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“MY FLOWERLESS ONES”: REPRESENTATIONS OF UNMARRIED WOMEN IN THE SHORT STORIES OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD

Abstract

Modernist short story writer Katherine Mansfield, although she herself never reached middle age, displayed an unusual understanding for lonely, unmarried, middle aged women – the members of society which were on its absolute margins, as well as on the margins of literature. Portrayals of these characters belong to her finest work, and stories which feature them constitute a fitting example of her artistic mastery.

The ambition of this paper is to present Mansfield’s most interesting unmarried female characters and analyze the way she depicts the tragedy of their lives.

Key words

Katherine Mansfield; loneliness; unmarried women; short story; Modernism

Although unmarried women and different aspects of their lives appear in literature throughout the centuries, their place, in parallel with society, is marginal. They inhabit the spare rooms of the works of art and function mostly as a background: minor characters, often shunned or ridiculed, presented as burden and problem. Even though, as Maroula Joannou points out, the Victorians had begun to be pre-occupied with these women, it is the 1920s in which “the topic of spinsterhood [...] recurs with a frequency and insistence” in many works of mostly women writers (Joannou 1995: 77). The wasted, unfulfilled life, far from the dreams and expectations of youth, becomes one of the central concerns of the aesthetics of Modernism. Young people, with their lives in front of them, are often replaced by middle-aged characters who have already made their choices or, as in the case of Eliot’s Prufrock, were too afraid or indecisive to make any. This naturally results

in the more frequent appearance of less exciting and adventurous existences, although ones which are no less true to life. This paper analyses the representations of lonely and unmarried women in the short stories of Katherine Mansfield.

Katherine Mansfield, a New Zealander, voluntarily exiled to London at the beginning of the 20th century, was, in the words of her prominent biographer, Anthony Alpers, “an authentic early member of the Modern movement – one of its shrewdest and wittiest observers, and unique in the range of her acquaintance with its principal members” (1980: ix). Mansfield met, knew and influenced most intellectuals gathering in the Bloomsbury group or around Lady Ottoline Morell in the Garsington Manor. She died in 1923, when Modernism was at its height. Like her fellow colleagues, she was presenting characters of a different kind than readers were used to encountering so far.

Mansfield, together with other women writers of this period, was trying to fully open the door which had for centuries been only ajar – the door to the world of women and their concerns, which might seem trivial and less captivating than the adventures and hardships of men, yet which she considered no less real and legitimate, and essential for at least one half of humankind. She attempted to deal with things previously unseen and definitely not considered worth being in the centre of a work of art. Characters like Jane Austen’s Charlotte Lucas – who escapes the fate of a spinster in the nick of time, and her unforgettable Miss Bates, who does not – suddenly shift to the spotlight, and appear with more reality and intensity, where their misfortunes are more obvious. Angela Smith, referring to Mansfield’s four best known spinsters, Connie and Josephine Pinner, Miss Brill and Miss Moss, quite rightly calls their lives “ordinary tragedies” (1999: 223). Yet in each case the circumstances surrounding these tragedies and their outcomes are different.

The story of Ada Moss from “Pictures” (1919) was foreshadowed by the story of Viola from “The Swing of the Pendulum” (1911), which was published in *In a German Pension*. A comparison of these two short stories remarkably points at the gap between the dreams of a young woman and the reality of a middle-aged one. Both Viola and Ada live in a boarding house, have no money to buy themselves food and, what is more, to pay their rent; thus they are exposed to the harassment of their respective landladies. In her distress, Viola flirts with the idea of becoming a prostitute and so freeing herself from money concerns. The unreality of her thinking is reflected in her exaggerated ideas and demands. She believes that “there is only one thing I’m fitted for, and that is to be a great courtesan” (Mansfield 2008: 97), which in her understanding means no work, but “nursing in the lap of luxury” (97). All her musing about her possible future life is like a movie. However, Viola, unlike Ada, is still young, and her difficulty is not so existential, since for her there is still hope for less extreme solutions. As soon as she tries to put her ideas into action, she withdraws and returns to her boyfriend with renewed trust in their final success.

