

Representations of Women in Selected Short Stories by Katherine Mansfield Viewed Through Seventeenth-century Genre Paintings

Abstract:

The goal of the paper is to demonstrate the influence of the Dutch masters on the representation of women in Mansfield's short stories. The correspondences discernible between Mansfieldian women characters and the women figures from the Dutch Old Masters' canvases as well as Dutch painters' techniques dealing with perspective and Mansfield's treatment of narration show a lot in common. When introducing her female protagonists, Mansfield seems to employ certain narrative strategies that are reminiscent of the techniques utilised by the Old Masters. The paper addresses, therefore, two issues. Firstly, it deals with a transmedial aspect of Mansfield's stories and makes an inquiry into the question of how the writer endowed her female protagonists with the characteristics that echo the features of women painted by the seventeenth-century artists. And secondly, the paper tries to establish why Mansfield would resort to the Old Masters' canvases while constructing her modern texts. Since the topic of Dutch influences in Mansfield's works appears to be a complex one, the paper is but an introduction into a deeper and more thorough inquiry into the works of Katherine Mansfield in relation to the 17th century paintings.

Keywords: Katherine Mansfield, Dutch, genre painting, strategy, visual, transmediality

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. (...) 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*¹. (*italics in original*)

Introduction

It seems that the topic of Katherine Mansfield's female characters is a well-examined one. Many scholars have discussed women and their lives from Mansfield's short stories from various perspectives and by focusing on different aspects. In their publications

¹ *Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. J.M. Murry, . Volume II, New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1929, p. 387.

one can find discourses engaged in tracing biographical references, artistic influences or literary inspirations. This interest in the female in regard to Mansfield's oeuvre comes as no surprise since, as Boddy Gillian observes, "[t]he role of women in society is central in much of her work"². However, there is one area which seems to be neglected, namely the correspondences that are discernible between Mansfieldian women characters and the female figures seen in Dutch Old Masters' canvases.

Surprisingly enough, although the Dutch spirit in Mansfield's stories has been noticed, the references to the topic are scarce and fragmentary. To give some examples, Melissa C. Reimer in her *Katherine Mansfield: A Colonial Impressionist*, writing about the paintings of Impressionists and their modernity, makes a connection between Dutch art and Mansfield by referring to the concept of the passing of time. In her words, Impressionist canvases were "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"³.

Another indication of Mansfield's interest in Dutch Masters can be found in William Rankin's article "Ineffability in the fiction of Jean Toomer and Katherine Mansfield". In his comparative discussion Rankin comes to the conclusion that in the works of Mansfield "[o]ur attention is directed to the symbolic significance of minute occurrences. What stands out particularly [...] is the use of microcosmic-macrocosmic associations in a way that recall the metaphorical poets of the seventeenth century"⁴. Providing evidence for this, Rankin quotes some of Mansfield's titles: "Sixpence", "The Doll's House", "The Fly" or "A Dill Pickle". Despite the fact that he mentions poets rather than painters, the connection with the so-called Dutch spirit is nevertheless established. However, to the best of my knowledge, none of the publications pursues in a detailed manner the question of Mansfieldian seventeenth-century affinity in reference to her women characters or to her narrative technique.

The aim of the present paper is, therefore, to demonstrate the influence of the Dutch masters on the representation of women in Mansfield's short stories. My thesis is that the already mentioned Dutch spirit manifests itself on many levels in Mansfield's narratives, yet the female figure is the hub of it. When introducing her female protagonists, Mansfield seems to employ certain narrative strategies that are reminiscent of the techniques used by the Old Masters. Considering the above, the approach of the article is twofold. Firstly, it will make an inquiry into the question of how the writer endowed

² Gillian Boddy, *Katherine Mansfield: The Woman and the Writer*, Ringwood: Penguin 1988, p. 172, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/version/171431823> [accessed 20 November 2017].

³ Melissa C. Reimer, *Katherine Mansfield: A Colonial Impressionist* PhD dissertation, University of Canterbury, 2010, p. 258. For more about Mansfield and still life see Anna Kwiatkowska, "Martwa natura w opowiadaniach Katherine Mansfield" in: *Literatura a malarstwo*, ed. J. Godlewicz-Adamiec, P. Kociumbas, T. Szybisty, Warszawa-Kraków: iMEDIUS 2017, pp. 205–218.

⁴ William Rankin, "Ineffability in the Fiction of Jean Toomer and Katherine Mansfield", in: *Renaissance and Modern: Essays in Honor of Edwin M. Moseley*, ed. M.J. Levith, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press 1976, p. 167.

her female protagonists with the characteristics that echo the features of women painted by seventeenth-century artists. And secondly, the paper will strive to establish why Mansfield would resort to Dutch canvases while constructing her modern texts. However, the paper is but an introduction into a deeper and more complex inquiry into the works of Katherine Mansfield in relation to seventeenth century paintings.

In order to show the affinity with the past masters and to examine the function of the verbal Dutch-like portrayals of women, such elements of literary text as space and setting, character and narrator will be examined. The crux of the discussion will be shaped around selected passages from three stories: "Feuille d'Album", "Prelude" and "New Dresses". The approach employed in the study is that of transmediality⁵, since the oeuvre of Mansfield definitely seems to call for it as the writer doubtlessly goes across media boundaries. The analysis and interpretation will be preceded by a brief overview of Dutch genre paintings featuring women.

