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## MODERN MANSFIELD AND OLD MASTERS. HYPOTYPOSIS IN SELECTED SHORT STORIES BY KATHERINE MANSFIELD

Individuality in the work of art is the creation of reality by freedom. [...] Art is individual; [...] It is the splendid adventure, the eternal quest for rhythm.<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The stories of Mansfield show a strong affinity with seventeenth and eighteenth-century paintings. It is interesting to observe how Mansfield's Modernist narratives activate in the reader's mind the pictures and genres typical of past artistic epochs. Her stories abound in all types of references to Old Masters' paintings – one can find verbal representations of flowers and/or fruit compositions, arrangements with musical instruments or with food and/or kitchen utensils. Many of these pictorial descriptions can be viewed as instantiations of *hypotyposis*, a concept that is broad enough to allow for various associations: while some readers will point to those elements of the description which hint at the influences of Paul Cezanne, others will indicate features that bring to mind Claude Monet or Mary Cassat, whereas still others will identify the subtle charm of Jean Chardin, the ambience of Johannes Vermeer's interiors, or meticulous food arrangements by Francisco Zurbaran. The article seeks to establish analogies between Old Masters' compositions, (with the focus on still life, *vanitas* and genre painting) and Mansfield's narrative structures.

**Key words:** Katherine Mansfield, still life, *vanitas*, genre painting, narration

Reading Katherine Mansfield's (1888–1923) short stories, the reader may notice that their focus is predominantly on the everyday and the mundane, which was very much in vein with the Modernist love of the ordinary. This particular aspect of Modernist reality, i.e. the common and the everyday, has recently once more attracted the attention of the researchers, including scholars of literary studies. As Rod Rosenquist observes, their publications examine “how the ordinary, seemingly insignificant things grow in significance when brought into direct observation or treated with innovative forms of representation.”<sup>2</sup> Further, Rosenquist remarks that Modernist readers are “ready to accept that the ordinary or everyday becomes an event through the aesthetic media-

<sup>1</sup> Katherine Mansfield and John Middleton Murry, “The Meaning of Rhythm,” *Rhythm* 2, no 5, (June 1912): 20, accessed January 10, 2018, <https://library.brown.edu/cds/repository2/repoman.php?verb=render&tid=1159894950942254&view=pageturner&pageno=1>

<sup>2</sup> Rod Rosenquist, “The Ordinary Celebrity and the Celebrated Ordinary in 1930s Modernist Memoirs,” *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* 49.3, (2015): 369.

tion of the object.”<sup>3</sup> This indicates a connection with art, especially as he had previously addressed a “focus on the common, the ordinary or everyday” which points to “generic, as in genre painting.”<sup>4</sup> Such a statement leads us to seventeenth and eighteenth-century European schools of painting<sup>5</sup> and to the topic of this article. The purpose of the present study is to show how the artistic traditions of Old Masters manifest themselves in the narratives of Katherine Mansfield or, in other words, how the Modernist writer made literary use of them. Whether viewed from a historical perspective or studied with the tools of structuralism, the stories of Mansfield show a strong affinity with seventeenth and eighteenth-century paintings. The correlation between the verbal images encountered in Mansfield’s short stories and the Old Masters’ paintings will be demonstrated within the framework of *hypotyposis*. It is interesting to observe how Mansfield’s Modernist narratives activate in the reader’s mind pictures and genres typical of past artistic epochs. More precisely, the discussion will center around the characteristic features of still lifes, *vanitas* and genre painting detected in Mansfield’s narrative structures.

Before proceeding to the exemplification of Mansfield’s literary love affair with Old Masters, let us first briefly see how *hypotyposis* is defined. In literature and literary studies, *hypotyposis* is referred to as a rhetorical figure which is employed in the construction of particularly compelling, ekphrastic descriptions. Such verbal portrayals address our sense of sight and appeal to our visual predilections, and they result in a picturesque, highly illustrative reconstruction of the theme. The term comes from the Greek word *hypotypóein* meaning to sketch.<sup>6</sup> Pierre Fontanier defines *hypotyposis* as a literary tool which “paints things in such a lively and forcible way that it stages them under one’s eyes, so to speak, and turns narrative or description into an image, a picture or even a real scene taken from life.”<sup>7</sup> In the same vein, Richard A. Lanham compares

3 *Ibidem*.

4 *Ibidem*.

5 This is because the term genre painting is generally applied to the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch masters like Jan Steen, Peter de Hooch or Johannes Vermeer, and the French 18<sup>th</sup> century artists who would specialize in one type of painting dealing with nature or middle-class life (e.g. Jean Chardin). Moreover, the connection is further justified by the fact that many of the leading artists at the turn of the century were inspired / openly drew from such Old Masters as Chardin (Eduard Manet, Paul Cézanne), Rembrandt (Chaim Soutine), Corot and Chardin (Giorgio Morandi), to name but a few. Additionally, the traditional Old Master’s theme of *vanitas* (represented by typical motifs like skulls, candles, dried flowers, etc.) also re-appears in the works of Pablo Picasso or Max Beckmann, and the predilection for intellectual arrangements of objects and food stuff in the still lifes by Willem Heda shall be witnessed once more in the still life compositions of Cubists.

