thacker, noting that the ‘heterotopia,’ though not directly linked to notions of power in ‘Of Other Spaces,’ can be read in modernist texts as ‘a site of potential instability’ that establishes power by incorporating multiple different ‘incompatible’ sites and thus resisting ‘an acceptable spatial ordering of modernity.’<sup>11</sup> Foucault’s heterotopias are by definition not utopic: they are not sites of escape or unreal, fantastical sites that ‘present society itself in a perfected form,’ but sites like prisons and colonies that juxtapose ‘the real and the unreal’ (24). These are spaces grounded in reality but organised to create altogether new, augmented versions of society, involving combinations of different sorts of functional sites (both prisons and colonies have schools, administrative centres, and other institutions). By interpreting modernist spaces as heterotopic, Thacker argues that modernism itself can be interpreted as ‘a set of responses to changes in the material spaces of modernity,’ suggesting that modernist literature can – and should – be read spatially, as has been attempted in this essay.<sup>12</sup>

The boss’s office is a heterotopic site of power in that it exercises control over the boss through its multifarious structure, becoming as much a prison as it is a site of diversion, consumption, and conspicuous materialism. In introducing the heterotopia, Foucault writes, ‘I am interested in certain [spaces] that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect’ (24). By providing him with the material trappings of prestige and capitalist achievement, the office designates the boss’s identity as an exultant, self-righteous icon of manipulative, consumptive capitalist power. Yet the office simultaneously neutralises or inverts the boss’s powerful status by functioning as a kind of prison, an inhibiting space that prevents him from confronting the tragedy of his past and the grief of his present. The first sentence spoken in the story, by Woodifield, is ‘Y’are very snug in here,’ referring to the size of the office: despite its many impressive features, the space is immediately notable because it is ‘snug,’ confining (357). Though the boss is Woodifield’s opposite physically, ‘stout and rosy’ whereas Woodifield is feeble, quavering, and infantilised (peering at the boss ‘as a baby peers out of its pram’), both the boss and Woodifield have been ‘boxed up’: Woodifield at home by his family, who, out of fear for his mental instability, only allow him to venture out on Tuesdays, and the boss in his office by his own reliance on empty materialism (357). ‘His spirit,’ argues Ted E. Boyle, is ‘a prisoner of his materialism [...] the boss is indeed ‘snug,’ as snug as if he were in his grave,’ since it is only material comforts in the office, ‘emblems of his successful business,’ that provide him with some semblance of pleasure, simultaneously distracting him from his own grief and melancholy.<sup>13</sup>

The office is the space in which the boss realises his identity as a representative of these ‘greedy, manipulative forces,’ yet it is simultaneously the space in which this identity is undermined. Collapsing under the weight of suppressed grief, the corruptive corporate power and materialism that the office symbolises can no longer satisfactorily sustain the boss. Crucially, the boss recognises that these ‘emblems’ of success lack meaning after his son’s death, yet he cannot free himself from them. After Woodifield remarks to the boss that his daughters have visited the grave in Belgium where their sons were buried, the boss reflects miserably on his own purposelessness, lurking beneath a veneer of materialist pride: ‘ever since [his son’s] birth [he] had worked at building up this business for him; it had no other meaning if it was not for the boy [...] How on earth could he have slaved, denied himself, kept going all these years without the promise for ever before him of the boy’s stepping into his shoes and carrying on where he had left off?’ (360) Though the boss realises that his capitalist successes, symbolised by the office, are merely hollow, inadequate substitutes for his son’s presence, by the story’s end he nonetheless fails to become liberated from these markers of wealth and

status; thus, he fails to come to terms with his profound loss. At the end of the story, the boss remains in the office, as if incapable of exiting: according to Foucault's fifth principle of the heterotopia, heterotopic spaces are not 'freely accessible like a public space' and 'presuppose a system of opening and closing' that can isolate them, making both entry and exit difficult (26). Confined within the closed, private space of the office, the boss calls to his secretary for new blotting paper to replace the paper he has used to kill the fly – thereby reinstating this material good to its position of prominence in the office – and reverts to brusque, authoritative, business-like behaviour ('Bring me some fresh blotting-paper,' he said, sternly,' to his assistant, 'and look sharp about it'), forgetting his earlier grief (361). When the boss cannot recall what it was he was thinking about before the fly's death, it is the space of the office that can be seen as preventing the boss from confronting, comprehending, or even recollecting his traumatic loss, since it is the world of the office – with its emphasis on materialistic displays and rigid corporate behaviour – in which the boss lingers, and that seems to distract him from recognising his own bereavement.

The office constructs the boss's identity, providing him with a stage on which to perform himself as the anonymous yet indisputably powerful businessman. Yet the office also tears at this supposedly dominant identity by contributing to the boss's emotional repression, resulting in an image of the boss as one who, as Angela Smith contends, is 'defined by his profession and resists access to his own feelings.'<sup>14</sup> The boss is emotionally degraded, stunted by devastating grief, yet unable to address this grief in any productive way – imprisoned as he is by materialism and its illusions of satisfaction and comfort.

