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WOMEN, MODERNITY, AND THE CRISIS OF FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN KATHERINE MANSFIELD'S SHORT FICTION: A FEMINIST-MODERNIST READING

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Abstract: Katherine Mansfield's short fiction occupies a significant position in literary modernism because of its innovative representation of consciousness, emotional instability, social alienation, and the complexities of everyday life. Her female characters are particularly important to this modernist project because their experiences reveal the tensions between socially prescribed identities and individual desires. This article examines the construction of female subjectivity in Mansfield's "Bliss," "The Garden Party," and "Miss Brill" through an integrated feminist-modernist approach. Rather than treating Mansfield's women exclusively as victims of patriarchal oppression, the study argues that their "fate" is produced through a continuous negotiation between gender expectations, class structures, emotional needs, and the desire for individual autonomy. The analysis demonstrates that Bertha Young, Laura Sheridan, and Miss Brill experience different forms of psychological crisis, yet all three characters confront the instability of identities constructed within social environments. Mansfield's modernist techniques—including interiority, symbolism, free indirect discourse, psychological focalization, irony, and ambiguous epiphany—are closely connected with her representation of female experience. The article argues that Mansfield transforms apparently ordinary domestic and social situations into moments of profound existential recognition. Consequently, her fiction presents female fate not as a fixed destiny but as a process of psychological negotiation between social conformity and emerging self-awareness.

Keywords: Katherine Mansfield; female subjectivity; feminist modernism; gender; social class; women's identity; psychological realism; modernist short fiction

1. Introduction

Katherine Mansfield occupies a distinctive position in twentieth-century literary modernism. Her short stories are characterized by compressed narrative structures, psychological intensity, symbolic imagery, shifting perspectives, and an emphasis on moments of perception rather than conventional plot development. Mansfield's contribution to modernist fiction is particularly significant because she transforms seemingly insignificant events—domestic conversations, social gatherings, encounters with strangers, or moments of private reflection—into experiences through which characters confront the instability of their identities.

The representation of women is central to this artistic project. Mansfield's female characters frequently live within social environments that define them through marriage, sexuality, class, age, domesticity, and social respectability. Yet these women are not represented simply as passive objects of patriarchal power. Their consciousness, desires, contradictions, and moments of resistance

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complicate any straightforward interpretation of female oppression. Mansfield's fiction therefore requires an approach that considers both the social structures surrounding women and the psychological processes through which women experience those structures.

This article focuses on three of Mansfield's widely discussed stories: "Bliss," "The Garden Party," and "Miss Brill." Although the stories differ considerably in setting, characterization, and narrative situation, they share an important concern: the conflict between socially constructed identity and individual consciousness. Bertha Young's apparently perfect domestic life collapses when she discovers the instability underlying her marriage. Laura Sheridan's encounter with death disrupts the protected worldview created by her privileged social position. Miss Brill, meanwhile, constructs an imaginary sense of belonging in order to compensate for her social isolation, only to experience a painful confrontation with exclusion.

The central argument of this article is that Mansfield's representation of women should be understood through the interaction of gender, class, modernity, and psychological subjectivity. Previous feminist readings have productively emphasized sexuality, marriage, women's social marginalization, and patriarchal discourse, while modernist scholarship has highlighted Mansfield's innovations in narrative form and psychological representation. This study brings these approaches together in order to demonstrate that Mansfield's modernist technique is itself essential to her representation of female experience.

The article addresses three questions: How does Mansfield construct female subjectivity in "Bliss," "The Garden Party," and "Miss Brill"? How do gender and class structures influence the identities of the female protagonists? And how do Mansfield's modernist narrative techniques represent psychological crisis and moments of self-awareness?

The study proposes that the "fate" of Mansfield's women should not be understood as a predetermined condition. Instead, fate emerges as an ongoing process in which women negotiate the expectations imposed upon them and their developing awareness of themselves.

2. Theoretical Framework: Feminism, Modernism, and Female Subjectivity

A feminist reading of Mansfield's fiction begins with the recognition that female identity is not formed independently of society. Gender expectations influence how women understand marriage, sexuality, motherhood, appearance, age, class, and acceptable forms of behavior. Judith Butler's influential account of gender as a socially produced and repeatedly performed identity provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding Mansfield's characters (Butler 1990). Mansfield's women often perform socially recognizable roles, but moments of psychological disruption expose the instability of those roles.

At the same time, Mansfield's fiction cannot be separated from modernism. Modernist literature frequently challenges the idea that identity is stable, coherent, and easily represented through traditional narrative. Instead, consciousness becomes fragmented, subjective, and dependent upon perception. Dominic Head's discussion of Mansfield's modernist short story is particularly relevant because Mansfield's narratives often replace conventional resolution with ambiguous moments of recognition (Head 1992).

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This connection between feminism and modernism is crucial. Mansfield's interest in fragmented consciousness allows her to represent women not merely through external social categories but through their internal experiences. Her stories therefore move between the public identity a woman performs and the private consciousness that may contradict it.

The concept of female subjectivity is especially useful here. A female character becomes a subject when the narrative gives sustained attention to her perceptions, desires, memories, fears, and interpretations. Mansfield repeatedly places female consciousness at the center of the narrative while simultaneously demonstrating how that consciousness is shaped by social structures.

The result is a tension between social identity and psychological identity. A woman may be a wife, daughter, hostess, unmarried woman, or member of a particular social class, but these categories cannot completely contain her inner life. Mansfield's fiction emerges precisely from the gap between what women are expected to be and what they experience themselves to be.

