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## ‘The secret self’: time, memory and childhood in two short stories by Katherine Mansfield

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This article examines Katherine Mansfield’s notion of self by considering two of her short stories, ‘Prelude’ (1918) and ‘At the bay’ (1922), as well as her biographical writing. It links her desire to acknowledge “the secret self” with her inclination to examine and contest existing notions of the self and its expression in fiction. Mansfield was concerned with exploring the self at its least inhibited, and for this reason the article focuses on works that draw on childhood reminiscences. It also discusses Mansfield’s innovative use of time to suggest the properties of memory. It explores how Mansfield’s art differed from the conventions and traditions of Edwardian fiction, as well as how she was influenced by, and stood in relation to contemporaries with whom she corresponded, such as Virginia Woolf and D H Lawrence, thus also placing her in a modernist context. It also examines how Freud’s concept of the unconscious functions in Mansfield’s fiction, drawing on Kristeva’s writing for this analysis. It argues that Mansfield’s achievement of her distinctive voice as a writer is interwoven with her exploration of ideas of self.

## ‘Die geheime self’: tyd, geheue en kindsdae in twee kort verhale deur Katherine Mansfield

Hierdie artikel ondersoek Katherine Mansfield se denkbeeld van die self deur middel van twee van haar kort verhale ‘Prelude’ (1918) en ‘At the bay’ (1922), en haar biografiese werke. Dit koppel haar begeerte om “die geheime self” te erken met haar voorkeur om bestaande selfidees en die uitdrukking daarvan te ondersoek. Mansfield wou die self ondersoek wanneer dit minder teruggehoue was, daarom fokus hierdie artikel op haar werke wat terugkyk na haar kindsdae en op Mansfield se vindingryke gebruik van tyd om eienskappe van die geheue voor te stel. Dit ondersoek Mansfieldiese kuns en verskille tussen die konvensies en tradisies van Edwardiaanse literatuur, en hoe sy beïnvloed was deur, en haar verhouding met, haar tydgenote soos Virginia Woolf en D H Lawrence met wie sy gekorrespondeer het, en wat haar dus ook in ’n modernistiese konteks plaas. Deur gebruik te maak van Kristeva se geskryfte ondersoek dit ook hoe Freud se konsep van die onbewuste in Mansfield se fiksie funksioneer. Mansfield se onderskeidende stem as skrywer is vervleg met haar verkenning van idees van die self.

In her quest to create a new kind of short story Katherine Mansfield sought “to go deep — to speak to the secret self we all have — to acknowledge that” (O’Sullivan 1984: 70). The idea of a “secret self” can mean a self that is hidden from oneself, dwelling unconsciously within us. Or it could indicate a self intentionally concealed from others, perhaps because of shame, or fear of ridicule or disapproval. Then there are the aspects of our characters that are inaccessible to others, either because of people’s perceptual limitations or because our personalities contain enigmatic, unintelligible attributes. All these facets of the self are manifest in the interior world of thoughts, dreams, fantasies and memories of both men and women. However, in the introduction to her volume *The secret self: a century of short stories by women* (1995), which opens with Mansfield’s “The daughters of the late colonel”, Hermione Lee (1995: xii) describes how stories by women in particular frequently:

set up a conflict: between ‘secret selves’ and the outside world; between personal desires and family restrictions; between consoling dreams and hostile circumstances, between children’s — or childish — perceptions and adult expectations.

She thus aligns the “secret self” in women’s writing with personal desire, dreams, and memories from childhood, and proceeds further to identify the “secret self” with the “aberrant” and with “fantasy”, indicating a discordance between these elements and what is understood as “normal” or “real” (Lee 1995: xii). The “secret self” coincides with the “real” world, creating plural modes of existence and their corresponding stories. This “double life”, as Lee (1995: xii) calls it, “though not the prerogative of women writers, seems particularly to express their circumstances and desires”. The imaginative life of the “secret self” is therefore a private alternative to the public self, which is dictated to by the requirements of social acceptance and responsibilities. Mansfield’s desire to acknowledge “the secret self” led her to examine and contest existing notions of the self and its expression in fiction.

This study aims to illuminate Katherine Mansfield’s understanding of self through a study of two of her short stories, “Prelude” (1918) and “At the bay” (1922) (Mansfield 1981: 11, 205), as well as her journal and letters. It examines how her art differed from the conventions and traditions of Edwardian fiction, and how she was influenced by, and stood in relation to, contemporaries with whom she corresponded, such

as Virginia Woolf and D H Lawrence, thus also placing her in a modernist context. It concentrates on the conception of self that informs her fiction, a conception which seeks to understand concealed facets of personality unknown to the individual or to others. In so doing, it attempts to show how Mansfield's theory of self, recorded in her journal and letters, is developed in her fiction.