6 Mirosław Jarosz, Maciej Adamski and Irena Kamińska-Szmaj (eds.), *Słownik wyrazów obcych* (Wrocław: Europa, 2001), *hypotypoza* [entry]. Michał Głowiński (ed.), *Słownik terminów literackich* (Wrocław: Open Wydawnictwo Naukowe i Literackie, 1998), *hypotypoza* [entry].

7 “[Hypotypose] peint les choses d’une manière si vive et si énergique, qu’elle les met en scène quelque sorte sous les yeux, et fait d’un récit ou d’une description, une image, un tableau, ou même une scène vivante.” Pierre Fontanier, *Les Figures du discours*, in Fabienne Gaspari, “Painting and

*hypotyposis* to “sketch, outline, pattern” and presents it as synonymous with *enargia*, “[a] generic term for visually powerful, vivid description which recreates something or someone, as several theorists say, ‘before your very eyes.’”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Krieger classifies *hypotyposis* as one of the forms of *enargeia*<sup>9</sup> and Sandra Logan calls it “a poetic means stimulating the experience of seeing.”<sup>10</sup> Certainly, this type of connection between the text, the image and the reader is based on subjective choice and personal associations, but so were Mansfield’s artistic choices.

In studies on Mansfield and her art, critics and researchers supply numerous examples of the writer’s broad artistic inclinations. Not surprisingly, references to visual arts loom large in her fiction, from the overt ones (for example the use of colours, the employment of the figures of painters, art discussed by protagonists), to less obvious instances (the application of techniques used by painters in the construction of Mansfield’s complex, narrative structures). Certainly, it was her private artistic tastes that were largely responsible for the thick artistic layers and textures of her short stories. Her art-related passions were not, however, limited to the artistic trends permeating Europe at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> To Mansfield, art as such was of importance, regardless of the epoch in which it was created. Moreover, she claimed that a piece of art was true and worthwhile only when it entered into a dialogue with your emotions. In a letter to her friend, Dorothy Brett, a painter, she explains it quite bluntly: “Hang it all, Brett—a picture must have *charm*—or why look at it? It’s the quality I call *tenderness* in writing, it’s the tone one gets in a really first-chop musician. Without it you can be as solid as a bull and I don’t see what’s the good.”<sup>12</sup>

For that reason, despite the alluring array of artistic schools and tendencies in which Modernism was shrouded, Mansfield also found many fascinating artistic works in the previous ages. In her *Journal* as well as in her letters, there are references, discussions and polemics referring not only to contemporary artistic celebrities but also to the Old

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Writing in Moore’s *Confessions of a Young Man, Lewis Seymour and Some Women, and A Drama in Muslim*, in *George Moore: Across Borders*, eds. Christine Huguet and Fabienne Dabrigeon-Garcier (Amsterdam–New York: Rodopi, 2013), 51, n. 20.

8 Richard A. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (London: University of California Press, 1990), 64.

9 Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992), 78.

10 Sandra Logan, *Text/Events in Early Modern England. Poetics of History* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 4.

11 To read about Katherine Mansfield’s artistic fascinations see, among others, Rebecca Bowler, “The beauty of your line – the life behind it.’ Katherine Mansfield and the Double Impression,” *Katherine Mansfield Studies* 3 (2011): 81–94; Julia van Gunsteren, *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Impressionism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990).

12 *Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. John Middleton Murry (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929), 2: 447, accessed December 10, 2017, <https://archive.org/details/lettersofkatherio31425mbp>.

Masters. For example, in one of her letters to her husband's brother, Richard Murry, she writes about Rubens:

About Rubens. I never can forget his paintings in Antwerp. They seemed to me far more brilliant than the London ones—I mean impressive. He must have enjoyed himself no end a doing of them. But I confess I like his small paintings best. One gets really too much for one's money in the big ones—There's rather a fat woman wading in a stream in the National Gallery—Quite a small one. It's very good—isn't it?<sup>13</sup>

And in yet another letter to him, she expresses her opinion about Old Masters as such (artists and writers together):

About the old masters. What I feel about them (all of them—writers too, of course) is the more one *lives* with them the better it is for one's work. It's almost a case of living *into* one's ideal world—the world that one desires to express. Do you know what I mean? For this reason I find that if I stick to men like Chaucer and Shakespeare and Marlowe and even Tolstoi I keep much nearer what I want to do than if I confuse things with reading a lot of lesser men. I'd like to make the old masters my *daily* bread—in the sense in which it's used in the Lord's Prayer, really—to make them a kind of essential nourishment. All the rest is—well—it *comes after*.<sup>14</sup>

