

From Platonic love to victimization of women in Mansfield

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Abstract: Mansfield one of the prominent modernist writers in short fiction created so many fiction that are translated to more than 20 languages and are read all over the world. After a long period of ignoring Katherine Mansfield's writing, the last decade has been "both Mansfield's centenary and a considerable resurgence of interest in her fiction". (Hankin, 804) Her stories are usually written in the modernist mode, floating in stream of consciousness, without a set structure, and with many shifts in the narrative. Plotless or unfinished stories are pioneering. She usually focuses on the differences between men and women and her themes are around daily life issues such as love, life, chance, marriage, facts, etc. She tries to focus on male dominance and victimization of women. 'Something Childish but Very Natural' and 'A Birthday' seem to have very different surface stories but a deep look reveals the opposite.

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Introduction

'Something Childish but Very Natural', a very long short story, was written in 1924 and was published in *Something Childish and Other Stories* in 1924. The collection of short stories was edited by Katherine's husband John Middleton Murry. Probably Murray considered it one of Mansfield's best stories that the collection was named for it. Kobler (1990) sees echoes of D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* in the excursion of the two young lovers to the woods in 'Something Childish but Very natural.' The title of the story is taken from Coleridge's poem that reveals its romantic tendencies. The poem is in fact a translation, by Coleridge, of a traditional German folk-song, *Wenn ich ein Vöglein wär*. Dowling (1980) writes that "Mansfield always admired the devotion to reality as opposed to the visionary elements of the Romantics". In a 1918 in a letter to Murry she wrote, "But I understand Wordsworth and his sister and Coleridge. They're fixed—they're true—they're calm". In another letter of 1918, she wrote, "There is a light on them, and Coleridge., which I feel is the bright shining star which must hang in the sky above the Heron as we drive home." (Dowling, 1980).

In this story the romantic love of two innocents is presented. Following Edwardians that believe in the fairy magic of childhood or escape into childhood, Mansfield chooses Henry 18, and Edna 16

years old in their first love. The story presents Henry's romantic ideal of love, Edna's platonic love who is kind of scared of physical contact, and their love develops to a point that Henry rents a cottage for them to share, but a telegram is sent that tear his dreams.

It is argued that "Mansfield attempted to bring to the short story some fancy, delicacy, shape, and colored conceits of the Elizabethan lyric" (Bates, 1972). The images in the story are so lively that a reader is indulged in their colors. For instance we read "Henry! If I start flying suddenly, you'll promise to catch hold of my feet, won't you? Otherwise I'll never come down. I'm so frightfully happy!... They came to a weird place, covered with heather... the sun streamed down upon the purple... Edna... waded into the heather and lay down... Oh, Henry, it's so lovely. I can't see anything except the little bells and the sky. Henry knelt down by her and took some primroses out of her basket and made a long chain to go round her throat... he crept over to his knees and lay hidden in her hair... It's like being under the sea, isn't it, dearest, so sweet and so still?" (Mansfield, 613)¹. The adventurous fantastic side of love is

¹ Mansfield K. *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1981. Here After, (CSKM, Page number)

clearly portrayed through the least number of words. Mansfield's eyes reflect her personal vivid colorful impressions received from life itself. In this story again her characters are very ordinary people that are both lonely and happy even when they are near each other. It is said that Mansfield has "a look at life not Life with capital letter but the very ordinary ...life going on in suburb homes, poor streets, village, back bedrooms... in every place" (Bates, 1972).

Murry adds that "She accepted life. . . she gave herself. . . to life, to love . . . she loved life, with all its beauty and pain . . . she responded to life more completely than any writer I have known except D.H. Lawrence. . . ." (Pilditch, 1996). Mansfield loved Murry a lot but they had a turbulent life and usually lived separate. In 1913, Gilbert Cannan, their friend, persuades Mansfield and Murry to rent a cottage next to his windmill in Cholesbury, Buckinghamshire in order to improve Mansfield's ill health. In 1914 they moved to Paris in order to change the setting to writing better and she wrote 'Something Childish but Very Natural' there. It is claimed that Murry was "self-proclaimed Romantic, but supreme egotist". (Dowling, 1980)