Moreover, the office-heterotopia is a place outside of time that separates the boss from his traumatic past and prevents him from moving towards healing in the future, corresponding to Foucault's fourth principle of the heterotopia. Heterotopic spaces are linked to 'heterochronies,' or ruptures in traditional time, and thus can exist on their own temporal planes, unsettling progressions between the past, present, and future (26). Though surrounded by 'new furniture,' in the office the boss is struck by 'how quickly time passed' since the death of his son six years before: 'it might have happened yesterday' (360). Indeed, the boss received news of the death by telegram in his office, and it seems as if this isolated world might have halted at that crucial juncture: 'no tears came yet' when he thinks of his son's death, 'and he wasn't feeling as he wanted to feel' (359). As if the boss cannot yet comprehend his own grief – as if, even six years on, he has only just learned of his son's death and has not yet had the time to process his horror – he cannot mourn or cry. Instead, he can only enact violence, performing as a symbolic agent of war and destruction, as if unable to move past the immediate conditions of violence that led to his son's death towards spiritual reckoning and emotional catharsis. The boss recalls that in the past, 'he had declared' that 'time [...] could make no difference. Other men perhaps might recover, might live their loss down, but not he' (359). Though the boss once experienced 'violent fit[s] of weeping' when reflecting on his son's death, he no longer experiences these intense emotions within the space of the office: it is true, then, that time has made 'no difference,' since inside the office the boss has reverted back to stunned, stoic contemplation of his son's death, as if still unable to reckon with the tragedy he has experienced (359).

Daniela Fortezza notes that the boss 'is unable to come to grips with his lies,' suggesting that he, like these anonymous 'other men' who have 'lived their loss down,' has recovered from the loss and become impervious to its traumatic memory, though he firmly denies this recovery to himself, fearful of his apparent numbness.<sup>15</sup> However, despite his inability to mourn properly, it seems that the boss has not recovered – has not lived his loss down – because he can no longer even recall this loss: after killing the fly, the boss quickly forgets his grief and returns to the domain of capital and corporatism, unable to recognise that this domain has effectively created his trauma by enabling warfare and mass violence. The office separates the

boss from the realities of traumatic history as well as a potentially healing future, confining him in an empty, superficial present in which he is, to borrow Boyle's terms, 'spiritually dead.' 'If the boss were still to have the power to remember, and consequently the power to grieve, he would still be alive. He can neither remember nor grieve; he is, thus, spiritually dead,' Boyle posits, portraying the boss as a figure whose apparent stability and power are significantly challenged by his inability to remember and mourn: an inability that the office enables.<sup>16</sup> The multifarious office-heterotopia juxtaposes the 'real and the unreal' by juxtaposing material reality and timelessness, and it embeds the boss between these two constructs, simultaneously lending him power and unsettling this power – and thrusting him ultimately into a space of pain and unresolved trauma.

Drewery describes the boss as possessing a 'complex, ambiguous, and multifaceted identity,' caught between egotistical pride and arrested mourning, and between self-assuredness and utter devastation.<sup>17</sup> In his study of the modernist short story, Dominic Head argues that a principle attribute of the modernist story is its 'cultivation and celebration of complex identity,' yet as a spatial reading of 'The Fly,' a seminal modernist short story, demonstrates, modernist space as much as character can be viewed as complex, dynamic, and ambivalent, especially in relation to contemporary theories of space and spatial relations, such as those advanced by Foucault and Bachelard.<sup>18</sup> The office is a symbolic space that renders the boss's spiritual healing impossible, providing him with a false sense of power and status that obscures severe mental and emotional instability. Thus, 'The Fly' is not only an anti-war story but also an anti-capitalist story, vehemently protesting the socio-political structures that promote consumerism and materialism and encourage the unfettered pursuit of wealth over all other aspects of life – including bereavement after national tragedy. Certainly the boss's inability to mourn is also bound up in his performance of rigid, stoic masculinity, but his confinement within the office should not be overlooked as an element of the narrative that helps to explain his ambiguous position between emotional fragility and societal power. Mansfield argues that work – and the material, physical objects that surround work culture – cannot satisfactorily supersede loss, death, and psychological wounding. Her invocation of the office as a heterotopic environment, per Foucault's theorising, suggests an attention to the complexities and contradictory dynamics involved in modern social space, as well as the overwhelming impact such space has on identity and feeling.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Alice Kelly, 'Introduction,' in Gerri Kimber and W. Todd Martin, eds., *Katherine Mansfield and World War One*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 1. Further insight into Mansfield's connection to the First World War is to be found in Vincent O'Sullivan, 'Finding the Pattern, Solving the Problem: Katherine Mansfield the New Zealand European,' in Roger Robinson, ed., *Katherine Mansfield: In from the Margin*, Robinson (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), pp. 9-24, in which O'Sullivan argues that the 'most important public event in Mansfield's lifetime was the First World War' (14).

<sup>2</sup> See Avishek Parui, 'For the life of him he could not remember': Post-war Memory, Mourning, and Masculinity Crisis in Katherine Mansfield's "The Fly" in Clare Hanson, Gerri Kimber, and W. Todd Martin, eds., *Katherine Mansfield and Psychology* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 113-124, and Stephen Edwards, 'Katherine Mansfield and the Trauma of War: Death, Memory, and Forgetting in "An Indiscrete Journey", "The Garden Party", "At the Bay", "Six Years After", and "The Fly,"' *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 69 (Autumn 2017), pp. 37-54.

<sup>3</sup> Erika Baldt, ‘Mythology And/of the Great War in Katherine Mansfield’s “The Daughters of the Late Colonel,”’ in *Katherine Mansfield and World War One*, p. 98; Angela Smith, ‘Katherine Mansfield at the Front,’ *First World War Studies*, 2.1 (2011), pp. 65–73 (p. 70).

<sup>4</sup> Claire Drewery, *Modernist Short Fiction by Women: The Liminal in Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf* (Routledge, 2016), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Drewery, pp. 46-7.