As if against Mansfield's apparent demonstration of love towards Old Masters, many scholars have tried to classify the artistic influences visible in the writer's literary output within one of the turn of the century schools of artistic thought. But it seems unfair to try to fit her only within Modernist artistic frames. As Liliane Louvel rightly points out, we should refrain from trying to look for analogies with a single or dominant school of visual representation in Mansfield's works.<sup>15</sup> Rather, we should ask about the extent to which her texts are dominated by the visual. Louvel suggests a “typology of the pictorial” in regard of literary texts, which could be quite useful in the analysis of visuality in Mansfield's oeuvre.<sup>16</sup> Such a perspective agrees remarkably well with Mansfield's eclectic artistic tastes. Also, thanks to such an approach, Mansfield can escape the merciless classification (of her work). Instead of giving her the label of “Impressionist” or “Expressionist,” one should rather consider talking about her as a pictorial writer, or, to use the words of Louvel, a writer whose works are characterized by a high “pictorial saturation.”<sup>17</sup> Looking at Mansfield's texts in such a way makes room for discussion of her artistic fascinations translated into the verbal patterns of her stories in reference to different genres and epochs. What is more, the genre which seems to have been among the most favoured by Mansfield, i.e. the still life, creates a bridge between the

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, 467.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, 387.

<sup>15</sup> Liliane Louvel, *Poetics of the Iconotext*, trans. Laurence Petit (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2011), 85.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, 89.

modern and the old. The writer often defined the interiors of the places she was in as still lifes. Similarly to the Old Masters, she also loved to look closely at small, seemingly unimportant, common objects and admire details, thus displaying an approach which characterizes a still life painter. In one of her letters to Brett, she remarks:

It seems to me so extraordinarily right that you should be painting Still Lives just now. What can one do, faced with the wonderful tumble of round bright fruits, but gather them and play with them—and become them, as it were. When I pass the apple stalls I cannot help stopping and staring until I feel that I, myself, am changing into an apple.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, Mansfield was living in Europe at the time when still life was undergoing a true revival. Although the drawings of inanimate objects can be traced back to antiquity, still life as a genre was recognized quite late. The first modern paintings of this kind (i.e. separate, framed images of fruit baskets, bowls or goblets) appeared as late as the seventeenth century and it was not until the eighteenth century that a theory on still life, alongside other genres like portraiture or landscape, was proposed by Reynolds.<sup>19</sup> The true recognition of the still life comes then in the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> To a large extent, this is because its nature corresponds with a new perception of reality by Modernist artists, who are now interested, as was already observed, in the ordinary, the common and the everyday. As Norman Bryson underlines, “[s]till life takes on the exploration of what ‘importance’ tramples underfoot. It attends to the world ignored by the human impulse to create greatness. Its assault on the prestige of the human subject is therefore conducted at a very deep level. [...] Narrative – the drama of greatness – is banished.”<sup>21</sup> Besides, still life is a very wide, almost “all-inclusive” notion. As Rosemary Lloyd points out, “[s]till life, in all its manifestations, has demonstrated that it is a remarkably flexible device for exploring not just the domestic areas of human experience but also much broader areas of experience.”<sup>22</sup>

As for Mansfield’s short stories, they display numerous instances of descriptions which, either directly (as a part of a plot) or indirectly (as a part of space), can be linked to still life compositions. Rishona Zimring, in “Mansfield’s Charm: The Enchantment of Domestic ‘Bliss’”, discusses still lifes encountered in “Feuille d’Album” and “Bliss”.

18 *Ibidem*, 42.

19 Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 7.

20 Stefano Zuffi, Matilde Battistini and Lucia Impelluso, *Martwa natura, arcydziela, interpretacje*, trans. Katarzyna Wango (Warszawa: Arkady, 2000), 121, 146, and Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 8.

21 Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 61. NB. this statement could serve as a general comment to Mansfield’s fiction.

22 Rosemary Lloyd, *Shimmering in a Transformed Light: Writing the Still Life* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), in Elizabeth Hicks, *The Still Life in the Fiction of A.A. Byatt*, (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 157-58, e-Book Academic Collection.

However, her focus is on the objects that are used for the compositions and on their “magical” power of transformation. Still life arrangements in the two stories are presented as a means of linking the fantastic and the real; thanks to the artistic compositions, everyday mundane spaces are transformed into the extraordinary.<sup>23</sup> Yet, the very same still lifes are additionally capable of connecting the old with the new. Consequently, many of these pictorial descriptions can be viewed as instantiations of *hypotyposis*, a concept that is broad enough to allow for various parallels with a variety of art works: while some readers will point to these elements of the description which suggest the influence of Paul Cezanne, others will indicate features that bring to mind Claude Monet or Mary Cassat, whereas still others will identify the subtle charm of Jean Chardin or orderly spaces of Johannes Vermeer.