Either Mansfield has described the cottage they lived in, or it is a totally different one, she dreamed to spend such romantic moments with Murry and have a secured emotional life in that cottage. Edna seems to be a reflection of Kathleen's own teenage hood because she also used to be shy with a low voice. Mantz writes that "Kathleen's wavy dark hair was about her shoulders like Edna's in 'Something Childish', when she was very small. She was rather lumpish, and often called to the others: "Wait for me! I can't hurry. I'm too fat -----" One of the little Walter Nathans, of whom there were five, used to shout over the fence at her from No. 13: "Fatty! Fatty! Fatty!" To which she scorned to make reply". (CSKM, 77) In addition, Henry appears to stand for Murry –in Mansfield's imagination-as they have same ending sounds. Edna means nut and she is afraid of starting a physical relationship with Henry. Maybe Katherine's early inexperienced sex that led to pregnancy is one of the reasons that her character is always avoiding even a kiss or a handshake. She says "I feel that if once we did that -- you know -- held each other's hands and kissed, it would all be changed," she tells Harry. "And I feel we wouldn't be free like we are -- we'd be doing something secret. We wouldn't be children any more...silly, isn't it?" (CSKM, 607)

The theme of transitional period between childhood and adolescence is emphasized here. Edna is not sure if she is ready to enter such a transitional path. She asks about faith despite her appearance that does not show any thing about her religiosity or being

an honest believer. This may also emphasize that people should not be judged in relation to their appearance or clothing. She says "People generally laugh at me. It –her hair-is such an absurd color". (CSKM, 603) As Mansfield herself was hurt a lot by public criticism about her affairs, lesbian attitude, unwanted pregnancy, and miscarriage she utters one of her own ideas through Edna "It is people that make things so silly. As long as you can keep away from them you're safe and ...happy". (CSKM, 604)

The theme of tension between fantasy and reality is very dominant. Henry is in love with Edna but it is as if she seeks for a kind of platonic love rather than a sinful worldly one. But this sweet platonic love of Edna has entered Henry into desperate hopelessness always dreaming and living in fantasy. For example he can't recognize his status and asks "I can hear you running up and down my veins. – and yet- are we a dream". Even, at the end of the story he is not able to distinguish if it is a little girl or a flying moth. Due to Mansfield's disease and her lonely life she used to live in her dreams and it is clearly reflected in her works. In some parts it is hard to guess if we read the realities of the story their dreams are reflected so naturally.

In opposition to Edna's attitude, Henry is in love with her surface beauty and the words such as hair, eyes, lips are frequently repeated in his mind "with the marigold hair and strange dreamy smile that filled him up to the brim". He is always keeping his feelings in check in order not to hurt her. The title words "childish" and "natural", both are romantic virtues that are divine. Their childish attitudes are because of their innocence for example "They laughed until they were tired" or "I believe I've swallowed a butterfly it is fanning its wings just here –his heart-", or "I'd give anything to see your hair" or "I either feel so happy I can hardly stop laughing or else so sad I can hardly stop crying both for the same reason".(CSKM, 602-4) In contrast, worldly lovers usually follow the metaphysical poets' seize the moment concept and Henry says "I have a feeling that it's dangerous to wait for things -- that if you wait for things they only go further and further away". (CSKM, 610) Maybe, Mansfield tries to focus on different views between men and women to love. For women love is flowers, sweet words, concerts, music, dancing, running hand in hand in woods but for men it totally is different. Henry in his imagination thinks "He breathed her; he ate and drank her. He walked about with a shining ring of Edna keeping the world away or touching whatever it lighted on with its own beauty." (CSKM, 612)

Another theme of the story is chance. Marriage is one the most important issues of life but usually falling in love is due to chance. Most of

Mansfield's stories are set on trains, ships or during a trip. Probably thanks to the fact that they show the liveliness or variety of life. Love, liveliness, motion, failure, persistence of life, chance, or coincidence, loneliness, and isolation are common themes of Katherine. Maybe she questions the end of a mutual life that is usually based on chance.

Although the surface of the story offers an honest man that due to his beloved's request accepts the platonic love free of sexual attitudes, in fact the common theme of Mansfield is still pinpointing that men and women are alienated, with different worlds, dreams, expectations and still feel lonely.