Mansfield, along with other experimental writers of her time, wished to move away from established modes of representation. This necessitated a reconsideration of the fundamentals of fiction: theme, character, narration, plot, the representation of time and space, imagery, and language. The Edwardian tradition espoused realist fiction, in which reliable, objective narrators encompass the single perspective of a consistent world where empirical observation provides the key to predictable human behaviour. In opposition to this harmony, modernism leant towards the disjointed, the disintegrating and the discordant, viewing the world from multiple and overlapping perspectives. The narrative structure of traditional Edwardian fiction is normally provided by a plot which emphasises the external events of the characters' lives. In modernist fiction the narrative revolves instead around the characters' mental and emotional lives. Modernism is noted for shifting the emphasis from the external world to the internal, and for focusing on how the world is perceived by an individual mind. With the publication of Freud's work, it became clear to many writers that there was no unitary, normative self. Many modernists were sufficiently influenced by the advances in psychology to change the way they represented the human character. For example Lawrence and Woolf understood the self as evolving, fluid, discontinuous and fragmented rather than as a fixed and stable entity. Many writers felt it was no longer sufficient to present only the externals of personalities and the surfaces of minds, as was predominantly the case in realist fiction; instead, the writer needed to explore hidden drives and desires. For Woolf, as for Lawrence, the human psyche was not a fixed or stable entity; it was in continuous flux and composed of many elements even while retaining its sense of identity. Hence Mansfield, along with her contemporaries, was looking to find a form and a language for fiction which would represent a self that was fragmentary and manifold in nature.

Mansfield's literary forays into childhood were an opportunity to explore the "secret self" at a stage when it was less inhibited and more open than in adulthood. Two works which draw on childhood reminiscences, "Prelude" and "At the bay", have therefore been selected as the focus of this study. These stories, based on her own childhood, suggest in particular a search for this part of her own psyche, and a desire to give expression to it. Because of this, memory — that retrospective journey through time — plays a central role in Mansfield's thought and fiction as she tries to reconstruct what may ultimately be an irretrievable world. The Burnell family stories, and more specifically "Prelude" and "At the bay", evoke much of Mansfield's early life in New Zealand, and the names and circumstances identify aspects of the author with the character Kezia Burnell, although it goes without saying that one must not simply equate the character with the author. This connection, along with the emphasis on childhood, makes these stories particularly noteworthy in elucidating Mansfield's ideas about the self, the way in which she went about exploring it, and the extent to which this exploration creates her distinctive voice as a writer.

"Prelude" is divided into twelve numbered sections and depicts moments in the lives of the Burnell family, showing them departing from a house in town and settling into another in the country. While the story runs over four days, the twelve-part structure suggests the twelve hours of a single day and therefore a cyclical narrative. The broken nature of the narrative enables Mansfield to leap from one time-frame to another. Each episode is set in a specific time-frame, such as early morning, afternoon or evening. The division into episodes suggests that each scene is a self-contained narrative piece, a moment of self-revelation, while the hiatus between one episode and the next implies silence or unspoken meanings. Both "Prelude" and "At the bay" proceed in a temporally linear fashion but the discontinuity created by breaking the narrative up into episodes suggests that time is fragmented. Although there is a clear chronology preserving the connections between episodes, the stories unfold as revelatory narratives. This narratological strategy evinces a typically modernist preoccupation with time.

"Prelude" opens with the family poised for departure from their old home. There is no room in the buggy for the two youngest daughters, Lottie and Kezia, and they remain temporarily with a neighbour. Epi-