<sup>6</sup> Katherine Mansfield, ‘The Fly,’ in Angela Smith, ed., *Katherine Mansfield: Selected Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 361.

<sup>7</sup> Mansfield, p. 361. F. W. Bateson and B. Shahevitch note that ‘the fly is only subjectively anthropomorphic,’ since ‘is it the boss who attributes human courage—and the human necessity to suffer pain under torture—to the fly’ by addressing it like a human and in terms of human qualities: “‘He’s a plucky little devil,” thought the boss, and he felt a real admiration for the fly’s courage’ (p. 361). Thus, the boss’s symbolic complicity in war violence is heightened by his own participation in discourse that supports the logic of warfare as an act structured around ‘human courage’ and the ‘necessity’ of suffering ‘pain under torture.’ The boss’s comments are reminiscent of the pro-war rhetoric in circulation at the time of the First World War, which focused on traditional principles of duty, heroism, and courageous sacrifice. See F.W. Bateson and B. Shahevitch, ‘Katherine Mansfield’s “The Fly”: A Critical Exercise,’ in *Essays in Criticism*, XII (1 January 1962), pp. 39-52.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Katherine Mansfield,’ in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, eds., *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women, Third Edition: Early Twentieth Century through Contemporary* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), p. 320.

<sup>9</sup> Drewery, p. 45; Mansfield, p. 359.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, ‘Of Other Spaces,’ *Diacritics*, 16: 1 (1986), pp. 23,. 25.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Thacker, *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Thacker, p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> Ted E. Boyle, ‘The Death of the Boss: Another Look at Katherine Mansfield’s “The Fly”’ *Modern Fiction Studies*, 11: 2 (1965), pp 183–185 (p. 184).

<sup>14</sup> Smith, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> Daniela Fortezza, “‘Strange Growths’: The World Wars as Agents and Markers of Change in Women’s Writing,” in Elena Lamberti and Vita Fortunati, eds., *Memories and Representations of War: The Case of World War I and World War II* (Amsterdam: Brill/Rodopi, 2009), pp. 129–144 (p. 140).

<sup>16</sup> Boyle, p. 185.

<sup>17</sup> Drewery, p. 48.

<sup>18</sup> Dominic Head, *The Modernist Short Story: A Study in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 34.

**‘Sitting in other people’s lives’: Inspiration, Influence and Modernist Literary Sensibilities in Katherine Mansfield’s ‘Miss Brill’ and Violette Leduc’s *The Lady and the Little Fox Fur*.<sup>1</sup>**

Sharon Gordon

All the world’s a Stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts  
[The] last scene of all, [...] is [...] mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

During her life Katherine Mansfield lived in France for short periods where she wrote twenty of her well-known short stories, including ‘Miss Brill’ which was written in November 1920. Set in the *jardins publiques* in Menton, on the Côte d’Azur, Miss Brill is a solitary and lonely figure who gains spiritual nourishment from those around her while sitting on a bench in the gardens. As I argue in this essay, Mansfield’s short story provided the French writer, Violette Leduc, with the inspiration for her sixty-three-page novella, *The Lady and the Little Fox Fur*, published in France in 1965, over forty years after Mansfield’s death. The theme of Leduc’s novella concerns a lonely, poor and isolated woman living on the margins of Parisian society, who gains her spiritual nourishment by observing the daily activities of others from a bench at a Metro station. In both stories, the significance of their insignificance is foregrounded. The stories, centring around the binaries of young and old; rich and poor; community and the individual; illusion and reality; – fits thematically with modernist sensibilities. Mansfield’s stylistic devices in terms of free indirect discourse, moments of epiphany, liminality, the themes of marginalisation, alienation and identity in ‘Miss Brill’ allow for introspection and enquiry into marginal subjectivities and, arguably, Leduc’s novella bears all the hallmarks of Mansfield’s commitment to modernist experimentation. In both *femmes seules* stories the symbolic relationship between the fox furs and the two marginalised female protagonists, foregrounds their shared mental torture, which is intensified by their acute loneliness and poverty, both physical and psychological. Mansfield and Leduc are forthright on the subject of women who are left outside the protection of men, money and class, and who are perceived as pitiful. As unmarried women, neither wife nor mother, they lacked a socially acceptable status. Both Miss Brill, whose identity is reinforced by her unmarried status and Leduc’s protagonist, who has no name, were living outside the institution of marriage. Therefore, their isolation, both economic and social, is intensified because they are unmarried and the subjective experience of occupying a marginal position in society is reinforced.

Leduc’s feminist writing spanned four decades, from the 1940s to the 1970s and during that time she wrote eleven novels. Born in Arras, France, in 1907, she died in 1972. Like Mansfield, Leduc experienced emotional disruption in her life. She was illegitimate, and raised by her mother and grand-mother. As Rafia Zakaria states, Leduc was ‘[a] provincial woman [. . .] a lesbian who lived wildly and loved madly [and who] was not part of the French cultural



narrative'.<sup>3</sup> With such a reputation it is not surprising that Leduc felt she had much in common with Mansfield, who, herself, was not an accepted part of the British cultural narrative and who never quite fitted in. As a consequence, Mansfield was socially marginalised because of her perceived provincialism and colonialism. Leduc had much in common with Mansfield in terms of bodily suffering – bisexuality and lesbianism, sexual awareness of other young girls when girls themselves and in adult life, infatuation and affairs with other women and men. Both women experienced ill-fated marriages and both had complicated relationships with their mothers, whilst sharing a deep affection for their grandmothers as children. These shared life-experiences and relationships are manifest in their respective writing.