It is very interesting to note although it is said that Mansfield stories are mostly unfinished, careful reading may reveal the opposite. If a story is left unfinished, another story may be its continuation; of course with new characters and in a new setting. 'Something Childish but Very Natural' reveals the platonic love, an ideal couple, one resists sexual contact and the other one eagerly accepts. In 'A Birthday' the story of a married couple is revealed. The woman is very painfully giving birth to her third child and it has been two days that she has been wailing. In contrast the man is dealing with his own thoughts and cares to food, his soul, sensitiveness, and cleaning.

It is said that they had a lovely period when they were engaged "she was a little thing...just as high as my heart and she had jumped on to a stool and pulled his head down, laughing. A kid in those days" or goes on to recall "The way she'd run down the road to meet him after business! And the way she laughed when they were looking for a house...that laugh of hers." (CSKM, 742) The romantic virtue of being a child is repeated here, before marriage she is called as a kid, full of innocence and freshness. He adds that marriage changes women more than men and adds "she has lost all her go in two months". (CSKM, 742) Then he decides to change her "groove" life with a trip. This is the end of a platonic love if leads to marriage. It is as if sexual desires destroy it. Women are more impressed by the harshness of life and giving birth to children seems to be a main part of it.

Mansfield was inspired by her birthplace and first home on Tinakori Road. At the front of the house, there was a square lawn, and at the back fence stood on the brink of a bushy gully running down to the sea. From the upper stair there was a view of the harbor. This gully was crossed by a suspension foot-bridge along Hobson street. The same setting is offered for 'A Birthday'. We read "...at the row of garden strips and backyards. The fence of these gardens was built along the edge of a gully, spanned by an iron suspension bridge...". (CSKM, 733)

Mansfield described their house as a 'dark little cubby hole' and a 'horrid little piggy house'.² The large windows installed in their kitchen and front rooms recreated the dark rooms recalled by Mansfield in 'A Birthday'.

For Honkin 'A Birthday' seems to reveal Katherine's own birthday but in the form of a baby son, the one his father wished to have. The name of the mother in story is Anna Binzer and her own mother was Annie Beauchamp. (Dunbar, 1997) Another parallel for Dunbar is that Katherine's mother like the heroin gave birth to three children in four years. In the story, Andreas is glad for having a baby son and says "He was glad to have to deal with a man again" (CSKM, 737) In his imaginations he floats "but a man needed a son...I'm working up my business for my son! Binzer & Son!". (CSKM, 739)

The pa character of Mansfield that is a combination of her father and Murry is clearly offered here. Andreas Binzy is a selfish, self centered, worldly and materialistic being. He calls himself too sensitive and is very fragile. Everyone, even his mother, seems to hurt him very easily.

It is interesting to note that Mansfield usually uses third person narrator through the view of male protagonist. In this story he focuses on the fact that a man can never understand and narrate the pain and pleasure of giving birth to a baby. Different attitudes and perspectives of men and women are not changeable. During the delivery the woman once sends his mother because she is worried that Andreas has caught a cold and asks him to wear an under vest and one more time sends the doctor because she knows he is worried about her.

The stereotyping of gender roles is exaggerated here. A woman is responsible for giving birth to children, taking care of her husband and her daily cores even if she is in the worst condition of life. Men are the dominant rulers that deal with business and as they earn money they have got the power to rule. Anna never directly is seen during the story. She is in her room wailing all the time and is having a hard ling delivery. Andreas never enters the room to calm her that shows the indifferent attitude of men toward the consequences that sex has on women. Giving birth to his son does not change his attitude. He says "Excellent mother she'd make for a boy." (CSKM, 741)

Stereotyping of women and their being forced to live a life of commitment by male dominated society is what Mansfield usually protests. Although love and marriage are sweet parts of life, she tries to show their beauty before touching them. If love, even a platonic love leads to marriage or

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katherine_Mansfield_Birthplace

sexual fulfillment, women are the ones that suffer more in form of victims of male dominated society. Either you are a new woman like Edna or if you are a conventional one like Anna, you will share the same fate.

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