Old Masters

When it comes to the subject matter recurrently observed in Dutch paintings of the seventeenth century, a woman and her daily life unquestionably come to the fore. Thus, among "the almost always idyllic, amorous mythological and pastoral scenes, as well as many still lifes and landscapes [there are] the innumerable genre pieces in which love, youth, virtue, and vice play an important role — usually with a young woman as the focus"⁶. What is more, as Simon Schama emphasises, "Dutch culture was overwhelmingly intimate, domestic and interior in character"⁷. He continues his discussion by pointing out that Dutch art changed the perception of women — no longer were they fragile, almost unearthly creatures, muses to poets and painters. Instead, they plainly became a vivid part of everyday reality and the associations they inspired were those related to their duties towards the family and the home⁸. Subsequently, as Gerard Koot remarks, the Dutch scenes featuring women were obviously staged for the sake of the message (setting an example of home virtues) and its enhancement⁹. Moreover, one should also remember that these portrayals of female fate were executed by men. Therefore, while looking at the paintings of Jan Vermeer or Pieter de Hooch we should

⁵ As discussed in Marie-Laure Ryan *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska Press 2004; Werner Wolf, "Narrative and Narrativity: A Narratological Reconceptualisation and Its Applicability to the Visual Arts", *Words & Image* 2003, vol. 19 pp. 180–197, Werner Wolf, *Theory and Typology, Literature-music Relations, Transmedial Narratology, Miscellaneous Transmedial Phenomena*, ed. W. Bernhart, Leiden/Boston: Brill-Rodopi 2018.

⁶ Eric J. Sluijter, "Didactic and Disguised Meanings? Several Seventeenth-century Texts on Painting and the Iconological Approach to Northern Dutch Paintings of This Period", *Art in History. History in Art: Studies in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Culture, Issues & Debates* 1991, p. 189.

⁷ Simon Schama, "Wives and Wantons: Versions of Womanhood in 17th-century Dutch Art", *The Oxford Art Journal*, 1980, p. 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Gerard Koot, *The Portrayal of Women in Dutch Art of the Dutch Golden Age: Courtship, Marriage and Old Age*, 2015, pp. 29-30, <http://www1.umassd.edu/euro/resources/imagesessays/theportrayalofwomenindutchartofthedutchgoldenage.pdf> [accessed 28 February 2018].

be more inquiring as to the quiet happiness beaming from the scenes in which women are presented pleasantly engaged in suitable activities such as sewing, child minding, tending the kitchen, music making and letter writing or reading. Was such a blissful representation of feminine home life true to life? As Koot claims, “[a] significant number of domestic genre paintings of the seventeenth century are informed by an idealisation of the home and the roles women enact within them”¹⁰. He further suggests that presenting women in domestic, everyday situations served the purpose of evoking “a sense of security, stability and wholesomeness”¹¹. Subsequently, the women figures from the canvases should be viewed as epitomes of certain rules, values and patterns of behaviour to be followed by the females of Dutch society¹². As a result, women were perceived as an indispensable element of domestic space. Books on the home and family, like Jacob Cats’ *Houweyck* [‘Marriage’] (1625), underlined the connection of Dutch Republic women with the house, and emphasised the significance of proper execution of household chores for conjugal happiness.

Coming back to the paintings, among many scenes portraying domestic virtue there is an image of a woman sewing or doing some other needlework. Assiduous working with a needle was to serve as a tool to overcome vices and repent for sins¹³. Needlework was therefore also a symbol of diligence and hard work¹⁴. In order to convince the young women that this path of orderly domesticity was the only one to follow, idyllic and tranquil pictures were juxtaposed with scenes of domestic mayhem such as, for example Jan Steen’s “Dissolute Household” (ca. 1668). Therefore, Dutch paintings, apart from decorating the houses, often served a didactic function which was “conveyed by symbolism that is not immediately apparent but lies beneath the ostensibly ‘realistic’ representation of itself”¹⁵. Other anxiously employed motifs by Dutch masters included letter writing or reading and music making. As for the former, Arthur K. Wheelock, for instance, in his engrossing book on Dutch seventeenth-century art indicates the tensions between individual concerns and communal ones that can be found in paintings which deal with correspondence. He emphasises the importance of a letter as a link between the private and the public world¹⁶. On the subject of music, it is examined, among others, by John Nash. He discusses the function and symbolism as well as compositional aspects of Vermeer’s canvases in relation to music, musical instruments and music paraphernalia¹⁷.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Klaske Muizelaar, Derek Phillips, *Picturing Men and Women in the Dutch Golden Age*, New Haven, London: YUP 2003, p. 120; Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society*, London: Thames & Hudson 2007, p. 12.

¹⁴ Koot, *op. cit.*, p. 4, 18.

¹⁵ Eddy de Jongh, *Questions of Meaning; Theme and Motif in Dutch Seventeenth-century Genre Painting*, trans. and ed. M. Holye, Leiden: Primavera Press 2000, p. 7.

¹⁶ *The Public and the Private in the Age of Vermeer*, ed. A.K. Wheelock, Jr., London: Philip Wilson Publishers 2000, p. 19.

¹⁷ John Nash, *Vermeer*, trans. H. Andrzejewska, Warszawa: Arkady 1998, pp. 71–78.