Arguably, Leduc had read between the lines of Mansfield's narrative. As Gerri Kimber states, 'In the previous autumn of 1921, Mansfield's stories had come to the attention of the French literary establishment (even though there were no translations of her work until after her death)'.<sup>4</sup> Kimber further states that 'Between 1928 and 1932, four of Mansfield's books were translated into French, the short story collections, *Bliss* and *The Garden Party*, together with the *Letters* and *Journal*'.<sup>5</sup> Arguably, Leduc may have become familiar with Mansfield's work at this time. Another influence on Leduc and a possible introduction to Mansfield's life and work, was the French feminist writer, Simone de Beauvoir, of whom Leduc, as Alex Hughes explains, was 'an ardent admirer' [and who] effectively launched Leduc's career'.<sup>6</sup> In her seminal work, *The Second Sex* (1949)<sup>7</sup> Beauvoir cites two of Mansfield's stories, 'At the Bay' and 'Prelude' in the context of married and maternal love. For example, Beauvoir suggests that in 'At the Bay', 'there is no such thing as maternal "instinct"', the notion of which is foregrounded in Leduc's novel, *In the Prison of her Skin*, which highlights 'the cruel aspect of motherhood [and] the idea of the "bad mother"'.<sup>8</sup> It is highly likely that Leduc, given her admiration for Beauvoir, read the two Mansfield stories cited, prompting her to familiarise herself further with Mansfield and her *oeuvre*.

## Reputations

Mansfield's reputation as a writer in France has been subsumed by the hagiographical representations of her persona after her death at the Prieuré, in Fontainebleau-Avon, on 9 January 1923. As Kimber explains:

Following her death, Mansfield became a celebrated author in France, with interest initially focused on her personal writing (her *Journals* and her *Letters*), and to a lesser extent on the stories themselves. The focus has always remained a narrow one, centred around a superficial exposé of the French critics' creation of a legend surrounding her life [...] the French reception of Mansfield has idealised her persona to the extent of crafting a hagiography.<sup>9</sup>

Her legend, 'her saint-like persona' has, as Kimber further suggests, 'been set in stone since it was invented a few short years after her death and the critics who have attempted to oust this popular perception [like Beauvoir] have seen their viewpoints submerged by [...] French critical opinion, determined to uphold this falsely created persona'.<sup>10</sup>

Mansfield's husband, John Middleton Murry, a respected literary critic in France, used his influence to manipulate and misrepresent his dead wife's persona, and was, as Kimber states, 'promulgating a personality cult of his dead wife'.<sup>11</sup> In 1923, Murry's friend, H.M.

Tomlinson writing in the English journal, the *Nation & Athenaeum*, further perpetuates the notion of Mansfield's hagiographical status:

And she suggested the power – an illusion, possibly, created by her luminous pallor and her look of penetrating intelligence – of that divination which is supposed to belong to those not quite of this world [...] She stood between this world and the next, and saw disillusionments and disappointments at the end of a long, clear perspective [...] Katherine Mansfield [...] remained aloof. She had no choice; she had been set apart by destiny . . .<sup>12</sup>

Here, Tomlinson reinforces the notion of Mansfield's perceived other-worldliness by foregrounding her ethereal qualities. Similarly, the French critic, Louis Gillet, writing almost two years after Mansfield's death states:

She was a woman [. . .] filled with sensual warmth as well as a sensitivity and an adorable feminine purity, without ever engaging herself in moral issues [. . .] She appears to have been [. . .] born before the state of sin . . . She was the product of a much more beautiful star and she radiated its ethereal atmosphere from her very being.<sup>13</sup>

The thrust of Gillet's comments perpetuated Mansfield's saint-like legend in France which was, arguably, influenced by the Catholic literary right, and as Kimber comments, 'Critical opinion was almost exclusively a Catholic and a reactionary one'.<sup>14</sup>

The notion of Mansfield being forever 'set in stone' as Kimber suggests, is foregrounded in Dominique Renouard's poem 'The Grave of Katherine Mansfield: Coming back from the grave and the Priory', written in 1938: 'The Priory [. . .] Oh Mansfield, was it really there that you went to die?/ Was it there that you closed your eyelids for the last time?/ Alas, how many regrets haunt the doorways of stone!'<sup>15</sup> These representations of Mansfield exemplify the notion of the artist who dies young. The perpetuation of Mansfield's perceived 'feminine purity' as Gillet describes it, arguably counters the controversial writings of, among other women writers at the time, Colette, whose work Mansfield and Leduc admired both for content and stylistics. Although the aforementioned quotations were written some years before Leduc emerged on the literary scene in France, such adulation of Mansfield and her created persona would not have escaped her.

Clearly, the French literary establishment chose to eschew the more radical aspects of Mansfield's writing, preferring instead to elevate her to the status of an angelic, heavenly being. However, no such adulatory status was accorded Leduc, writing after the Second World War, and who faced intense criticism from the conservative French literary establishment for the salacious nature of her writing. Although Albert Camus acknowledged Leduc as a talented writer, some critics were, as Emma Garman states, 'underwhelmed, and the public all but ignored her work', and yet, as Garman further states, 'Leduc has been hailed as France's greatest unknown writer'.<sup>16</sup>

Expressing many of the characteristics present in Mansfield's writing in terms of the emotionally raw yet unsentimental nature of her writing, her forthright views on the condition of women and her overt bisexuality, her feelings of marginalisation and alienation, it is not surprising that had Leduc, as Garman comments, 'been less committed to telling the stark, unpalatable truth about being female [...] she might have won membership to the temple of

French literature'.<sup>17</sup> The French literary establishment appear loathe, even to this day, to acknowledge one of their own writers who, as Garman suggests, was a 'writer's writer, which carries connotations of highbrow experimentation'.<sup>18</sup> Garman's comment strengthens my argument that it was Mansfield's 'highbrow experimentation' with form and stylistics that influenced and inspired Leduc's rendering of her lonely, nameless, protagonist in her novella, *The Lady and the Little Fox Fur*.