For Ada, the situation is much more difficult. She is not imagining herself as an actress in a movie, she is one. Although originally a contralto singer, in the new

times her talent is not needed and she earns her living as an extra in films. She is older than Viola, and, unlike her, is not spending her days with idle fantasies; she actively roams the city to find a job. During her “Modernist” walk, she is constantly reminded of her age, appearance and unfitness for the job she applies for.

“Look out, Fattie; don’t go to sleep!” yelled a taxi driver. She pretended not to hear.

[...]

“Oh, no good to you, my dear,” said she. “He wanted someone young, you know – a dark Spanish type – my style, but more figure, that was all.”

[...]

“Now I had a call for twenty-eight ladies to-day, but they had to be young and able to hop it a bit – see?”

[...]

“Can you aviate – high-dive – drive a car – buck-jump – shoot?” read Miss Moss. She walked along the street asking herself those questions. (Mansfield 2002: 196–199)

Her fantasies are brief, and, unlike Viola, the only thing she asks for is to be given a chance to earn some money:

A dark handsome gentleman in a fur coat comes in with a friend, and sits at my table, perhaps. “No, old chap, I’ve searched London for a contralto and I can’t find a soul. You see, the music is difficult; have a look at it.” And Miss Moss heard herself saying: “Excuse me, I happen to be a contralto, and I have sung that part many times. ...” “Extraordinary! Come back to my studio and I’ll try your voice now.” (199–200)

But even as she is dreaming, she knows where this all leads, but struggles till the last moment:

Why should I feel nervous? It’s not nervousness. Why shouldn’t I go to Café de Madrid? I’m a respectable woman – I’m a contralto singer. And I’m only trembling because I’ve had nothing to eat today. (200)

All her walking that day leads to the very place she would like to avoid; but she has no other chance. Mansfield does not waste words; even if the name of the café is not familiar to the reader, its reputation can be understood from the speed with which a “very stout gentleman wearing a very small hat that floated on the top of his head like a little yacht” (200) sits down in a chair opposite hers. Until the very last moment Ada Moss refuses to acknowledge what she is about to do. When the “gentleman” states that he likes “‘em firm and well covered” (200), Ada, to her surprise, sniggers and finally surrenders.

“Well, am I goin’ your way, or are you comin’ mine?” he asked.
 “I’ll come with you if it’s all the same,” said Miss Moss. And she sailed after the little yacht out of the café. (200)

Ada has no boyfriend to rely on, no youth, freshness and hope, and thus she has to do what Viola only thought of doing: she accepts the offer of the fat man and becomes a prostitute. The tragedy of her situation is increased by the fact that not only did she give up any hope (no matter how imaginary), which Viola still cherished, but she sank to the bottom without finding much of a solution for her situation. She might earn enough to satisfy her landlady for a while, but the road she entered does not lead to safety, since the profession she was forced to choose is even more dependent on age and looks than the profession of an actress and singer.

Although “Miss Brill”, published in 1920, is also connected with middle age, loneliness, walking and acting, her doom is of a different sort. Miss Brill is a teacher, and a paid companion to invalid people, but her clients do nothing to make her life happy and vice versa:

She thought of the old invalid gentleman to whom she read the newspaper four afternoons a week while he *slept in the garden*. [...] If he’d been dead she mightn’t have noticed for weeks; she wouldn’t have minded. (228, italics mine)

On the contrary, the people she thinks are interesting are those she does not even speak to, her “co-actors” in the Sunday “theatre play” of her walk. Her “Sunday treat” is not a meeting and a nice chat with some friend, but a honey cake that she eats alone in her “room like a cupboard”.