Let us now turn to the first passage from Mansfield’s texts. It comes from the short story entitled “Bliss”:

There were tangerines and apples stained with strawberry pink. Some yellow pears, smooth as silk, some white grapes covered with a silver bloom and a big cluster of purple ones. These last she had bought to tone in with the new dining-room carpet. Yes, that did sound rather far-fetched and absurd, but it was really why she had bought them. She had thought in the shop: “I must have some purple ones to bring the carpet up to the table.” [...] When she had finished with them and had made two pyramids of these bright round shapes, she stood away from the table to get the effect – and it really was most curious. For the dark table seemed to melt into the dusky light and the glass dish and the blue bowl to float in the air.<sup>24</sup>

The acclaimed scene with Bertha Young arranging the fruit, and thus composing a still life, is a perfect illustration of the timeless aspect of Mansfield’s vivid narrative style. Admittedly, on the basis of formal analogies with certain modern styles or schools of painting, the scene might evoke in the reader an Impressionist or post-Impressionist image. The similarities include the technique of juxtaposition (for instance, when it comes to the shapes and colours of fruit), the usage of light effect (the change of perception due to the change of light), focus on the sensation and the impression (“the effect [...] was most curious”). One might further argue, if only by referring to the information from the earlier part of this article, that it is in Modernism that still life genre, after being treated as a form of “lower” art<sup>25</sup> for centuries, comes to the fore. Artists, beginning with Cezanne<sup>26</sup>, started to manifest their deep interest in the struc-

<sup>23</sup> Rishona Zimring, “Mansfield’s Charm: The Enchantment of Domestic ‘Bliss,’” *Katherine Mansfield Studies* 4 (2012): 33-50.

<sup>24</sup> Katherine Mansfield, “Bliss,” in *Bliss and Other Stories* (Ware, England: Wordsworth Classics, 1998), 68.

<sup>25</sup> Margit Rowell, *Objects of Desire. The Modern Still Life* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1997), 13.

<sup>26</sup> It is important to note that Cezanne’s still lifes show clear links with the Dutch seventeenth-century paintings and invoke the eighteenth-century compositions of French painter Jean-Siméon

ture of artistic space as well as in the object located in this space.<sup>27</sup> To me, however, this seemingly modern description displays quite striking affinities with the seventeenth and eighteenth century art. On inspecting the scene more closely, there emerge certain elements which suggest the Old Masters' approach to still life. Let us consider such issues as the objects and material used, the structure of the composition, and finally the specific code of representation – factors that were at the highest focus among the painters of still lifes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Just as in Old Masters' paintings, the verbal still life in "Bliss" is composed of lavishly diversified fruit and materials. For her composition, Bertha uses exotic tangerines, delicate apples and perfect pears as well as juicy grapes. She also includes the new carpet, a glass dish and a blue bowl. All these items are signs of luxury and prosperity and thus correspond to Dutch still life representations. As we can read in Paul Zumthor's *Daily Life in Rembrandt's Holland*, the "desire to acquire objects determined largely the character and development of the nation's cultural existence during the seventeenth century" and "the structure and morality of Dutch society limited the choice of these principally to things which could add to the comfort of the house or enhance its appearance."<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Bryson, in his interesting book on still life, states that "Dutch still life painting is a dialogue between the newly affluent society and its material possessions."<sup>29</sup> And this is exactly the case in "Bliss." These are the reasons for Bertha's decision to buy the grapes; she does not need them, she does not crave their taste, she purchases them merely for decorative and compositional purposes. Obviously, this also provides evidence of her high social standing and wealth. Affluence is additionally prompted by the comparison ("smooth as silk"), which simultaneously implies pears of the best quality (with thin, intact, delicate skin), and, by referring to the sense of touch, evokes associations with expensive, delicate fabric.

As for the structure of the composition, in this case there are also some well-defined textual markers which substantiate the thesis of a close-knit relation between Mansfield and Old Masters. The image created by Bertha follows the ideas of the old school. First and foremost, it is characterised, to a large extent, by the realistic and the theatrical. The food items presented cease to be lifeless images the moment the reader learns how they were obtained – they were simply bought in a shop. This reference to the "outside-the-image" reality, to the real life of Bertha Young, supplies the fruit with a realistic tinge. Additionally, the already mentioned reference to the sense of touch (the fabric

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Chardin, in Carol Armstrong, *Cezanne in the Studio. Still Life in Watercolors*, (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2004), 53-55.

<sup>27</sup> Zuffi et al., *Martwa natura*, 151.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Zumthor, *Daily Life in Rembrandt's Holland*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 194.