### Literary Influences

On February 15, 1920, Mansfield moved to the Villa Flora at Port de Menton, Garavan. The Villa Flora had a smaller house at the bottom of the garden called the Villa Isola Bella and in September 1920 Mansfield moved to the Villa Isola Bella, where she lived until May 1921. By this time she knew she was ill and had hoped that by moving to the south of France she might find a cure for her tuberculosis. After her death, the Villa Isola Bella became a shrine to her memory and a plaque was mounted on the wall of the villa on March 21, 1939. As Brigid Magner explains, 'The cellar of the villa [Isola Bella] was transformed into a Memorial Room, and an associated New Zealand writer's residency was inaugurated in 1969'.<sup>19</sup> The Katherine Mansfield Memorial Fellowship as it was then known, and the Memorial Room at Isola Bella, were officially established in 1970. The tradition continues, and in 2020 the fiftieth anniversary of the Katherine Mansfield Menton Fellowship will be celebrated in Menton.

The garden at the Villa Isola Bella provided Mansfield with moments of aesthetic intensification, as for example, in a letter to Murry dated September 14, 1920, where she writes, 'The path from the gate has a big silver mimosa showering across it'.<sup>20</sup> On another occasion she describes 'the pale morning light gleaming through the golden sprays of the mimosa trees'.<sup>21</sup> Mimosa trees have clusters of strongly scented yellow flowers and are common in the south of France; their scent evoked past and painful memories for Leduc's protagonist 'as she plunged forward into Paris [...] The cars gave off a scent of mimosa: the mimosa of a convalescence at Menton forty years before. She stepped up with the others up on to the far pavement, and the mimosa was falling like snow' (2-3).<sup>22</sup> These lines strengthen my argument that Leduc was aware of Mansfield's time in Menton. The metaphorical suggestiveness of the scented mimosa in Leduc's novella becomes a powerful signifier, evoking memory and desire, stressing a significant moment in time in a significant place. As Catherine Maxwell comments, 'smell's evocative capacity, its connection to atmosphere and memory, make it a potent means of registering the particularity of a [...] moment'.<sup>23</sup>

The themes of loneliness, false community and impending mortality have resonance in both of the stories under discussion. Mansfield's 'Miss Brill' is set in the *jardins publiques* in Menton and on her weekly Sunday visit to the park Miss Brill

had become really quite expert, she thought, at listening as though she didn't listen, at sitting in other people's lives just for a minute while they talked around her [...] there was always the crowd to watch [...] couples and groups paraded, stopped to talk and greet. How she loved sitting here, watching it all, it was exactly like a play [...] They were all on the stage. They weren't only the audience, not only looking on; they were acting. Even she had a part and came every Sunday (269-70).

Miss Brill's loneliness is heightened by her observations of 'the crowd', of 'couples' and 'groups' who 'stopped to talk and greet', though not to her. And, like Miss Brill, Leduc's protagonist 'invented dramas, tragic shadows (14) [...] Her world consisted of nothing but what she had invented' (73). Gazing at the ebb and flow of daily life from a bench on the Paris Metro, 'she lamented softly, very softly for her solitary female state' (10). Her inward lament intensifies her mental trauma and the suggestion that she is unmarried is hinted at. Leduc's protagonist would 'draw nourishment from the crowd in the Metro' (5), as Miss Brill draws spiritual 'nourishment' from the people who frequented the gardens on a Sunday afternoon. For Leduc's protagonist, ever the vicarious watcher, 'People were her opium' (25), the 'opium' and its suggestive sedative qualities numbing her troubled mind.

The rituals of human activity are played out as Miss Brill observes that 'other people sat on the benches, but they were nearly all the same, Sunday after Sunday' (269). Similarly, Leduc's protagonist, while sitting observing the world around her, 'gazed at what she had gazed at the day before, and the day before that' (6). Workmen working nearby 'put up with her because they didn't know she was there [...] she melted into the landscape' (7) and, as if to enforce her invisibility and non-identity, Leduc's protagonist has no name. Unaware of her invisibility at this stage in the story, Miss Brill believed that '[n]o doubt somebody would have noticed if she hadn't been there; she was part of the performance after all' (270). Unlike Leduc's protagonist, Miss Brill does not face the reality of her situation, but instead creates a fantasy world in her imagination.

Setting out from her attic room one day to take up her position on the bench at the Metro station, Leduc's protagonist felt 'unconcerned, detached from the world by her idleness of age (10), She was handling her sixtieth year' (18). Elsewhere, 'she sat down [...] and watched the trains coming in and going out, the passengers arriving and departing [...] She found reassurance in this ebb and flow' (11). The passengers were 'surging past her, but she didn't want to see their wrinkles, their worries, [...] their fatigue [...] what she wanted was their warmth' (11). Similarly, Miss Brill finds that 'there was always a crowd to watch, (269), and she too, was oblivious of their imperfections, craving only for their 'warmth' and a sense of belonging.