sode two begins after tea, with Kezia wandering through the empty house, where she suddenly becomes frightened as the darkness draws in. Episode three charts the journey of the girls to their new home, primarily from Kezia’s point of view. The darkness renders the environs strange and exciting for her, and she is comforted by the sturdy presence of the storeman next to her. Upon arrival the sleepy children join the rest of the family in the dining room, where the relations between the various members are dramatised. Linda reclines with a headache, indifferent to the arrival of her daughters. Her husband Stanley and her sister Beryl engage in an insinuating interchange that suggests their mutual resentment and requires Linda to pacify Stanley. Isobel, the eldest child, asserts her position of ascendancy, while her father issues orders to his mother-in-law, thinly disguised as polite requests. Episode four sees the family and servants retiring. Beryl indulges in romantic fantasies as she undresses; Linda, half asleep, humours Stanley’s self-congratulatory rumination on his financial acumen in acquiring the house. Episode five begins with the dawn of the following day. Linda is having a disturbing dream in which a small bird metamorphoses into a baby in her arms. She is awoken by Stanley’s preparations for the office and anticipates the pressure under which his intention to make an early start will place the household. She relaxes once he has left and reflects on her repeated experience of inanimate things coming alive and seeming to want something of her. Episode six demonstrates how Linda’s mother, Mrs Fairfield, takes command of, and pleasure in the domestic situation. Beryl’s dissatisfaction with her single status is revealed. Mrs Fairfield gently castigates Linda for her negligent attitude to motherhood but is laughed off. Kezia explores the garden and, meeting her mother, enquires about the flowering of an aloe. Episode seven traces Stanley’s experience of the return journey from work and his arrival home, showing his plans, anxieties and joys, then switches to Beryl, who entertains fanciful ideas of herself as she plays the guitar. In episodes eight and nine the Trout boys, Pip and Rags, cousins to the Burnell children, pay a visit. Through their interactions and occasional insights into their individual desires, we are shown how Pip and Rags respectively conform to or fall short of the dictates of gender norms. The children are invited by Pat to watch the decapitation of a duck, causing them to be first excited then troubled. Episode ten focuses on the servant, Alice, and in particular on her resentment towards Beryl for belittling her. In episode eleven Linda and her

mother together contemplate the aloe in bud. This prompts Linda to reflect on her feelings for Stanley and to admit that, in spite of her affection for him, she hates his sexual attentions, primarily because she fears and resents pregnancy. Episode twelve begins with Beryl writing a pre-ententious letter to a friend, then admiring her appearance in the mirror. Both acts lead her to muse on her plural selves until she is interrupted by Kezia. The story ends with Kezia leaving the room guiltily after playing with Beryl's things in her absence.

In "Prelude" the relocation and adjustment to the new home are thus seen through the eyes of the characters rather than those of its third-person narrator, who is barely perceptible. This omniscient but non-intrusive narrator takes on the thoughts of each character in turn, using the technique of free indirect discourse, so that the reader has the illusion of direct access to the characters' minds. Mansfield adopts an impersonal style in that she shows rather than tells the reader about the characters, to some extent through their dialogue and actions but primarily through their mental and emotional experiences. "Prelude" is concerned with atmosphere rather than action, for there is no plot in the conventional sense of cause and effect working to a conclusion. The expectations awakened in the reader are those of witnessing life rather than of hearing a story, and the preoccupations are predominantly psychological.

"At the bay" continues with the Burnell family, this time on holiday by the sea. It is structured around a single day, twelve of its thirteen episodes corresponding to the twelve hours of clock time. The story begins with a purely descriptive first episode, in which the pastoral idyll of Crescent Bay in the early morning is evoked. The second episode is set a few months later, also in the early morning. Stanley rushes down to the sea for his morning bathe and is annoyed to find Jonathon Trout there before him. Trout's leisurely and unworldly character acts as a foil to Stanley's competitive, business-like nature. Episode three shows Stanley's fussy and demanding behaviour as he prepares to leave for work and the relief of the women in the house once he has left. In episode four Kezia and her sisters make their way to the beach, where they find the tearaway Samuel Josephs playing games under the direction of their lady-help and the Trout boys digging for treasure. The women have joined the children on the beach in episode five. Beryl chooses to bathe with Mrs Harry Kember, a woman who disregards gender conventions,

towards whom she harbours ambivalent feelings. Linda remains at home, lying in the garden dreaming and reflecting on the flowers, with her infant son at her side. Episode six reveals her thoughts on Stanley: her love for what is sensitive in him and her frustration at its rare appearance. Her thoughts progress to her dread of childbearing, which is complicated by her reluctant affection for the baby boy. Episode seven is set in the afternoon, with Kezia and her grandmother taking their siesta together and conversing about the inevitability of death. Episode eight follows Alice on her afternoon off, visiting Mrs Stubbs, the local shopowner, and wishing, to her surprise, to be back in her own familiar kitchen. In episode nine the children play a card game in which each takes on an animal persona reflecting his or her character. They grow frightened as night descends and are startled by a face at the window, which turns out to be Jonathon, come to fetch the Trout boys. Jonathon is late because, as is shown in episode ten, he has been talking to Linda about his dissatisfaction with his working life as an office clerk and his inability to escape. In episode eleven Stanley arrives home from work and apologises profusely to Linda for having left without saying good-bye in the morning. After having spent the day distraught he is hurt when he realises that his mood had no effect on her. Episode twelve is set very late at night, with all in the house asleep except Beryl, who stands at her window longing for a lover who will liberate her undiscovered self. She is lured outdoors by Harry Kember, who is confused when she rejects his approaches. Episode thirteen consists of one very short paragraph that, like the first episode, evokes the natural surroundings, particularly the sea, and the world of dreams.