As shown above, contemplating the images of women in Dutch paintings, we inevitably arrive at the question of domesticity. Thinking about painterly representations of the concept of home, the canvases executed by Vermeer, de Hooch and Gabriel Metsu, unequivocally come to mind. They pictorially define the domestic situation in terms of quietness, order, soft light and cleanliness, with women silently hovering over their daily chores. In this unhurried world words are rarely uttered. Communication with the viewer is expressed merely by gesture, a gentle smile, the pose of the presented figure. As a consequence, Dutch canvases become carriers of the notion of domesticity since they tend to evoke positive feelings rooted in the harmonious and the idyllic¹⁸. What is more, as Schama rightly notices, domesticity in the Dutch canvases focuses “on privacy in the middle-class family” which results “in a clear dividing line between the intimate, cosy, secure indoor world of the home and the perilous world outside”¹⁹. Thereupon, interiors in Dutch paintings are perceived as epitomes of homely happiness, frequently endowed by their creators with certain symbolic meanings related to moral values and the healthy practicality of life. Scholars also point to the conspicuous feminization of such interiors²⁰. Interestingly enough, the term “domesticity” understood as privacy, intimacy and comfort, appeared as late as the nineteenth century and was frequently built around the seventeenth-century Dutch paintings of Vermeer or de Hooch²¹. According to Heidi de Mare, it was nineteenth-century comfortable bourgeois life which was a springboard for the sentimental idea of the home which was only later “applied to seventeenth-century paintings, books and houses”²². However, further in her article she claims that the nineteenth-century ideology of the home is actually missing from Dutch paintings. She convincingly argues that the division between the home and the street should be understood in physical terms rather than emotional ones²³.

Nevertheless, some form of emotional expression is to be detected in the canvases. Among various methods employed by the Dutch masters in order to introduce some tension into the scenes, manipulation of perspective seems to be the most favoured. For instance, in Vermeer’s works frequently “[t]he bond with the viewer’s physique is broken and the viewing subject is [...] proposed and assumed as a notional point, a non-empirical Gaze”²⁴. In consequence, when one looks at the paintings of Vermeer, the feeling of the presence of the painter is created. Yet the artist does not belong

¹⁸ The discussions devoted to the concept of domesticity and its gentle nature in the seventeenth-century Dutch paintings can be found in numerous publications, among others in: Christopher Brown, *Scenes of Everyday Life: Dutch Genre Painting of the Seventeenth Century*, London: Faber 1984; A. T. Van Duersen, *Plain Lives in a Golden Age*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1991; Wayne E. Franits, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in 17th Century Dutch Art*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1993.

¹⁹ Heidi de Mare, “Domesticity in Dispute. A Reconsideration of Sources”, in: *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space*, vol. 1, ed. I. Cieraad, New York: Syracuse University Press 2006, p. 14.

²⁰ Witold Rybczyński, *Dom. Krótka historia idei*, Gdańsk-Warszawa: Marabut 1996, p. 77.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²⁴ Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, New Haven: YUP 1983, p. 12.

to the painting, its narrative; rather, he acts as an observer, a figure who is very close to the painted scene²⁵. Additionally, Dutch genre paintings oftentimes also induced a feeling of curiosity which in turn would add to their charm. A tool used for setting such “domestically mysterious” ambience was frequently that of defamiliarization. By mixing the real with the imagined, the artists would endow their works of domestic bliss with an intriguing atmosphere²⁶.

Finally, it is also worth noting that the love of interiors, personal or social in its nature, was so strong in the Dutch that they developed a fashion for keeping miniature houses, replicas of their own houses, in otherwise uninteresting cupboards which, when opened, would display exquisitely furnished little spaces, complete with miniature copies of paintings on their walls. And, although they looked like toy houses, they were not for playing with. They acted as small show-cases to be admired by the guests and as little reservoirs of memories for the inhabitants of the house²⁷.

Katherine Mansfield

Turning to Katherine Mansfield and her oeuvre, this New Zealand Modernist writer, as has been already mentioned, is known for her deep interest in women-related issues. She introduced her ideas and doubts using various modes of modern, often experimental, narrative technique. In foregrounding her feminine themes, Mansfield eagerly resorted to methods of writing based on the indirect and the veiled. For this reason, she made use of associations, allusions and symbols²⁸. Additionally, since Mansfield was famous for her love of the visual arts, her narratives are predominantly based on ekphrastic descriptions. Subsequently, her stories are constructed with the use of techniques borrowed from the visual arts and translated into verbal code. This correlation between the art of painting and the art of writing is noted by many scholars discussing Mansfield’s oeuvre²⁹.

When presenting her protagonist, Mansfield employs strategies similar to those used by the Old Masters. She would manipulate time by making (extensive) use of flashbacks and flashforwards³⁰. Thanks to these temporal shifts and adjustments, she successfully managed to blur the borders between past and present.

Time treatment is inevitably connected with perspective. Mansfield introduces the reader to the life of her characters by way of glimpses of their domestic situations as if seen

²⁵ Nash, op. cit., p. 35.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 37.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 68.

²⁸ Boddy, op. cit., p. 167.

²⁹ See, for example, Janet Wilson, “Veiling and Unveiling: Mansfield’s Modernist Aesthetics”, *Journal of New Zealand Literature (JNZL)* 2014, no. 32, pt. 2: *Special Issue: Katherine Mansfield Masked and Unmasked*; Julia van Gunsteren, *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Impressionism*. Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA: Rodopi B.V. 1990; Liliane Louvel, *Poetics of the Iconotext*, trans. L. Petit, Farnham: Ashgate 2011.