The trope of liminality is deployed by Mansfield and Leduc in their respective stories in order to convey their protagonists' moments of epiphany. Areas of entrapment, in the context of little dark rooms, cupboards and a box in 'Miss Brill', and a packing case, an attic window and a tunnel in *The Lady and the Little Fox Fur*, are liminal spaces, representative of their psychological confinement, hence providing an escape into the dark recesses of their unconscious minds. For Leduc's protagonist, her moment of epiphany comes when 'motionless she travelled with them [the passengers] into a tunnel' (11), the liminal space providing a means of escape from the harsh realities of her solitary existence. The metaphorical suggestiveness of the tunnel as a liminal space is again deployed by Leduc when her protagonist 'would escape into one of the tunnels of the Strasbourg-Saint-Denis station, open out her arms and beat her wings: she was a bird-woman using up her last breath' (15). These lines recall Mansfield's poem 'The Wounded Bird': 'O my wings – lift me – lift me', which she wrote when she knew she was dying, and here deployed by Leduc when foreshadowing her protagonist's demise.<sup>24</sup>

As Leduc's newly transformed protagonist steps back over the threshold she is momentarily transformed when 'the crowd engulfed her [...] like a lover. [...] She purred on her bench' (11). It is possible to determine Miss Brill's mood as she is 'engulfed' by the crowd in the gardens, and the sensation of purring lends itself to her pleasure at being part of the

performance. For Miss Brill, a change in the air signals her moment of epiphany: ‘there was just a faint chill – a something, what was it? Not sadness, no not sadness – something that made you want to sing’ (271). Miss Brill’s sublimely transcendent moment peaks as the ‘tune’ the band were playing ‘lifted, lifted, the light shone; and it seemed to Miss Brill that in another moment all of them, all the whole company, would be singing [...]. And then she too, she too, and the others on the benches they would come in with a kind of accompaniment [...] something so beautiful – moving’ (271). It is a defining moment for Miss Brill before her rhapsodic moment is undercut.

As Claire Drewery states:

Modernist short fiction is frequently set in in-between spaces [...] The stories are also frequently structured around a defining moment or interlude, and reveal a constant preoccupation with transcending boundaries, whether psychological or social [...] trapped in an isolated, traumatic outsider state from which her only escape is [death]. Liminality is closely associated with death, incoherence, silence [...] and alienation [...] the space in-between embraces the states of inclusion and exclusion.<sup>25</sup>

These moments of transition are cruelly undercut for Leduc’s protagonist when ‘some teenage boys with enormous eyes were staring at her. Then they were dredging inside her: ahh! a drill. Ahh! sharp points, hammers, pincers, hinges, sourness, swelling, shrinking – she was a howling shadow’ (12). Leduc’s protagonist is starving and living on the streets of Paris, the language connoting the pain associated with hunger and starvation. The rhythm of these lines have the same psychological dimension when Miss Brill conveys her feelings for ‘the gentleman’ who abandons the ‘ermine toque’ character, the rhythm of the band evoking ‘The Brute! The Brute! over and over’ (270). The unravelling of Miss Brill’s moment of epiphany occurs when she realises that her inclusion with the ‘other members of the company’ hints at her exclusion from them: ‘Yes, we understand, she thought – though what they understood she didn’t know’ (271). This undercurrent of doubt and uncertainty foreshadows Miss Brill’s realisation that she is no longer a part of the spectacle when ‘Just at that moment a boy and a girl came and sat down’ and ‘Miss Brill prepared to listen to them’ (271), but she is a hindrance to their love-making: “‘But why? Because of that stupid old thing at the end there? [...] Why does she come here at all – who wants her? Why doesn’t she keep her silly old mug at home? [...] It’s her fu-ur which is so funny [...] It’s exactly like a fried whiting”’ (271). Stereotypical images of unmarried women in the early twentieth century as old maids were often stigmatised as odd, and Miss Brill, ‘a stupid old thing’ with a ‘silly old mug’ fits into that category. The notion that Miss Brill is no longer a sexually attractive woman in the context of ‘who wants her?’ and the suggestion that she, like her fox-fur, is shrivelled up like ‘fried whiting’, dehumanises her. Miss Brill’s realisation that she is an ugly old maid and her illusion that there was some binding force that united the world in a community of shared experience, is shattered. So disillusioned is she that she does not fancy her Sunday afternoon treat of ‘honey-cake’ and ‘today she passed the baker’s by’ (272) and returns home to her little cupboard-like room. Her tortured mental state is palpable.

## The Little Fox Furs

The wearing of fox-fur necklets/stoles is usually associated with class aspirations and wealth, yet the wearing of the furs for the two protagonists, represented as ‘a fried whiting’ (272) in ‘Miss Brill’ and ‘decrepit and shabby’ (50) in *The Lady and the Little Fox Fur*, bear all the hallmarks of being cast-offs, of having seen better days, the metaphorical suggestiveness of which foregrounds both the physical and psychological modes of existence of the two protagonists who find themselves on the margins of society. For Miss Brill and Leduc’s protagonist their fox-furs connote love, loss and destiny: On her weekly Sunday visit to the gardens

Miss Brill was glad she had decided on her fur [she] put up her hand and touched her fur. Dear little thing! It was nice to feel it again. She had taken it out of its box that afternoon [...] given it a good brush, and rubbed the life back into the little dim eyes. “What is happening to me?” said the sad little eyes. Oh, how sweet it was to see them snap at her again from the red eiderdown! . . . But the nose, which was of some black composition, wasn’t at all firm. It must have had a knock, somehow. Never mind – a little black dab of sealing-wax when the time came – when it was absolutely necessary . . . Little rogue! Yes, she really felt like that about it. Little rogue biting its tail just by her left ear. She could have taken it off and laid it on her lap and stroked it. (269)

Mansfield’s portrayal of Miss Brill is unsentimental, suggesting a consciousness which distances itself from suffering and isolation with restraint, and yet there is always an underlying melancholia and tone of uncertainty.