Significantly "At the bay" opens on the cusp of night and day and introduces its characters when they are on the border between sleep and wakefulness, a margin at which images from the unconscious can emerge. But the tensions and antagonisms witnessed in "Prelude" are less evident: such stresses as there are have become less deep-seated, closer to the surface of the characters' minds, and therefore more amenable to solution, most obviously in Linda's spontaneous affection for her baby boy. "At the bay" is concerned with universal aspects of the characters' lives which are explored in discussions: about death, between Kezia and Mrs Fairfield, and about futility, between Jonathan and Linda. The story ebbs and flows and then quite suddenly reaches a crescendo,

like the sea, with its swell and waves. The ebbing-and-flowing effect is achieved as each character or scene comes to the fore then fades away and is succeeded in prominence by another character or scene. The shifting motion of the sea is captured when the story opens, shifts pace with Stanley's frenetic morning activities, then subsides into a slow, easy domesticity again when he leaves. The crescendo is a moment of disruption in the fiction, frequently associated with "the secret self", as occurs when Beryl perceives Mrs Harry Kember to be "like a horrible caricature of her husband" (Mansfield 1981: 220).

This approach exemplifies the modernist preoccupation with repetitive, cyclical time rather than the chronological, linear time favoured in conventional Edwardian narrative. Mansfield's writing is concerned to encode psychological rather than chronological time, following the progression of thoughts rather than external events, disrupting narrative expectations, and creating a dream-like atmosphere suggestive of the intangibility of memories. Perspectives in time shift between its leisurely passage in the domestic scenes and Stanley's impatient hurry. Because individuals order reality differently from external time, Mansfield represents the individual's actual experience not chronologically but through a subjectively ordered, meandering narrative. Varying personal experiences of time are used to depict the relative need of characters for one another: Stanley finds time drags during his day at the office whereas Linda feels the day has gone by in a flash. The frequent departures into the world of memory, dream and day-dream, where lengthy passages of time are condensed into minutes of mental activity, questions our normal notions of fixed intervals of time. More importantly, the reality of these mental experiences and the emotions they produce blur the boundaries between past, present and future. This resonates with the position put forward by the French philosopher Henri Bergson in his *Time and free will* (1889). Bergson, an influential figure impinging on the work of modernists such as Woolf and Joyce, thought that "reality" was characterised by the experience of time in the mind as different from the linear, regular beats of clock-time which measure all experience by the same gradations. He argued that psychological time was measured by duration, defined as the varying speed at which the mind apprehends the length of experiences according to their different intensities, contents and meanings for each individual. Clock-time,



or chronological time, is the time of history in hours, minutes and seconds, while duration, or psychological time, encompasses those times in a life which are significant to an individual, and which are necessarily different for each individual (Bergson 1910: 120).

It is of course only in the mind that the past is preserved, which nonetheless determines our selves. As George Steiner (1971: 13) has pointed out: "It is not the literal past that rules us, save, possibly, in a biological sense. It is images of the past". The process of self-discovery involves delving into the past, yet there is the recognition that mapping from the past to the present is by its very nature fragmented, partial and tentative. Memory is hazy and adjustable, as Mansfield explained: "But all must be told with a sense of mystery, a radiance, an afterglow, because you, my little sun of it, are set" (Middleton Murry 1954: 215). The title "Prelude" indicates that this work is concerned with a period before, the word "prelude" signifying in musical terms a preliminary composition preceding another piece of music. It suggests that the reader attend to intimations of what is to come, and observe how recurrent motifs — images, situations, individual words — both echo and reconfigure that which precedes. The aloe, the most significant image in the story, is about to produce its one-in-a-hundred-years flower. Linda imagines that small things are swelling and coming alive, like the poppies on her bedroom wallpaper, suggesting the growth of the foetus and conveying a subliminal perception of a pregnancy of which she is not yet consciously aware. The title also recalls Wordsworth's "The prelude" in which the poet returns to his childhood, focusing on certain events in his development, the "spots of time" which assume significance in retrospect. The focus of Mansfield's works, by contrast, does not appear to be explanatory but rather exploratory, in the sense of evoking what an experience felt like for the characters. For example, in her portrayal of Kezia and Lottie's abandonment at the beginning of "Prelude" Mansfield does not make any extrapolations about the effect on their characters. Rather, she concentrates on the immediate experience of being cast off by their mother. Mansfield focuses on observing the self, in contrast to Wordsworth's attempts at understanding the self retrospectively, for she recognises the self as something apart and unattainable.