<sup>29</sup> Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 104.

impression, the fact that Bertha touches the fruit – “she had finished with them,” “made two pyramids”) completes the realistic, pictorial description of the objects. As for the theatricality of the scene, an important aspect of the Old Masters’ artistic idea of still life painting, it is suggested by the orderly, geometrical figures of two pyramids. The round shapes were rigorously framed in two pointed edifices. Such an arrangement results in artificiality. Nothing is left to chance. The viewer admires the perfectly arranged food items, as if forgetting that their primary function is related to eating. The fruits do not show any signs of their role as items for consumption<sup>30</sup> and the fact that they might be, after all, consumed in the future, is not hinted at in any way. Likewise, the reader does not think about the fruit in terms of food but in terms of an aesthetic value. The arrangement created by Bertha is distant, real and unreal at the same time, “most curious” indeed.

Despite the variety of textual clues (mentioned above), in keeping with the idea of *hypotyposis*, each reader must make his/her own associations with a particular painting. For me, the ambience, the stillness, the artificial, but mathematically perfect, aesthetic arrangement on a dark table, with the background disappearing into “the dusk” as well as the focus (close-up on the arranged items) – all these may bring to mind the paintings by Spanish artist Francisco Zurbaran (e.g. “Still-Life with Plate of Apples and Orange Blossom”, ca. 1640) or, the elaborate pyramidal structures by French painter Jean Chardin (e.g. “The Buffet”, 1728).

Finally, let us focus on the veiled meanings. Unlike the early twentieth century still lifes, in which form and/or colour visibly dominate the symbolic content, the Old Masters’ works were highly symbolic and could be “read.” Likewise, the still life constructed by Bertha is a vividly presented message. It is only from the perspective of the protagonist that the fruit and dish arrangement serves a mere aesthetic and decorative function. The reader, however, like the seventeenth and eighteenth-century viewer, can decipher the coded messages. And the symbolism of the pictorial scene is twofold. It foreshadows the events of the story and thus is complementary to the plot, and, as in the Old Masters’ paintings, it describes the condition of human life itself. And so the exotic tangerines stand for wealth and economic success<sup>31</sup>; the apples allude to original sin, the temptation, the unknown, as well as to life on Earth, power and domination<sup>32</sup>;

30 An interesting discussion on food which is barely eaten by the characters in Mansfield’s stories can be found in Mary Burgan, *Illness, Gender and Writing: The Case of Katherine Mansfield*, chapter 2, “‘They discuss only the food’: Body Images” (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 21-39.

31 Vivian Thomas and Nicki Faircloth, *Shakespeare’s Plants and Gardens. A Dictionary* (London–New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 249.

32 Beata Purc-Stepniak, *Kula jako symbol vanitas. Z kregu badan nad malarstwem XVII wieku* (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz/Terytoria, 2004), 57-58; Zuffi et al., *Martwa natura*, 213.

as for the pears, they are linked with passion and sensuality<sup>33</sup>; and grapes imply an unequivocal link with Bacchus, meaning wine and debauchery, but also hospitality and entertainment. All these symbolic associations can be found later on in the short story. In other words, the verbal picture becomes a comment on the emotions and life status of the characters. The still life composed by Bertha on the one hand illustrates her seemingly happy life (expressed by the artificial perfection of her composition which is devoid of spontaneity but proclaims luxury) and her emotional distress (the variety of fruit and shapes superficially belonging together in terms of colour only)<sup>34</sup>. By analogy, Bertha's still life-like fruit decoration serves also as a general, social comment. It points to the position of upper middle class women, their role as wives, their emotional perturbances. It trumpets naivety and hypocrisy, artificial bliss and concealed unhappiness.

Another example of the influence of the Old Masters on the pictorial descriptions in Mansfield's narratives comes from the short story "Sun and Moon". Let us look at the description of the table after the party:

And so they went back to the beautiful dining-room. But – oh! oh! what had happened. The ribbons and the roses were all pulled untied. The little red table napkins lay on the floor, all the shining plates were dirty and all the winking glasses. The lovely food that the man had trimmed was all thrown about, and there were bones and bits and fruit peels and shells everywhere. There was even a bottle lying down with stuff coming out of it on to the cloth and nobody stood it up again.<sup>35</sup>

There are a number of elements embedded in the above passage which bridge the gap between the world of modern Mansfield and the realm of the Old Masters. Of particular importance is the motif of a banquet table, as well as the objects used for the composition and their arrangement.

Tables with food half-consumed and overturned vessels, bits of fruit or nutshells were a recurring motif of *vanitas*, paintings denoting "emptiness, or the transient nature of earthly possessions."<sup>36</sup> The fragment under discussion is a verbal representation of *vanitas*. The state of the dining room after the banquet is vividly suggested to the reader via enumeration rather than long descriptive sentences. Mansfield, once again, makes use of her favourite tool, i.e. contrast. The narrator goes from one element to another, listing the items and noting their states – collating those after and before the party:

33 Thomas and Faircloth, *Shakespeare's Plants*, 259.

34 For a more detailed discussion about this particular scene in the context of still life as well as about the role of still life compositions in Katherine Mansfield's short stories, see: Anna Kwiatkowska, "Martwa natura w opowiadaniach Katherine Mansfield," in *Literatura a malarstwo*, ed. Joanna Godlewicz-Adamiec, Piotr Kociumbas and Tomasz Szybisty (Warszawa-Kraków: iMAGO, 2017), 205-218.