³⁰ Her concerns related to handling time in her stories are visible in her letters to her husband, e.g. in the one dated 21 November 1921, John Middleton Murry, *Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/collections.html>, [accessed 14 May 2018].

through a half-open door or window³¹. Others talk of cinematic close-ups and discuss her fictional constructs in terms of film techniques³². What follows is that, as in Dutch paintings, Mansfield's narrator is more of an observer who is very close to the scene. Thanks to this, the reader can *watch* the scene as if from *within* the story, enjoying "a slice of life" of the private, often intimate, world of the characters³³. And these characters are predominantly women who are inextricably linked to the homely and the domestic. Boddy even writes about Mansfield's "domestic mythology of the female community" and insists that when the Burnell children play house, "the configuration of socialization is less important than the consecration of the house into a sacred space"³⁴.

Practical consideration

The stranger

Verbal images depicting women and their daily activities are innumerable in Mansfield's short stories. Many of them echo the works of Dutch painters, particularly Vermeer, de Hooch and Metz, due to the type of activity presented on the one hand, and the timeless, pictorial representation of the scene on the other. The following passage comes from "Feuille d'album":

It was the kitchen. He heard the clatter of the dishes as she washed up after supper, and then **she came to the window, knocked a little mop against the ledge, and hung it on a nail to dry**. She never sang or unbraided her hair, or held out her arms to the moon as young girls are supposed to do. And she always wore the same dark pinafore and the pink handkerchief over her hair. [...] Whom did she live with? Nobody else came to those two windows, and yet she was always talking to someone in the room³⁵.

The observer of the scene is Ian French, a young painter who lives opposite and is intrigued by the girl (who is nameless throughout the story). He has seen her before coming to the little balcony but he would love to know more about her. The girl is modestly dressed and she is putting away the mop after cleaning. The girl's daily routine in taking care of the house (washing-up and tidying) is clearly indicated by the location ("it was the kitchen"), the sounds ("clatter of the dishes") and the object she puts out against the ledge ("a little mop"). The ordinariness and predictability of her life, expressed by the repetitiveness of the tasks, is further amplified by the structure of the description.

³¹ E.g. Boddy, *op. cit.*, 170; Sylvia Berkman, *Katherine Mansfield. A Critical Study*, New Haven: YUP 1959, p. 150.

³² More about Mansfield and film can be found in Sarah Sandly's article "Leaping into the Eyes: Mansfield as a Cinematic Writer", in: *Celebrating Katherine Mansfield: A Centenary Volume of Essays*, eds. G. Kimber and J. Wilson, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave-Macmillan 2011, pp. 72–83; or in Maurizio Ascari's *Cinema and the Imagination in Katherine Mansfield's Writing*, Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan 2014.

³³ The technique identified later in narratology by Gerard Genette as *metalepsis* (*Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Ithaca: Cornell UP 1980).

³⁴ Boddy, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

³⁵ Katherine Mansfield, *Bliss and Other Stories*, Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics 1998, p. 126 [emphasis mine].

The elements of the composition are supplied to the reader in the form of an enumeration. The actions she performs (see the underlined sections) are merely registered, void of any emotional comment. They do not bear any suggestion of her personality or her attitude towards the housework. Her clothes are also noted in a similar matter-of-fact way. The limited range of colour and light add to the simplicity of the presentation – the evening light, “dark pinafore”, “the pink handkerchief”, oblique background (the interior). Paradoxically, as in the paintings by Vermeer or de Hooch, the ordinary gradually transforms into the mysterious. Neither the observer nor the reader is allowed to see more. The tantalising glimpse triggers curiosity but also apprehension. The latter stems not only from the fact that the interior is impenetrable but also because the observer’s anticipations as to the girl’s behaviour never come true. Moreover, they are ridiculed by the narrator who shows them as unreal since they are conceived merely on the basis of the “young-girls-are-supposed-to-do” notion. These theatrical and pseudo-romantic, unrealistic dreams of the observer are juxtaposed with the ordinary moment of the girl’s life. The concise and orderly manner of narratorial presentation of the girl’s routine is contrasted with the dissatisfied and irritated tone of French’s voice. The clash, on the one hand, results in the praise for everydayness (the narratorial stand) and the mockery of the unrealistic (the focaliser’s world view being laughed at), and on the other, creates a certain, emotionally loaded, border between the public and the private.

Apart from the above, the idea of looking at an engrossing picture is additionally suggested by the ellipsis. The suspension points offer a time for contemplation. They act in a similar way to the onlooker’s gaze. The observer, and the reader together with him, focus their thoughts entirely on the figure of the girl framed by the window. This is further evidenced by the question and the remark about someone in the room. On top of that, the verbal description of the scene is characterised by a timeless quality. The moment verbally painted before our (mind’s) eyes lacks markers of any distinct historical time. The division into the past and the present is blurred. This temporal liminality is created by the repetition of particular actions as well as by a high probability of their occurrence, marked most vividly with the adverb of frequency (“always”). This temporal suspension is also signalled by the lack of change underlined by the further adverb, i.e. “never”, and fortified by the enumeration of the elements which *are not* there (singing, unbraiding the hair, holding out arms to the moon). Finally, the fact that the onlooker is a painter intensifies the feeling that what the reader is contemplating is a picture, a construct whose nature implies a mixture of (the fictional character’s) real life and fictitious (conjured in the head of the painter, Ian French) reality.