Repression of traumatic memories and of unacceptable facets of our personalities creates the unattainable elements of the self to which

Mansfield referred. The notion of the unconscious as the repository for repressed thoughts derives from Freud's early work, which Mansfield would have been aware of through her association with the Lawrences and the Woolfs. She was also aware of the importance of these ideas to writing, as Lawrence wrote in a letter to her: "It seems to me, if one is to do fiction now, one must cross the threshold of the human psyche" (Boulten 1980: ii 301). Thus Linda in "Prelude", standing in the moonlight, feels "that she was being strangely discovered" (Mansfield 1981: 38) and is also aware of "her faint far-away voices" which "seemed to come from a deep well", suggesting a barely audible message emanating from her inner depths, her unconscious mind. These images bring to mind Julia Kristeva's description of the unconscious as the foreigner within (Kristeva 1991: 181), encounters with which are dramatised by Mansfield as ordinary experiences of the extraordinary. Crossing the boundary between what is consciously understood and what is not is also enacted in "Prelude" when Kezia is suddenly terrified in the old, familiar house (an example also of Freud's notion of the "uncanny"). Material of an unknown but disturbing nature lying buried in the unconscious threatens to come to light. Kristeva (1991: 191) suggests that "when we flee from or struggle against the foreigner, we are fighting our unconscious". This attempt to escape the unconscious, and the impossibility of ever doing so, is conveyed when Kezia runs downstairs and finds that "IT was just behind her, waiting at the door, at the head of the stairs, at the bottom of the stairs, hiding in the passage, ready to dart out at the back door" (Mansfield 1981: 15). Despite her rapid series of spatial relocations, Kezia cannot shake off the fear because it resides within her. Significantly, this fear wells up with the coming of darkness, associated with the unknown, inscrutable part of the mind. Linda has a similar experience with her unconscious "THEY" whom she finds she can "hardly escape" when alone (Mansfield 1981: 27). She is vaguely aware that "THEY" reside within her because she turns her head away when passing the mirror, an indication also of her fear of this facet of herself; in fact the plural "THEY" suggests a multitude of selves, which she is only just managing to repress. "THEY" want something of her, presumably an opportunity for self-expression, but she continues to wait for somebody, that other self, "who just did not come" (Mansfield 1981: 28).

Kristeva (1982: 1) suggests that the foreigner that cannot be accommodated within the self is "ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated". She terms this "abjection" and suggests that

when even the limit between inside and outside becomes uncertain, the narrative is what is challenged first. If it continues nevertheless, its makeup changes; its linearity is shattered, it proceeds by flashes, enigmas, short cuts, incompleteness, tangles and cuts (Kristeva 1982: 141).

Mansfield's narrative exhibits precisely these qualities. In "Prelude" they are most marked in Linda, who is not at all disposed towards motherhood and endures her situation by remaining childlike herself, refusing the adult roles of wife and mother. Linda's suppression of such an important aspect of her self means that she lives mentally and emotionally almost entirely in secret. The secret self has so little public expression that Linda's being borders on the hysterical. During the move her lips tremble with laughter at the ludicrous thought of her daughters standing on their heads like the furniture. This image of her children inverted suggests her own unnatural attitude to motherhood, and their association with furniture emphasises the fact that she is discarding them in favour of material items. When she is brought to a moment of self-recognition, becoming aware at night that she hates Stanley, she quickly suppresses the truth she has recognised by mocking herself and asking "What am I guarding myself for so preciously?" (Mansfield 1981: 54). Beryl is also unwilling to accommodate the foreign self when towards the end of "At the bay" she realises that "she wants a lover" (Mansfield 1981: 242) but reverts to the third person in voicing this desire, indicating a reluctance to admit this truth about herself.

Katherine Mansfield's conception of the self is complex. She is aware of the inscrutability of self, the hidden essential self, the masks people wear, and the possibility of multiple selves, all of which serve to illuminate various aspects of her notion of a secret self. The sense of not knowing oneself, and of trying to find out whether an essential self even exists, is raised in a letter written at the end of her life:

[T]he question is always: 'Who am I?' and until that is answered I don't see how one can really direct anything in oneself. 'Is there a Me?

The notion of the public mask, which is necessary to hide the real, vulnerable self from the world, is present in both her personal writings and short stories. In a letter to Murry she advised: “[D]on’t lower your mask until you have another mask prepared beneath — As terrible as you like — but a mask” (O’Sullivan 1984(i): 318). She once told Lady Ottoline Morrel that she sometimes did not know when she was acting and when she was living her own life, adding, “Have I any real self left?” (Alpers 1982: 244). The protective mask could also be an entertainer’s mask and if worn too often or too long could threaten to usurp the wearer’s identity.