Like Miss Brill, Leduc’s protagonist is a poor and vulnerable woman. One day, rummaging in a crate for an orange, while ‘the whole city was hatching out a drama’ (45), Leduc’s protagonist discovers an abandoned fox-fur necklet and steals it: ‘She took out the little ragamuffin, the funny little fellow, the tiny furry creature [and] wrapped the fox around her neck and fled’ (47). The rendering of the fox-fur imagery strongly suggests that Leduc had borrowed from Mansfield and expanded upon what she imagined would have been Miss Brill’s life-story and ultimate fate. When back in her attic room Leduc’s protagonist places her little fox-fur in a ‘whitewood packing case [...] Her angel, the angel she had found in a cardboard box (47). She examined it beneath her attic window [...] And what she found was warmth, relaxation, and a caressing softness (50). The fox-fur morphs into a surrogate lover when ‘She plunged her face into her little one’s naked groin and snuggled there’ (50). The eroticised language suggests that for her this was a moment of sexual fantasy. Mansfield’s suggestion that Miss Brill projects her sexual desires onto her fox-fur is restrained and understated. Miss Brill enjoys the sensation of her little fox-fur ‘biting its tail just by her left ear’ (268) and her desire to stroke him on her lap, connotes a caressing lover. However, Miss Brill’s quasi-sexual fantasy, though only hinted at, suggests that her relationship with her fox fur has transgressive possibilities, in the context that the ear and the nape of the neck are erogenous body zones.

Miss Brill suggests her little fox ‘must have had a knock’ (269) hinting perhaps at a former ‘life’ of ill-treatment, much like Miss Brill herself. Mansfield does not reveal Miss Brill’s life-story or fate, so, as readers, we are left to interpret the narrative for ourselves. Leduc’s protagonist however:

invented past passions for her ragamuffin. (50)

She made a setting for him out of her own existence, she mounted him in her private life, this brother, this child, this companion, this lover. (51)

She invented a past for him, she delved into her imagination. (68)

There is much in Leduc's novella to suggest that her 'Lady' in question had known better times (she is given the title of a 'Lady' in the title) and had been abandoned by a former lover, but these lines also hint at the notion of family belonging and that of belonging to the wider of community.

With the brutal realisation that the Lady's fox-fur is nothing more than a dead object, '[a] feeling of sadness would well up inside her, because she knew that the fox was really nothing but a little dead animal that someone had thrown in the gutter' (51). The denouement of Leduc's novella foreshadows her protagonist's demise with the realisation that her other self is dead and that 'she had become one with her little fox' (59). Her grief is palpable as she cries, 'My angel, my little angel, I have learned what I already knew; we shall spend the rest of our lives together, I shall never be parted from you. I am hugging you because one always feels cold after people have been unkind. Warm yourself up close to me' (59). Although Miss Brill identifies with her little fox-fur, it is never explicitly stated that she perceives him as a dead animal, but this is hinted at when

Miss Brill climbed the stairs, went into the little dark room – her room like a cupboard – and sat down on the red eiderdown. She sat there for a long time. The box that the fur came out of was on the bed. She unclasped the necklet quickly; quickly, without looking, laid it inside. But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying. (272)

As Clare Hanson and Andrew Gurr comment:

the rapid rhythms of “quickly; quickly, without looking” shade into representations of Miss Brill's agitated state. The closing perception of the story [...] is in accord with her neurotic, fantastic imagination. And it is entirely unsentimental, suggesting firmly the fear and horror which attend the suppression of any human being.<sup>26</sup>

The mental changes brought about in Miss Brill's sadness and melancholia and the panic-like realisation of the hopelessness of her situation, is in contrast to the perceived happiness she experiences earlier in the story, thus reinforcing the discrepancy between illusion and reality, community and the individual. As Drewery states:

Miss Brill's return to her cup-board-like room is echoed by the act of shutting off the fox from its box. Prior to this point, the fur and what it represents gives Miss Brill a position from which to speak. Once this is discarded, the story suggests that there are no remaining subject positions for the ageing protagonist other than a slow slide into non-being.<sup>27</sup>

For Leduc's protagonist, her slow slide into oblivion is foreshadowed when '[s]itting on the whitewood packing case under the little attic window, [...] she discovered that the afternoon

just past had been the longest journey of her life, that her room was becoming obsolete' (75). The story takes on a quasi-religious tone, much like an act of prayer and meditation:

She knelt down beside the packing case [...]. Her angel, her little angel. He was asleep. [...] He would sleep forever, and she would wear him curled round her neck [...] Then she folded over her overcoat in four, placed it inside the whitewood packing case, set her battered hat and her handbag containing three francs on top of it, and closed the lid. She lay down on her mattress on the floor dressed in the long dressing gown with its train. [...] She did not hear the overhead Metro nor the hours chiming out. (79-80)

The Lady's transition is transcendent. Like the bride of Christ, she is purified and thus has found redemption for her 'sins', unlike Miss Brill who hears her own lament. Although connotations of being buried alive are hinted at the end the narrative in both stories there is a lack of any final statement, although the notion of suffering womanhood and the inevitability of death is foregrounded.