35 Mansfield, "Sun and Moon," in *Bliss*, 121.

36 James Hall, *Illustrated Dictionary of Symbols in Eastern and Western Art* (Boilder, Collorodo: IconEditions, 1995), 210.

“beautiful dining room” versus “ribbons and roses pulled untied”, “shining plates” and “winking glasses” versus “dirty” dishes, “lovely food” versus food “thrown about”. As for the objects used in the composition, as in the passage previously analysed, they are charged with certain symbolic meaning. As in *vanitas*, the dirty dishes, the unappetising leftovers, “bones and bits and fruit peels and shells” stand for emptiness, hollowness, decay and passing, the indispensable elements of earthly existence. Quite paradoxically, the dead stillness of the scene divulges the movement that was once there. The sudden, unexpected (for the children in the story) disappearance of both beauty and life underlines the idea of passing more strongly. The narrator, employing the childish, limited and therefore naïve perspective of a little boy, presents the passing of time straightforwardly and bluntly – the little boy and his younger sister come back to the previously beautiful room and cannot believe their eyes: within a few hours all beauty has been ruined. Symbolically speaking, the boy’s utter disgust and horrification at seeing the spectacle (expressed at the end of the story in the style of Conrad’s Kurtz with the words of “Horrid! Horrid! Horrid!”) corresponds to the idea of the shortness of life or a certain stage of it (childhood) and the inevitability of change (entering another stage of life, losing illusions). All in all, once elaborate and now ruined dishes, empty plates and undone ribbons – all of these signify on the one hand opulence and pleasure, but on the other, the temporality and fragility of such a state. By extension, we can also draw conclusions about the participants of the party. The mess they have left behind and the unconsumed food (too much prepared for too few) point to their love of pleasure and their wealth, but even more to their gluttony, vanity and lack of measure.

The arrangement of the objects of this verbally depicted *vanitas* also enhances the atmosphere of disorder and sadness characteristic of the works of Old Masters. Again, the composition is based on opposition and contrast – the napkins are on the floor and not on the table, the food is all over the table instead of being nicely arranged on plates or dishes, unsightly remains of food are everywhere instead of being put out of sight, and a bottle is ‘lying down’ instead of standing. The scene from “Sun and Moon” might bring to mind banquet paintings by Old Masters, for example those by Abraham van Beyerem in whose works on the one hand “the rich and sumptuous arrangement was meant (...) to engage and delight the patron” (e.g. “Still Life with Lobster”, ca. 1653-55) but on the other it was “to remind him of the transience of human life and the vanity of worldly possessions and pleasures”<sup>37</sup> (e.g. “Banquet Still Life”, ca. 1653-55). Similarly, in Mansfield’s short story, the verbal banquet still life is to remind the reader of the shortness and fallibility of both material things and human life. This conclusion seems to be especially compelling bearing in mind Mansfield’s acute awareness of the transience

37 Scott A. Sullivan, “A banquet-piece with *vanitas* implications,” *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, 61.8 (1974), 280.

of time. This notion of passing related to the seventeenth-century Dutch painting and its connection with Mansfield has also been noted, for instance, by Melissa C. Reimer. In her “Katherine Mansfield: A Colonial Impressionist”, she writes that “[e]ssentially, their [the Impressionists’] canvases are modern representations of an age-old concept – the transience of life, previously epitomised in Seventeenth-century Dutch still lifes, or *Vanitas*. Mansfield was demonstrably alert to these ideas and it is one of the most distinctive features of her writing.”<sup>38</sup>

These theme-based connotations are additionally reinforced by the ones stemming from the ambience and structure of the presented scenes. The above mentioned works of van Beyeren are characterized by sharp focus, silence and limited perspective (closeness of the foreground). Moreover, the red dominant as well as the signs of wealth (type of food, material of dishes and vessels) and signs of human activity (like half-peeled and half-eaten fruit, the crumpled table cloth) serve as connecting points, too. Both Mansfield and Old Masters play with perspective in a similar way; they bring the reader / viewer, respectively, closer to the scene, riveting therefore his/her attention to a certain fragment of depicted (fictional) reality. As a result, the background as if dissolves into insignificance; indications of size or furniture, if any, are lost in the impenetrable background or located outside the frame, and thus in the space that cannot be accessed by the viewer.

The last passage to be discussed here comes from “Prelude.”