Mansfield’s characters are frequently seen at moments of self-recognition and collapse, when they become aware of the illusory myths they have generated about themselves and those they love (Showalter 1982: 246). The moment of realisation is one of shock and fear at the disjunction between the self projected to the world, masked and inauthentic, and the fragile, uncertain, unstructured self residing behind the mask. This is captured in Beryl’s reflections on her self when reading her letter to Nan Pym as well as when she catches herself, a few minutes later, again gazing into the mirror. For Mansfield, looking into a mirror is consistently associated with a desire, or a simulated desire for self-knowledge (Dunbar 1997: 78). Linda cannot bear to look in the mirror; Beryl feels compelled to put on her false self, and the story ends with Kezia making the toy cat look in the mirror with the command “Now look at yourself” (Mansfield 1981: 60). In “Prelude” Beryl’s sense of herself as masked presupposes a different self beneath the mask, waiting for liberation. The narrative, however, does not verify this belief. The mask is Beryl as much as the sceptical and self-critical response to that mask is also a secret part of her identity. This in turn suggests a divided or multiple self, a notion Mansfield explores throughout her writings.

Mansfield’s idea of multiple selves can be found in its incipient form in an early letter to a schoolgirl friend in which she described her heart, which in this context appears to be interchangeable with the idea of the self, as being “where I store my memories, all my happiness and my sorrow and there is a large compartment in it labelled ‘Dreams’”. In the same letter (Alpers 1982: 30) she is also already referring to the secret self when she explains that many people “generally view my public rooms” and that “I would not show them what I was really like for worlds. They would

think me madder, I suppose". Mansfield developed this idea of multiple compartments for the self at a later stage as

a huge cavern where my selves (who were like ancient sea-weed gatherers) mumbled, indifferent and intimate [...] and this other self apart in the carriage, grasping the cold knob of her umbrella, thinking of a ship, of ropes stiffened with white paint and the wet flapping oilskins of sailors (Middleton Murry 1954: 203).

She perceived her personality as subdivided into a number of undifferentiated selves struggling with incoherence and dwelling in caves. But she was also aware of a single distinct self, active and journeying across the sea. These metaphors for self, developed in her private writing, recur in Mansfield's fiction.

Journeying is a liminal state, similar to Mansfield's experience of stairs: "One is somehow suspended. One is on neutral ground — not in one's own world nor in a strange one" (O'Sullivan 1984(iv): 256), which indicated that she understood part of her essential self as transitional, or perhaps existing between boundaries. This is the visible part of herself, unlike the cave dwellers, contained and in the dark. These selves date from the dawn of human history and have existed long before the creation of social structures. They are "sea-weed gatherers", suggesting that they trawl the vast, unknowable sea of the "collective unconscious" as Jung was later to call it. They are the introspective part of Mansfield, indistinct, preoccupied more with reflexive action than with the external world, and private. This is the arcane, less accessible dimension of her being. The ancient cave dwelling selves are evoked in "Prelude" when Linda walks out in the night with her mother. They use "the special voice that women use at night to each other as though they spoke in their sleep or from some hollow cave" (Mansfield 1981: 53). They use a language of dream symbolism associated with night, darkness and sleep. With reference to Freud's belief that interpreting dreams is the key to understanding the unconscious we can interpret the "mumbling" of the cave dwellers and the "special voice" that Linda and her mother use as the verbal expression of the strange language of representation found in dreams. This language is without logical and syntactical relations and resembles more a rebus, ideograms or pictographs, in which the syntactical connections are left to be made by the dreamer (Freud 1953: 227-8).

Mansfield frequently uses symbolic animals in her characters' dreams. For example Kezia tells the storeman: "I often dream that animals rush at me — even camels — and while they are rushing, their heads swell e-enormous" (Mansfield 1981: 17). This comment prefigures Linda's dream in which an animal, in this case a small bird, grows into a human baby — which suggests that the latent content of Kezia's dream may also have something to do with a fear of motherhood, probably inspired by her own mother's reaction. The aggressive "rushing" animal is a male one, understood by the storeman's description of a ram as an animal that "runs for you" (Mansfield 1981: 17). Linda later reflects, with Stanley in mind, how "she had always hated things that rush at her" (Mansfield 1981: 54), so it appears that the rushing animals of Kezia's dream may have some connection with Stanley or with masculinity.<sup>1</sup> The presence of her father in a dream about motherhood may also suggest the workings of an Electra complex, which is echoed in Linda's dream when her father gives her the bird which grows into a baby. Despite the Freudian content of her characters' dreams, Mansfield was quick to mock "vulgar Freudian symbolism": a given code in which images have a specific bodily association (Wright 1998: 22). She depicts the servant, Alice, reading the Dream Book, which ludicrously distorts Freud's theories, asserting that "To dream of black-beetles drawing a hearse is bad. Signifies death of one you hold near or dear" (Mansfield 1981: 48).