The echoes of Old Masters in Mansfield’s narrative reverberate most compellingly on two levels. First, it is the straightforward reference to the domestic situation and the representation of the female figure that make the story reminiscent of the Dutch Masters in terms of theme. Secondly, there is the matter of perspective which persistently links the two. Similarly, to the ideologically packed visual narratives of the Dutch, the above

verbal description of the girl is constructed around a spatiotemporal network which is devoid of a clear delineation of specific space and time, but instead makes a comment on the life of women in general³⁶. As a result, the portrayal, otherwise rich in detail, offers but a restricted vista of the character. In other words, the Mansfieldian narrator merely suggests actual/fictional reality, via selected fragments characterised by unspecific time yet with a very suggestive location and focus. They point to the role of women in society and to the way they are perceived by men. And the very “slices of women’s life” inevitably bring to mind Dutch pictures³⁷.

Old Mrs. Fairfield

Another example which shows the incorporation of the Dutch tradition in a modern text comes from “Prelude”, Mansfield’s most acclaimed and advanced story in terms of narrative technique:

It was hard to believe that she had not been in that kitchen for years; she was so much a part of it. She put the crocks away with a sure, precise touch, moving leisurely and ample from the stove to the dresser, looking into the pantry and the larder as though there were not an unfamiliar corner. When she had finished, everything in the kitchen had become part of a series of patterns. She stood in the middle of the room wiping her hands on a check cloth; a smile beamed on her lips; she thought it looked very nice, very satisfactory³⁸.

This time it is the location in which the character, Mrs. Fairfield, is presented, that makes the most striking connection with Dutch works. The description of the figure of Mrs. Fairfield in the kitchen shows her as an element of it. She belongs to that place. The textual markers such as “sure” and “precise” connote repetitive actions but also express the fact that the person working there is at ease. Besides, such lexical items as “leisurely” and “ample” indicate certain familiarity and pleasure further evidenced by the broad smile on Mrs. Fairfield’s face. What is more, this English kitchen brings to mind the Dutch showcase-like kitchens. The rooms for cooking that we can enjoy on the canvases by the Old masters are well lit, extremely orderly and spotlessly clean, as if for admiring rather than using. What is also interesting is that the Dutch kitchens were not tended by servants. In larger households, the mistress of the house would have just one maid to help her. The kitchen was by far the most important place in the Dutch house³⁹. And the kitchen in the Burnells’ house is just such a place. Although

³⁶ On narratology and ideology see Terry Eagleton’s “Ideology, Fiction, Narrative”, *Social Text* 1979, vol. 2, pp. 62–80 or his *Ideology. An Introduction*, London: Verso 2007; Gerard Genette’s *Figures II*, Paris: Seuil 1979; Roland Barthes’ *S/Z*, New York: Hill and Wang 1974.

³⁷ Jean Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism from Dryden to Gray*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1958; Rudolph Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*, Berkley: UCP 1969; May Ann Caaws, *The Eye in the Text: Essays on Perception, Mannerist to Modern*, New Jersey: Princeton UP 1981; Seweryna Wystouch, *Literatura a sztuki wizualne*, Warszawa, PWN 1994; Mario Praz, *Mnemosyne: The Parallel Between Literature and Visual Arts*, Princeton: Princeton UP 1970.

³⁸ Mansfield, *Bliss*, op. cit., p. 17.

³⁹ Ryczyński, op. cit., p. 78.

the Burnells are a well-off (they have just moved out from the city to a bigger dwelling with a large garden in the countryside) middle class family composed of three children, their mother pregnant with another child, her sister, the father and grandmother, the whole house is tended by the Burnell women and one servant girl. Quite an unusual situation in English houses at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. Such a respectable family would be expected to have at least a cook, a nanny and a maid⁴⁰. Besides, a number of staff “was an obvious indication of wealth”⁴¹. But in the Burnells’ new fashionable house the women took care of their domestic establishment almost entirely by themselves. Thus, the kitchen is the realm of old Mrs. Fairfield who is generally in charge of preparing dishes and keeping the space tidy. What is more, the portrayal of Mrs. Fairfield is done predominantly via the kitchen, through serving or preparing food and taking care of the children. Beyond any doubt, this is a kitchen where she feels comfortable, ‘at home’, occasionally only slipping into the garden. What is also worth noticing, just as in many Dutch paintings, her link with the outside world is oftentimes via the window (e.g. “In the kitchen at the long deal table under the two windows old Mrs. Fairfield was washing the breakfast dishes. The kitchen windows looked out onto a big grass patch that led down to the vegetable garden and the rhubarb beds”⁴²). And it is not only the narrator who notes the tight linkage between Mrs. Fairfield and the kitchen space and the window. Linda Burnell, Mrs. Fairfield’s married daughter, notices that “her Mother looked wonderfully beautiful standing with her back to the leafy window [in the kitchen]”⁴³. Mrs. Fairfield was, genuinely, an indispensable aesthetic part of the kitchen. Just as a fragment of a spotless, clean, tidy room with black-and-white floor tiles and a chair rings of the paintings of van Hooch or Vermeer, the kitchen in the Burnells’ house “says ‘mother’ all over”⁴⁴. Using the image of a tidy kitchen with the smiling, quiet figure of Mrs. Fairfield in it, Mansfield implants the broad and complex notion of domesticity in the minds of the readers. The writer explains this narrative strategy of suggesting certain mind states and emotions in the following way: “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 else will do”⁴⁵). Therefore, a short description of the scene which includes old Mrs. Fairfield, translates in our minds to the whole concept of a home which is composed of, among others, cosiness, warmth and safety, tradition and kindness but also playfulness. Like

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴¹ Alison Maloney, *Life Below Stairs. True Lives of Edwardian Servants*, London: Michael O’Mara Books Limited 2015, p. 13.