On her way home she usually bought a slice of honey-cake at the baker’s. It was her Sunday treat. Sometimes there was an almond in her slice, sometimes not. It made a great difference. If there was an almond it was like carrying home a tiny present – a surprise – something that might well not have been there. She hurried on the almond Sundays and struck the match for the kettle in quite a dashing way. (229)

The smallness and pettiness of her life are reflected in the almond, whose presence or absence in the cake makes a great difference in her Sunday afternoon. The almond suggests the old tradition of the Twelfth Night cake: whoever finds the bean in his or her slice is pronounced King for the day. Miss Brill’s almond has the same function, but she does not share the cake with the family she does not have, but with unknown clients of her baker, in this modern world where traditions are broken, lives of people shattered, and people like Miss Brill do not live, but only play at living.

Until one Sunday, in accord with her name, she sets out on her pleasure walk on a sunny afternoon dressed in a fur that she treats as a precious thing. But it

soon becomes obvious that the brilliance of her day is not real, just like the stories in the theatre she adores. With nothing to live for, she pretends to be an actress in a theatre play, attempting to give her life some glamour and meaning. Her fur is her costume, the Jardins Publiques are the stage, and random passers-by her co-actors and audience. To protect herself against the loneliness and emptiness of her life, she creates an imaginary bubble around her and when a cruel remark punctures it, she suddenly sees the true nature of her existence.

“No, not now,” said the girl. “Not here, I can’t.”

“But why? Because of that stupid old thing at the end there?” asked the boy.

“Why does she come here at all – who wants her? Why doesn’t she keep her silly old mug at home?”

“It’s her fu-fur which is so funny,” giggled the girl. “It’s exactly like a fried whiting.” (228–229)

When she comes back home, she cannot look at her previously precious fur anymore and closes it into its box, just as she is enclosed in her flat “like a cupboard” (229), devoid of illusions, not even able to admit that the crying she hears is not coming from the box, but from herself.

The most remarkable of Mansfield’s characters perhaps are Constantia and Josephine Pinner, the daughters of the late colonel, who come the closest to *Emma*’s Miss Bates. Unlike other Mansfield middle-aged characters, and in accordance with Austen’s famous spinster, they are extremely funny, while at the same time tragic. Yet Mansfield always refused the accusation of being cruel and sneering at their unhappiness. When she discussed the story in a letter to a friend, she claimed that her attitude to the “flowerless ones” was misunderstood, claiming: “there was a moment when I first had ‘the idea’ when I saw the two sisters as *amusing*; but the moment I looked deeper (...) I bowed down to the beauty that was hidden in their lives and to discover that was all my desire...” (O’Sullivan and Scott 1996: 249). Constantia and Josephine have wasted and distorted existences which are the direct consequence of their restricted lives, separated from reality, and their father’s constant bullying – all of which is reflected in their unnatural and absurd reactions.

When the priest of their parish visits them and offers them “a little Communion”, after the death of their father, they are shocked:

What! In the drawing-room by themselves – with no – no altar or anything! The piano would be much too high, thought Constantia, and Mr. Farolles [the priest] could not possibly lean over it with the chalice. And Kate would be sure to come bursting in and interrupt them, thought Josephine. And supposing the bell rang in the middle? It might be somebody important – about their mourning. Would they get up reverently and go out, or would they have to wait ... in torture? (235)

After their father's death they become terrified and confused on every small occasion, as this is the first time that they have had to decide things for themselves; before, their life was firmly set beforehand, and each, even minor, deviation from the given order was immediately set to right by their father's thumping stick. Not only did they live in constant cliché, their minds and thoughts became such too. When the priest wants to discuss the details of the funeral, Josephine knows what to say because this is a situation she had been through many times: something has to be bought, and, according to father's orders, it has to be cheap:

"I should like it to be quite simple," said Josephine firmly, "and not too expensive. At the same time, I should like –" (235)

Her speech, which must have reminded her of those thousands of times when they were buying something with the phantom of their father behind their back, brings Constantia's automatic response to her sister's remark:

"A good one that will last," thought dreamy Constantia, as if Josephine were buying a nightgown. But of course, Josephine didn't say that. "One suitable to our father's position." She was very nervous. (235)

This Freudian slip¹ is unmistakably Constantia's unconscious response to her burden, expressing her desire to be rid of her father forever. Other occasions of that busy week support this reading:

Well, at any rate, all that part of it was over, though neither of them could possibly believe that father was never coming back. Josephine had had a moment of absolute terror at the cemetery, while the coffin was lowered, to think that she and Constantia had done this thing without asking his permission. What would father say when he found out? For he was bound to find out sooner or later. He always did. "*Buried*. You two girls had me buried!" She heard his stick thumping. (235–236)

It is both hilarious and terribly tragic; but it is not the end of Josephine's agony. Her "fantasy" does not stop here; it continues until it becomes a reality which will haunt her forever.