Just as she did for the unconscious world of dreams, Mansfield also gave symbols to the waking world of consciousness. The aloe, on the verge of flowering, is the central symbol of "Prelude" and seems directly related to her journal entry headed "The flowering of the self" in which she describes a self

which, untouched by all we acquire and all we shed, pushes a green spear through the dead leaves and through the mould, thrusts a scaled bud through years of darkness, until one day, the light discovers it and shakes the flower free and — we are alive — we are flowering for our moment upon the earth (Middleton Murry 1954: 205).

She echoes Lawrence's organic image of flowering, death and resurrection, recalling a letter she received from him on the death of her brother in which he points out: "[O]ne 'I' is dying; but there is another

1 That Kezia feared her father is confirmed by Mansfield in an earlier story, "The little girl" (1912).

coming into being, which is the happy, creative you" (Boulton 1980(ii): 481). The idea of "flowering" for a "moment" also strikes a chord with Woolf's notion of moments of being. The characters' responses to the aloe indicate their attitudes to the essential self. When Linda replies to Kezia's question as to whether the aloe flowers she "smiles down" and half shuts her eyes, showing her satisfaction with the suggestion of changing character given by the plant which, in preparing to flower, is about to alter its characteristic appearance. When Linda contemplates the aloe with her mother it looks to her "like a ship with the oars lifted" (Mansfield 1981: 53). She imagines herself in command of this ship (like Mansfield's journeying self), escaping from her domestic role into exploration of the unknown world, outside, beyond the "paddocks" and even the "dark bush" (Mansfield 1981: 53). Since the paddock is a field especially for keeping horses, this word, in combination with the idea of the dark bush, brings to mind the concluding chapter of Lawrence's *The rainbow*, in which horses are used to represent the beasts inhabiting the darkness of the unconscious, irrational world. This association suggests that Linda longs to explore beyond the familiar, rational and socially acceptable aspects of her self.

Mansfield strives to capture by turns the forming and disintegrating sense of self in her writings and to record the individual's experience of this constant metamorphosing. In a letter to the artist Dorothy Brett she explains the twelve-celled structure of "Prelude":

And just as on those mornings white milky mists rise and uncover some beauty, then smother it again and then disclose it, I tried to lift that mist from my people and let them be seen and then to hide them again (O'Sullivan 1984(i): 331).

She achieves this mimicry by dividing the narrative into sections, which open to reveal an element of a character and then close again. The analogy between the self and a land alternately veiled and exposed anticipates Kristeva's understanding of the self as something that "shows itself to be a strange land of borders and othernesses ceaselessly constructed and deconstructed" (Kristeva 1991: 191). Mansfield destabilises old certitudes regarding the fixed, unitary, nature of the self, sometimes by lining up pairs of characters whose individual identities blur or overlap (Dunbar 1997: 80). Thus Kezia and her mother are not clearly differentiated; both are unnerved by things that rush and swell, and are

both are aware of a terrifying, unidentifiable “IT” or “THEY”. The constant shift in focus also contributes to this effect of blurring boundaries between characters’ identities as well as suggesting fragmented personae. This understanding is recorded in Mansfield’s journal, where she was often uncertain as to whether she was “I” or “She” (Alpers 1982: 58), an example of this being her comment “I want to live. What does she mean by that?” (Middleton Murry 1954: 182). Woolf pointed out that the private and instinctive nature of Mansfield’s journal is such that “it allows another self to break off from the self that writes and to stand a little apart watching it write” (Pilditch 1996: 16).

Mansfield’s close relationship with Lawrence meant she was familiar with the important metaphor in *The rainbow* of the safe circle of light containing all that is familiar and rational but surrounded by the vast darkness of the irrational, unconscious, unknown self. Mansfield’s secret self is situated well beyond the circle’s circumference in the inscrutable darkness. It is therefore not surprising that De Beauvoir excluded Mansfield from her general criticism of women writers as “still too preoccupied with clearly seeing the facts of the world to try to penetrate the shadows beyond that illuminated circle” (Smith 1999: 7). At the same time, interrogating the world is an exercise which can lead to elimination of the “inauthentic self”, a self constructed by the world that surrounds the individual, rather than by the individual. Mansfield’s fiction undermines the myths and assumptions that restrict people to inauthentic lives, justifying De Beauvoir’s regard for her as one of the women “who have traversed the given in search of its secret dimension” in questioning “everyday contingency and suffering” (De Beauvoir 1953: 720).