⁴² Mansfield, *Bliss*, op. cit., p. 17.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴⁵ *Letters between Katherine Mansfield and John Middleton Murray*, ed. Ch.A. Hankin, New York: New Amsterdam Books 1998, p. 212.

the seventeen-century painters, Mansfield indicates rather than tells directly; she communicates with the reader using a “pictorially infused” supercode⁴⁶.

Alice

The passage below is to be found in “Prelude”:

Up in the house, in the warm tidy kitchen, Alice, the servant girl, was getting the afternoon tea. She was “dressed.” She had on a black stuff dress that smelt under the arms, a white apron like a large sheet of paper, and a lace bow pinned on to her hair with two jetty pins. Also her comfortable carpet slippers were changed for a pair of black leather ones that pinched her corn on her little toe something dreadful. . .

It was warm in the kitchen. A **blow-fly buzzed**, a fan of whity **steam came out of the kettle**, and **the lid kept up a rattling jig as the water bubbled. The clock ticked** in the warm air, **slow and deliberate**, like the click of an old woman’s knitting needle, and sometimes – for no reason at all, for there wasn’t any breeze – **the blind swung out and back, tapping the window.**

Alice was making water-cress sandwiches. She had a lump of butter on the table, a barracouta loaf, and the cresses tumbled in a white cloth⁴⁷.

This time the reader gets a glimpse of the life of Alice, a servant girl. Unlike old Mrs. Fairfield, Alice is but a guest in the kitchen. This time the focus is on the place rather than on the character. The figure of the servant girl is shown as an artificial element there. In her official black dress and black leather shoes, she is only seemingly a match to the clean, tidy, warm kitchen. The theatricality of the girl is expressed by her stilted costume and uncomfortable shoes as well as by her black and white figure, which makes a startling contrast to the otherwise natural and lively surroundings. Paradoxically, living Alice is quite static in comparison with the inanimate objects which appear far more alive (see the underlined sections). Her stillness is amplified by the fact that she is shown standing at the table which in itself brings to mind Dutch still lifes. At the same time, however, as in many Dutch paintings, the servant is shown as a human being⁴⁸. With her “dress that smelt under the arms” and her shoes “that pinched her corn on her little toe something dreadful” Alice becomes more than just an element of a picturesque composition. The authenticity of the character is emphasised by the change in the narratorial voice. We learn about the too tight shoes through free indirect discourse – this is the girl’s and not the observer’s perspective. Moreover, the mixing of voices is adroitly linked with

⁴⁶ To show the intricacy of her associations and to complete the picture of Linda Burnell’s mother it is important to note Mrs. Fairfield’s name. It adds to the pastoral and idyllic picture of the elderly lady, not only thanks to its literal meaning but above all because of the allusion to Mansfield’s own grandmother’s name, i.e. Beauchamp (Susan Gubar, “The Birth of the Artist as Heroine: (Re)production, the Kunstlerroman Tradition, and the Fiction of Katherine Mansfield”, in: *The Representation of Women in Fiction*, ed. C.G. Heilbrun, M.R. Higginnet, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1983, p. 36).

⁴⁷ Mansfield, *Bliss*, op. cit., p. 32 [emphasis mine].

⁴⁸ Koot, op. cit., p. 57.

the shifting of perspective. The Mansfieldian observer who enters the kitchen, first focuses on a close-up of Alice. She is the object of scrutiny and attention. Only later, after a break meant for the contemplation of Alice and her life (ellipsis) the focus moves away from her and the reader is given a view of the place rendered through an enumeration of its elements, one after another. Yet since each of the mentioned objects is briefly described (e.g. “whity steam” “rattling jig”, “bubbled”, “warm air”) with the use of lexical items evoking positive emotions, the ambience of the space is that of quiet domesticity. Interestingly, the comparison “like the click of an old woman’s knitting needle”, is reminiscent of (absent) old Mrs. Fairfield who, in the course of the story, is presented to the reader while knitting. This only amplifies the domesticity of the presented space and the fact that this is the realm of the grandmother. Finally, the observer comes back to Alice, but this time the girl is shown from a distance – the framed scene includes the table, as a part of the already mentioned static composition⁴⁹.

Mrs. Carsfield

An interesting analogy between the seventeenth-century portrayals of women at home and Mansfieldian female characters can be likewise reached via the motif of sewing. This activity, as on the Old Master canvases, is quite common among the women in Mansfield’s short stories. One of the narratives, “New Dresses”, is almost entirely, in terms of plot, devoted to the needlework. The opening paragraph includes the following scene:

Mrs. Carsfield and her mother sat at the dining-room table putting the finishing touches to some green cashmere dresses. [...] The red cloth was taken off the table — where stood the wedding-present sewing machine, a brown work-basket, the “material”, and some torn fashion journals. Mrs. Carsfield worked the machine, slowly, for she feared the green thread would give out, and had a sort of tired hope that it might last longer if she was careful to use a little at a time; the old woman sat in a rocking chair, her skirt turned back, and her felt-slipped feet on a hassock, tying the machine threads and stitching some narrow lace on the necks and cuffs. The gas jet flickered⁵⁰.