Oh, what would they say? What possible excuse could they make? It sounded such an appallingly heartless thing to do. Such a wicked advantage to take of a person because he happened to be helpless at the moment. [...] And the expense, she thought, stepping into the tight-buttoned cab. When she had to show him the bills. What would he say then? She heard him absolutely roaring, "And do you expect me to pay for this gimcrack excursion of yours?" (236)

What an abundance of things Mansfield is able to express in such a relatively short paragraph. All their existence with father is hidden in those few words: his absolute God-like power, which he exercised over them, the sense of guilt he liked to impose on them, the enclosure they have no chance to get out of, and the feeling that he took good care to infuse in their minds that whatever they do is just a “gimcrack”. To an outsider, all this is a ridiculous folly, but to those two, it is much too real. They are isolated, nobody else can understand them. Constantia’s reaction to Josephine’s terrified statement “we should not have let them bury him” (236) is not what common reason would expect; Constantia well understands the torture of her sister’s mind and answers defensively:

“We couldn’t have kept him, Jug – we couldn’t have kept him unburied. At any rate, not in a flat that size.” (236)

Yet they both know that father will never forgive them for what they have done. In that moment both of them are as dead and buried as their father.

The title “The Daughters of the Late Colonel” implies a question: what were Con and Jug called before their father died, since this appellation is clearly the most commonly used when people talked about them? And it may well be supposed that they were always called that, excepting the word “late”. This address fully expresses their dependence on their father, their satellite existence closely bound to his. Furthermore, the word “colonel” accounts for their “drill”, and the absence of independent thinking. Father ordered them around as he did his subordinates, and the tragedy of their life is that even the word “late” does not change anything in their bondage.

Maybe it is not a coincidence that the last story Mansfield completed is also dedicated to a lonely, abandoned woman, whose only joy in life was her canary, and since it died her life is empty and sad. “The Canary” is one of Mansfield’s dramatic monologues of this poor woman (see Justus 1973), whose loneliness is tempered only by her garden, flowers, and the evening star. The canary brought joy to her life, in contrast to people who do not care about her and call her an old scarecrow.

... Company, you see, that was what he was. Perfect company. If you have lived alone you will realise how precious that is. Of course there were my three young men who came in to supper every evening, and sometimes they stayed in the dining-room afterwards reading the paper. But I could not expect them to be interested in the little things that made my day. Why should they be? I was nothing to them. In fact, I overheard them one evening talking about me on the stairs as ‘the Scarecrow’. No matter. It doesn’t matter. Not in the least. I quite understand. They are young. Why should I mind? (371–372)

This lady, whose name is tellingly not mentioned in the story, faces her fate with exceptional bravery and compliments herself on the “cheerful disposition” (372) that she luckily possesses and which keeps her from succumbing to grief and despair. That her life is a failure she refuses to see and acknowledge; the only case when she approaches this possibility from afar is when she innocently claims that “there does seem to [her] something sad in life” (372), although she fails to understand or define what it is.

Mansfield’s stories featuring marginal members of society belong among the best she had written. With the vividness and ingenious use of detail so representative of her style she presents the cruelty of human society reflected in the misfortune and sadness of particular members. The lonely characters’ lives accuse the world in which youth and beauty reign; and even the family, normally considered positive, is in fact a cruel arrangement for those who are excluded from its circle or for those for whom it constitutes a prison and enslavement.

Note

- ¹ For the Freudian elements in “The Daughters of the Late Colonel” see for example Mortimer (1994), Dunbar (1997), D’Arcy (1999), Norman (1999).

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