In the dining-room, by the flicker of a wood fire, Beryl sat on a hassock playing the guitar. She had bathed and changed all her clothes. Now she wore a white muslin dress with black spots on it and in her hair she had pinned a black silk rose.

Nature has gone to her rest, love,

See, we are alone.

Give me your hand to press, love,

Lightly within my own

She played and sang half to herself, for she was watching herself playing and singing. The firelight gleamed on her shoes, on the ruddy belly of the guitar, on her white fingers . . . .

‘If I were outside the window and looked in and saw myself I really would be rather struck,’ thought she. Still more softly she played the accompaniment-not singing now but listening.

. . . . ‘The first time that I ever saw you, little girl-oh, you had no idea that you were not alone-you were sitting with your little feet upon a hassock, playing the guitar. God, I can never forget. . . .’ Beryl flung up her head and began to sing again: [. . .].<sup>39</sup>

38 Melissa C. Reimer, “Katherine Mansfield: A Colonial Impressionist” (PhD diss., University of Canterbury, 2010), 258. Note: in the quoted source there is a footnote mark after the word “*Vanitas*”. It refers the reader to page 280 of the article by Emilie Sitzia “‘A Toutes Les Heures, Par Tous Les Temps’: Impressionist Landscapes and Capturing Time”, *Art & Time*, eds. Jan Lloyd Jones, Paul Campbell and Peter Wylie (Melbourne, Victoria: Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd, 2007), 273-84.

39 Mansfield, “Prelude”, in *Bliss*, 25.

The above quotation is yet another instantiation of the presence of Old Masters in Mansfield's short stories. It recalls genre painting which centred on the domestic. Firstly, the depicted scene is composed of elements typical of an interior scene: a fireplace suggested by the burning wood, the guitar, a figure of a young girl in her evening dress. The space is made cosy and safe thanks to the flickering fire, a reference to quiet music (the guitar, the singing of the girl), fabrics reflecting light (muslin dress, silk rose, the smooth surface of the shoes). A sense of seclusion is likewise conveyed by the soft, gleaming light. The ambience corresponds with that observed in paintings of seventeenth and eighteenth-century artists. In addition, the composition of Mansfield's short story also brings to mind the arrangements encountered in the old paintings – a young woman in the midst of her daily chores or during her pastime activities – playing a guitar, singing, reading a letter. Frequently, the painters would offer the viewer a glimpse of a private life, seen as if by accident from outside the window or through a half open door. This is precisely the situation in the passage quoted above. The impression of an Old Master-like image is particularly reinforced by the reference to a window – a common element of the seventeenth-century painting serving as a source of light in the picture. At the same time, the window in the quotation functions as a frame since, as Beryl suggests she should be looked at from that direction – outside looking in. Apart from the arrangement, the mood of Old Masters' paintings is also evoked by the focus on light effects ("flicker of wood fire", "the firelight" gleaming on Beryl's shoes, fingers, the guitar), the limited range of colours, the delicate contrasts, as well as the allusion to the senses of touch and hearing so frequently addressed in the canvases by Old Masters, too.

The scene may bring to mind Jan Vermeer's, "The Guitar Player", ca. 1672. The girl playing the guitar in that piece is aware of someone looking at her, she is apparently gazing in the direction of some invisible (for the viewer) onlooker, or perhaps only towards an imaginary figure (like Beryl). The landscape painting on the wall behind the girl is also of interest – a piece of nature in the room. As some art critics suggest, this was to manifest the idea that a beautiful girl was like nature or a part of nature, she was an image to be extolled. According to Elise Goodman, who comments on that particular painting by Vermeer in her "The Landscape on the Wall of Vermeer", "the ubiquitous idea that the lady was the 'masterpiece of nature,' to be admired, possessed, and displayed, appeared in countless poems, songs, and tracts on beautiful women in the seventeenth century."<sup>40</sup> This makes the relation between the painting and the scene from Mansfield's "Prelude" even closer, for in the passage there are references to nature as well. The most vivid one is the reference to nature from the stanza of the love song Beryl is singing. What is more, the lines of the song are reminiscent of the

<sup>40</sup> Elise Goodman, "The Landscape on the Wall of Vermeer", in *The Cambridge Companion to Vermeer*, ed. Wayne E. Franits (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 82.

landscape piece from the painting since they are clearly separated from the text of the narrative.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the scene from the short story is limited as far as action and decoration are concerned. Nothing really happens; at some point Beryl even stops singing, she is merely playing and listening. She is accompanying her thoughts rather than her song, thus participating in the imaginary and not the real. Vermeer's genre pieces were created on the same grounds. The artist would use "elements drawn from an underlying reality, [building] genre pictures in which the story telling was reduced to a minimum of hints."<sup>42</sup> On top of that, Beryl is wearing a dress "with black spots", the pattern so characteristic of the dresses of Vermeer's girls.