## Conclusion

Mansfield's sympathetic, yet, critical portrayal of Miss Brill as naïve and trusting, and one who does not see herself as others perceive her, is a restrained and understated critical social commentary about poor and lonely women living on the margins of society. Leduc's novella is, arguably, a semi-autobiographical piece in which cries of anger and self-pity have resonance throughout. As a child Leduc experienced alienation, hardship and hunger, stealing food in order to survive. Though her protagonist's plight is sympathetically portrayed, Leduc's novella is gritty and hard-hitting, a radical questioning of social and economic deprivation. In their stories Mansfield and Leduc not only reflect women's subjective experiences (which places them in a socially marginalised position as other), they are also challenging those structures which oppress them.

*The Lady and the Little Fox Fur* is, as I have argued, Leduc's response to Mansfield's modernist sensibilities. Her persona and her writing are embedded in Leduc's novella, as for example, when describing her protagonist's character as a young woman, '[s]he was so young, so modern; her don't-give-a-damns were emancipation' (53). Mansfield's life in France<sup>28</sup> and her short story 'Miss Brill' reverberate throughout Leduc's novella and the lyricism of her prose bears all the hallmarks of Mansfield's aesthetic strategies. In her writing Mansfield determined future trends for other writers, her legacy being a strong feature of today's experimental short fiction, her literary heritage, and influence on Leduc's writing being a case in point. For Leduc, Mansfield was, arguably, a respected writer in the canon of Modernist writers and in this essay my aim has been to provide a new thought-provoking and critical direction for Mansfield studies

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Katherine Mansfield, *Collected Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 225-227.

<sup>2</sup> *As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 7.



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- <sup>3</sup> Rafia Zakaria, ‘Violette Leduc: the great French feminist writer we need to remember’, *Guardian*, Thursday April 11, 2016.
- <sup>4</sup> Gerri Kimber, *Katherine Mansfield: The View from France* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 184.
- <sup>5</sup> Kimber, p. 193.
- <sup>6</sup> Alex Hughes, *Violette Leduc: Mothers, Lovers and Language*, (W.S. Maney and Son, 1994), p. 3.
- <sup>7</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage Books, 2011). My references are taken from this edition.
- <sup>8</sup> De Beauvoir, pp. 567 and 319.
- <sup>9</sup> Kimber, p. 19.
- <sup>10</sup> Kimber, p. 181.
- <sup>11</sup> Kimber, “‘From Flagrant to Fragrant’”, *Reinventing Katherine Mansfield*, *Moveable Type*, 3, ‘From Memory to Event, (2007), p. 88.
- <sup>12</sup> H.M. Tomlinson, ‘Katherine Mansfield’, *Nation & Athenaeum*, 32, 20 January 1923, p. 609.
- <sup>13</sup> Louis Gillet, ‘Katherine Mansfield’, *Revue des deux mondes*, 15 December 1924, pp. 929-42 (p. 232). I have cited Kimber’s translation of this quotation in ‘Flagrant to Fragrant’, p. 78.
- <sup>14</sup> Kimber, ‘Flagrant to Fragrant’, p. 72.
- <sup>15</sup> The title of the poem in French is ‘La Tombe de Katherine Mansfield: En revenant de la tombe de Katherine Mansfield et du Prieuré’ and appeared in *La Nouvelle Revue*, 161 (1938), p. 58. I have taken the English translation of the poem from Kimber in ‘From Flagrant to Fragrant’, p. 71.
- <sup>16</sup> Emma Garman, ‘Daily: Feminize Your Canon: Violette Leduc’, *Paris Review*, August 2018. ‘Feminize your Canon’ is a segment exclusive to the Daily online blog and never appears in the print magazine.
- <sup>17</sup> Garman
- <sup>18</sup> Garman
- <sup>19</sup> Bridgid Magner, ‘Revisiting the Villa Isola Bella’, in *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Influence*, Sarah Ailwood and Melinda Harvey, eds (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 219-232, (p. 219).
- <sup>20</sup> Vincent O’Sullivan and Margaret Scott, eds, *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield* vol. 4, 1920-1921 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 36.
- <sup>21</sup> Ida Baker, *Katherine Mansfield, The Memories of L.M.* (London: Virago, 1985), p. 153.
- <sup>22</sup> Violette Leduc, *The Lady and the Little Fox Fur*, (London: Penguin, 2018). This publication is the English edition and all my references are from this edition. The novella was first published in English in Great Britain in 1967.
- <sup>23</sup> Catherine Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 1.
- <sup>24</sup> In her novella, Leduc frequently deploys the hunger trope in order to represent her protagonist’s physical and mental starvation. She also provides a commentary on social injustice throughout. Mansfield’s poem proves useful for analysis in that she foregrounds the notion of hunger projected onto a starving and (morally) wounded bird: ‘Kind people come to the edge of the pool with baskets/ ‘Of course what the poor bird wants is plenty of food/ Their bags and pockets are crammed almost to bursting/ With dinner scrapings and scraps from the servants’ lunch./ Oh! How pleased they are to be really giving’. Gerri Kimber and Claire Davison, eds, *The Collected Poems* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 140-1.
- <sup>25</sup> Claire Drewery, *Modernist Short Fiction by Women: The Liminal in Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf*, (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 3-4.

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<sup>26</sup> Claire Hanson and Andrew Gurr, *Katherine Mansfield* (London/Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1981), p. 76.

<sup>27</sup> Drewery, p. 103

<sup>28</sup> Arguably, there are echoes of Mansfield's affair with Francis Carco in Paris, the notion of which provides an opportunity for further research.