To start off, this is an intensely vivid reference to the senses of sight (colour) and touch (various fabrics) that bridges the scene described with the world of the visual arts in the first place. Additionally, the quality of the colour – bold, contrastive and unambiguous, as well as certain signs of wealth (the fabric from which the dresses are made, the sewing machine, the gas lamp, fashion journals) direct the reader to Dutch paintings saturated with rich colours and presenting women doing their needlework either in fine interiors or over fine fabrics. Dutch affinity is further emphasised by the pose

⁴⁹ There are many other examples in “Prelude” which enter into a transmedia dialogue with the Dutch masters. One of them is the passage with Beryl playing the guitar. A detailed discussion of that scene will appear in: Anna Kwiatkowska, “Modern Mansfield and Old Masters. Hypotyposis in Selected Short Stories by Katherine Mansfield”, *Modernism Re-visited*, Vol. XII, eds. U. Gołębiowska, M. Kubasiewicz [to be published in 2018].

⁵⁰ Katherine Mansfield, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics 2006, p. 453.

of the woman (she has her feet on a hassock) and the object of her work (lace). Seventeenth-century paintings show many female figures who, when seated, often rest their feet on a footwarmer and are bent over a delicate lace pattern. (e.g. the *Lacemakers* by Metzsu or Vermeer). However, when taking a closer look, the pleasantness and quiet domestic happiness emanating from the Dutch works is not to be seen in Mansfield's story. In the quoted passage, interwoven in the seemingly domestic bliss is the feeling of toil, nervousness and uncertainty. Despite the words "wedding" and "present", which are associated with something extraordinary and generally pleasant, the "wedding-present sewing machine" phrase proclaims hard work and mundane everydayness. In the aftermath, the social expectations pertinent to the domestic life of a young wife are well exposed on the dining room table. The amplification of harsh reality is further connoted by such words and phrases as "slowly", "feared", "tired hope", "careful" and "flickered". Nevertheless, the underlying meaning relating to sewing scenes in Dutch paintings correlates with the theme foregrounded by sewing in Mansfield's story (i.e. the place of a married woman in a patriarchal society). In both cases sewing stands for hard work and diligence. It testifies to women's training and proper skills as housewives. Both these texts of culture thus serve as representations of certain ideas related to the domestic life of women. The difference, however, is in the attitude of the addresser of the texts. Mansfield's narrator, by endowing the scene with an agitated atmosphere, criticises the social entrapment of women in domestic chores, whereas the Dutch artists approve and popularise the patriarchal model as most correct and thus socially desired. As Eddy de Jongh states, the aim of seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting "was to instruct and delight the viewer"⁵¹ whereas Mansfield's stories strive to make the readers more aware and informed of the fears and apprehension that many contemporary women experienced in their married states.

As for the perspective employed, in the passage quoted once more the narrator-observer appears very close to the described scene, as if she were sitting at the same table with the characters. The story not only starts *in medias res* but also with a couple of close-ups which, on the one hand, intensify the notion of unknowing and, on the other, arouse curiosity. The view offered is restricted to the table and the women. There is no indication as to the size of the room, nor to the number and size of the windows or other furniture. In effect, the reader is as focused as the characters bending over their work. The tension of the women is forced onto the reader. As before, the description frames a selected, emotionally charged genre painting-like scene.

Conclusions

The above is but a glimpse into the rich array of Mansfield's female figures who show an affinity with Dutch genre paintings. In her oeuvre Mansfield enters into a trans-medial dialogue with the Dutch canvases via themes, motifs, symbols, characteristic

⁵¹ De Jongh, op. cit.

objects and locations, ambience, narrative strategies and composition. The analogies can be veiled and subtle (disclosed by means of symbol, understatement, allusion or with the help of techniques borrowed from visual works such as chiaroscuro, contrast, colour, and manipulation of time and perspective). But they can be direct and easily spotted as well (the parallels are frequently observed in setting, elements of space, location or title⁵², in the focus on the everyday and in the fact that the visual seems to dominate over the narrated). This article has shown but a tiny part of such diverse affinities. Nevertheless, even on the basis of the few examples considered above, it becomes plausible to claim that Mansfield's short stories are quite substantially influenced by her adoration of Old Masters⁵³. And while touching upon the subject of women, it seems that the most striking connections between Dutch masters and Mansfield can be discerned in the type of space and type of narrator, as well as in an elaborate, laced construction of the respective fictitious realities.

The short stories of Katherine Mansfield, like the Dutch paintings, manifest a deep interest in the feminine interior and domesticity. The analyses confirm that the house in Mansfield's stories is the most important space dedicated to women, which is used as a vehicle to express the most private emotions of the characters and disclose their attitudes towards others and towards the surrounding reality. Domestic space valorises the protagonists, is an indispensable part of characterization and setting. Interestingly, Mansfield's concept of domesticity appears to be a mixture of the idealised presentation emanating from the Dutch paintings, the nineteenth century understanding of this term and the modernist approach to it.