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The impact of art on the works of Katherine Mansfield, both in terms of motifs and narrative construction is undeniable. Her highly pictorial descriptions offer, among other possibilities, an interesting insight into the realm of the Old Masters. It seems that still life, *vanitas* and genre painting, in particular, combine the Modern with the Old. They link the past with the present, the real with the unreal. Moreover, features of the traditional artistic genres to be traced in Mansfield short stories are responsible for the ambience of many of her narratives; they complement the plot and illustrate the emotional states of her protagonists. The above discussion is an attempt to read Mansfield a-new, to look at her modernity from the perspective of Old Masters. The aim was to show the timeless aspect of her writing expressed with the ekphrastic allusions to the old, but equally timeless, seventeenth and eighteenth-century visual representations of the world. Summing-up, although the spirit of the past ages in Mansfield's short stories has been noted by scholars, especially in reference to Shakespeare, her affinity and literary transposition of the paintings of Old Masters has been neglected.

The representations of Old Masters paintings are so adroitly ingrained in the narrative structures of Mansfield's stories that it is easy to overlook them. As the writer has been predominantly discussed in connection with Modernism, the compositions spotted in her works were chiefly classified as manifestations of artistic trends and influences of the early twentieth century. Like the works of Impressionists, Post-Impressionists or Fauvists, especially their still lifes, Mansfield's verbal paintings at first glance seem to be void of a story; they could easily exist for themselves – the descriptions of little pieces which we can easily imagine to be framed and hung on a wall, just for decoration.

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41 Additionally, to me, both a wood fire and a silk rose, may further enter into the dialogue with the sound hole cover for the guitar of Vermeer's girl, since it is made of wood and resembles the flower Beryl has in her hair.

42 John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 197.

However, though Modernist in form these “pictorially saturated” fragments evoke the works of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Old Masters. Just like these canvases, Mansfield’s narratives are charged with meaning, and in the context of a particular story, they are evaluative and serve as both artistic and social commentaries. Thus, Mansfield’s immensely visual modern narratives enter into a dialogue with the past. She borrows freely from Old Masters to her own ends. The writer uses them as a certain tool to ridicule and deride the vices and/or weaknesses of her characters and of her contemporaries. Additionally, the ambience and narrative construction of Mansfield’s visual passages correspond with the atmosphere and structuring of Old Master canvases. Mansfield’s verbally depicted scenes and the Old Masters visual arrangements on their canvases simultaneously radiate with the known (the ordinary and domestic) and the unknown (the secretive and obscure). They render stilled moments<sup>43</sup>, slices of life, via close-ups and the microscopic focus. Both Mansfield and the Old Masters urge the reader/viewer to take notice of details, to ponder the spectacle described. Subsequently, the receiver becomes as if suspended in time, forced to contemplate the life of the protagonists / the figures in the painting / those absent in the scene as well as his/her own.

The above conclusions can be supported with other references to Old Masters which are scattered across the stories. They come in a variety of forms – sometimes they are quite straightforward, while at other times they are less prominent and veiled and thus easily overlooked. For instance, William Hogarth’s “Marriage à la Mode” immediately comes to mind when reading Mansfield’s story with the very same title, which deals with a fashionable approach to marriage. Indeed, it is not only the title of the short story that brings Hogarth to mind but also the fact that the name of the main character, the old-fashioned, traditionally-minded husband, is William<sup>44</sup>. Later on, the plot evolving around William’s modern, “new”, seemingly happy and easy-going young wife, Isabelle, provides yet another quite ostentatious link with the Old Masters. At some point in the story, one of Isabella’s trendy friends tellingly calls the scene in which Isabella is reading a love letter from her husband ‘A Lady reading a Letter’, thus making quite a conspicuous nod towards Vermeer’s “Woman in Blue Reading a Letter” (ca. 1663–64) or “Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window” (1657–59). Some other painterly implications are less straightforward, but still to be found if only we look

43 Such stilled moments which include human figures may also bring to mind tableaux vivants, a fashionable form of entertainment in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

44 Apparently, this example is at the same time a splendid illustration of the complexity of Mansfield’s cross time references. “Marriage à la Mode” is simultaneously a tribute to another Old Master, namely William Shakespeare. Hence, the figure of William from the short story in question, while viewed in relation to the theatrical behaviour of the characters, the costumes and masks they eagerly put on, the language employed by them and the space of the garden, makes the reader think of the Renaissance playwright.

closely enough. For that matter, the pages of Mansfield's short stories are filled with little objects so characteristic of Old Masters' paintings, i.e. like pearls, shells, little flower arrangements, musical instruments. And above all, Mansfield's sharp focus on tiny detail, her individual, almost motherly, approach to every, even the smallest, object or its part, her interest in domestic, frequently feminine interiors and the effect of light in dark spaces, makes her inexorably a part of the Old Masters' tradition, which she addresses with a modern wink.

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