While the surfaces of Katherine Mansfield’s stories are redolent with details of natural beauty and engaging characters, the underlying tones are sombre, indicating discontentment with what appear to be the most innocent aspects of life. For example, the new house, the domestic core, is “like a sleeping beast”, and the two sisters sleep with “their little behinds just touching” after Isabel has abused her authority as the eldest by undermining meek Lottie’s intention of praying in bed. Indeed, beneath the mood of contentment and material wealth conveyed in “Prelude” and “At the bay”, there is a sense of unease and a disposition to challenge traditional notions about human relationships and the nature of individual identity. The lyrical descriptions in the stories,



their atmospheres of absorbed intensity, are counterpointed by the subtext's radical questioning of ubiquitous myths about the individual and society — marital bliss, the wholesomeness of family life, the coherence and integrity of the individual self, the immutable nature of sexual identity. Mansfield dealt with the underside of these myths. Thus Linda feels hatred towards Stanley; Beryl lives chiefly in her divided imagination, with the prose that depicts her consciousness alternately swooning, romantic and fanciful, and angry, violent and tyrannical; Rags, although male, is traumatised by the duck's death. The lyrical and the subversive aspects of Mansfield's writing are presented in contrasting layers. The lyricism on the surface lightly covers the subversive themes and attitudes, reflecting what Mansfield perceived as the double nature of society and of the human mind.

The presence of child characters, with their protean quality, emphasises the amorphous nature of the self. "At the bay" shows children taking on, seemingly at will, the *personae* of various animals in the card game they play in the Burnell's washhouse. Childhood is dominated by the attempt to establish a coherent identity, and for the artist this is fertile ground for exploring the formation of character. In children the self is just beginning to devise the modes of disguise that mask them as adults; at the Samuel Josephs, Kezia catches a tear "with a neat little whisk of her tongue" and eats it before anyone sees (Mansfield 1981: 14). According to Freud the structure of children's play, like dreams, is one of the visible manifestations of the unconscious and is therefore a way of coming to know this aspect of the secret self. In the story this is exemplified by Rags, who enjoys playing with girls "for a shameful reason. He adored dolls" (Mansfield 1981: 42). Mansfield was particularly interested in the stage of a child's development at which, helplessness and dependence on another person having passed, it begins to explore its independence. This exploration is accompanied by a sense of lost security which brings to mind the expulsion from Eden, epitomised here by Linda's lack of interest in her children, or the entry into the underworld, exemplified here when Kezia explores the new garden and finds part of it "frightening" (Mansfield 1981: 32). This enquiring into the unknown precedes Kezia's discovery of the aloe, which represents "The flowering of the self" (Middleton Murry 1954: 205), as has been shown. Thus Mansfield demonstrates that one must extend oneself, even take risks, if one is to develop this aspect of the self.

Mansfield was committed to understanding herself, and to extending her readers' understanding of the self. She aimed to do this by dramatising her insights into the irrationality of the human psyche and by dealing with topics whose disturbing nature meant that they were not normally acknowledged. Perhaps the most significant of her insights is the powerlessness of the individual, conveyed here by Linda's likening herself to a leaf swept by life in "At the bay". This compounds the sense of powerlessness generated by Linda's earlier contemplation of the purposeless existence of the Manuka flowers, epitomised by the brief duration of their lives, which she considers to be "wasted, wasted" (Mansfield 1981: 221) because they fall and are scattered as soon as they flower.

Mansfield's narrative claims knowledge only of the temporary nature of things — people, objects, social relations. She emphasises the lack of fixture in life by revealing the uncertainty of all perception, the endless possibilities for change, and the limitations of static assumptions. When she began writing "Prelude" she described it as:

Not big, almost grotesque in shape — I mean perhaps heavy — with people rather dark and seen strangely as they move in the sharp light and shadow; and I want bright shivering lights in it, and the sound of water (O'Sullivan 1984(i): 168).

The language suggests her understanding of identity as fluid. She viewed people as shifting between illumined and darkened states. Hence they are not stable egos, in the sense of established personalities whose motives and being can be rationally analysed and understood. In this she resembled Lawrence, who strove to transmit this radically new sense of human consciousness. Both writers sought a means of literary expression adequate to convey the new ideas about the psyche. These ideas challenged the traditional humanist belief which regarded the self as a coherent and unified entity, open to rational argument and understanding. Mansfield's view of character, like Lawrence's, required a new kind of prose that often eschewed the conventional linear progression of a plot. Instead, her stories progress through images and symbols. She developed mood and voice as locations of meaning, and concentrated on the mysterious, inchoate flux that underlies the individual. She invented a body of truly original and innovative short fiction that, in both its concerns and its techniques, places her among the experimental modernist writers of the time.

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