As for the Mansfieldian narrator, it is analogous to the one of the Dutch texts of culture. She is an attentive and vigilant observer, with a sharp eye on detail, light, colour, minute gestures and facial expressions, materials. However, while classic Dutch women are representations filtered through the male perspective, offering thus a male interpretation of women's role and place in society, ostensibly propagating the patriarchal social order, Mansfield's female figures are rendered, with very few exceptions, from a woman's perspective and presented to the reader often via a sexless, yet quite feminine, narrator. Therefore, the pictorial representations of women in Mansfield stories disclose a different face of domesticity – oftentimes a life of toil and spiritual loneliness, full of fear of trespassing on social borders and expectations⁵⁴. Yet Mansfield does not do away entirely with traditionally understood domesticity. This is particularly evident in the figure of old Mrs. Fairfield who is a tribute to domestic life. She seems to be the closest to the Dutch

⁵² This happens for instance in "Marriage à la Mode" when the protagonist, Isabel, who receives a love letter from her old-fashioned (according to her modern friends), husband, is referred to by one of her guests as "A lady reading a letter". The discussion of this reference, however, in the context of the whole story combined with other allusions to Old Masters in the said story would call for a separate article.

⁵³ See the motto of the article.

⁵⁴ This is far more visible when the passages are examined in the context of the whole story. Nevertheless, even these few glimpses offered by the quotes provided give the reader an idea of the uneasy, traditional and socially complicated life of Mansfield's women.

women in her quiet acceptance, hard work, and love of the everyday. She epitomises the idyllic past, Mansfield's childhood included. Consequently, the Mansfieldian teller is a timeless being who shares the knowledge of the past and the anxiety of the modern.

Turning to the construction of Mansfield's fictional realities, its most pronounced feature is the fusion of elements taken from outside-text reality, visual arts and fantasy. One could use the words of Franits, an expert on Dutch genre paintings, to describe the method used by Mansfield. Franits observes that what we see on the seventeenth-century Dutch canvases are but limited, selected aspects of domesticity which, therefore, should be perceived as "a selective, fictitious construct. [...] meticulous re-creations of reality that are fictitious because they synthesize observed fact and invention"⁵⁵. Similarly, in Mansfield's case, her decision as to the type of character and setting are not merely the products of her imagination. She makes use of culturally established symbolic models, and draws both from traditional and contemporary social situations to create her fictional, yet emotionally true, feminine world. As in Dutch paintings in which the meaning "is an essential constituent, intimately bound up with their mimetic qualities"⁵⁶, each single message, as well as the whole system of values, emerging from Mansfield's works are combined with particular elements which mirror the reality (both past and present) to which they inevitably belong. Also following Dutch painters, the writer narrows down the number of objects⁵⁷ and locations, thus endowing them with significance. The difference being that the symbolic reading of the objects scattered in the Dutch paintings was easily decipherable by their contemporary viewers⁵⁸, whereas Mansfield's readers have to gradually learn the coded language to unveil complex messages underlining her seemingly simple stories about mundane everyday domestic occurrences.

To answer the second question posed at the beginning of this article as to the purpose of Mansfield's use of Dutch masters, the social stance illustrated in the works of the Old Masters complete and reinforce Mansfield's comment on the situation of female characters from her stories and, by analogy, on the situation and modes of thinking of women and about women at the awakening of the twentieth century⁵⁹. In her stories, the writer tries to attract and lock the reader's attention onto the predicament of modern women. Many of her female characters eagerly seize new opportunities offered to them

⁵⁵ Franits, op. cit., p. 13.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ (NB. many of them reminiscent of the seventeen-century canvases).

⁵⁸ Franits, op. cit., p. 14.

⁵⁹ For gender / feminist discussions see, for example, Susan Lanser's article "Towards (a Queer and) More (Feminist) Narratology" in: *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, ed. R. Warhol and S. S. Lanser, Columbus: The Ohio State University Press 2015, pp. 23-42, in which she focuses on the function of narrative in cultural context and ponders over the question of free indirect discourse and its role in the works of, among others, Katherine Mansfield. Other publications dealing with the issue of women and strategy modes employed for expressing it are, for instance, Susan Friedman's *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, Princeton: Princeton UP 1998; Robyn R Warhol's "Guilty Cravings: What Feminist Narratology Can Do for Cultural Studies", in: *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, ed. David Herman, Columbus: Ohio State UP 1999, pp. 340-355; Susan Lanser's "Sapphic Dialogics: Historical Narratology and the Sexuality of Form", in: *Postclassical Narratology: Approaches and Analyses*, ed. J. Alber and M. Fludernik, Columbus: Ohio State UP 2010, pp. 186-205.

by the changing world. However, what Mansfield also suggests is that, although women of the early twentieth century enjoy more freedom and have more rights, in practice rarely are they brave enough to make use of the new situation. Likewise, nothing really changes when it comes to the way they are treated or perceived. They continue to be a part of patriarchally defined domesticity. On the one hand, the modern interiors presented in Mansfield's stories are private retreats – the women in them are just more at ease than in a public space. Yet this is quite an illusionary privacy. Just as in the seventh-century paintings, Mansfield's modern women are active at home as they are expected to be by society. Mansfield re-used and adapted the old Dutch model of domesticity preserved in genre paintings to her own ends. Old masters are there to strengthen her message on the gap between theory and practice in relation to women and their place in society. Paradoxically, using the silence of Dutch masters, she makes her social critique more audible. The ostensible plainness of Mansfield's short stories (the simple life situation of the characters, action frequently reduced to a minimum) framed in a visually and aesthetically compelling way, conceals, as with the Dutch painters, a complex net of social conventions in which her women characters are shrouded.

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