3. Female Subjectivity and the Illusion of Domestic Happiness in "Bliss"

"Bliss" provides one of Mansfield's most complex explorations of female consciousness. Bertha Young appears to possess everything associated with bourgeois happiness: a comfortable home, a husband, a child, social relationships, and material security. Yet her emotional state is characterized by an intense and almost inexplicable excitement. Her "bliss" initially appears to represent genuine happiness, but the narrative gradually reveals that it is connected to desires and emotional possibilities that she cannot fully articulate.

The garden and the pear tree become central symbols of Bertha's psychological condition. The pear tree represents beauty, vitality, and a form of emotional intensity that seems to exist beyond the limitations of domestic routine. Bertha's perception of the tree is deeply subjective; the external world is transformed by her emotional state.

Her encounter with Pearl Fulton further complicates her identity. Bertha is fascinated by Pearl in a way that exceeds ordinary social friendship. The attraction has been interpreted through feminist, psychoanalytic, and queer approaches, particularly because Bertha's emotional response suggests a desire that remains difficult for her to recognize openly (Dickson 2016; Jin 2008).

This ambiguity is important. Mansfield does not provide a clear declaration of Bertha's sexuality or desires. Instead, she places the reader inside Bertha's uncertain consciousness. The character experiences emotions before she possesses the language necessary to interpret them. In this sense, Mansfield's narrative technique becomes a form of feminist representation: female desire is allowed to exist as a psychological reality even when social discourse cannot easily name it.

The revelation of Harry's affair with Pearl produces the central rupture in the story. Bertha's idealized understanding of her marriage suddenly collapses. The person she believed represented a mysterious emotional connection is revealed to be part of her husband's secret life.

The significance of this revelation extends beyond marital betrayal. Bertha discovers that her apparently secure identity has been constructed upon assumptions that she does not control. She is a

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wife, but she does not possess complete knowledge of her marriage. She is emotionally alive, yet her desires have remained largely unrecognized.

Thus, the ending of "Bliss" is not simply a story of a betrayed wife. It represents the collapse of an illusion of psychological and domestic coherence. Bertha's fate is left unresolved. Mansfield does not tell the reader whether she will change her life, confront Harry, or reinterpret her relationship with Pearl. The absence of a conventional resolution is characteristic of Mansfield's modernist method and allows female subjectivity to remain open rather than predetermined.

4. Class, Gender, and Moral Awakening in "The Garden Party"

"The Garden Party" shifts the focus from domestic sexuality to class consciousness and moral perception. Laura Sheridan belongs to a privileged family whose social world is protected from the realities experienced by working-class people. The garden party initially represents beauty, wealth, youth, and social performance.

Laura's consciousness, however, is more receptive than that of the other members of her family. When she learns that a working-class neighbor has died, she becomes uncomfortable with the continuation of the celebration. Her response exposes a conflict between the values of her social class and her developing moral consciousness.

The story is therefore concerned not only with gender but with the intersection of gender and class. Laura is privileged, but her position as a young woman also limits her authority. Her brother and mother repeatedly influence her understanding of what is appropriate. Her mother's insistence on maintaining the garden party demonstrates how class identity depends upon controlling appearances and excluding uncomfortable realities.

Laura's desire to stop the party can be understood as an early movement toward individual moral agency. However, her resistance remains incomplete. She continues to inhabit the privileged world that produces the social inequality she is beginning to recognize.

This ambiguity is central to Mansfield's treatment of female subjectivity. Laura does not suddenly become socially liberated. Instead, she experiences a crisis in perception. Her encounter with the dead man's body produces an emotional response that cannot be easily incorporated into the ideological structure of her family.

Scholars have emphasized the importance of class, intimacy, alienation, and psychological transformation in readings of the story (Mitchell 2017; Thorndike-Breeze 2016). The encounter with death also destabilizes Laura's earlier understanding of social boundaries. The supposedly separate worlds of the wealthy Sheridan family and their poorer neighbors become connected through mortality.

Mansfield's treatment of Laura therefore resists a simple narrative of moral progress. Laura's awakening is partial and unresolved. Her final response to her brother suggests that she has encountered something she cannot yet fully articulate.

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This incomplete understanding is precisely what gives the story its modernist force. Mansfield replaces a clear moral lesson with an ambiguous psychological experience. Laura has changed, but the reader cannot be certain what that change will produce.

5. Loneliness, Age, and Social Exclusion in "Miss Brill"

"Miss Brill" presents a different form of female marginalization. Unlike Bertha Young and Laura Sheridan, Miss Brill is not defined primarily through marriage or family. She is an unmarried, middle-aged woman whose social existence is fragile and whose sense of identity depends heavily upon observation and imagination.

Every Sunday, Miss Brill visits the public gardens and watches other people. She imagines the crowd as a theatrical performance in which everyone participates. Most importantly, she imagines herself as part of this performance.

The theatrical metaphor reveals the psychological strategy through which Miss Brill constructs belonging. She is not simply watching society; she is imagining herself as a meaningful participant in it. Her loneliness is therefore managed through narrative imagination.

Mansfield gradually reveals the fragility of this construction. When a young couple mocks Miss Brill, the social world she has created collapses. The cruelty of the scene is significant because the young couple does not merely insult her appearance. Their words deny the identity she has constructed for herself.

Her return home is correspondingly described through silence and withdrawal. The narrative does not provide a dramatic external event. Instead, Mansfield focuses on the psychological consequences of humiliation.

Miss Brill's fate is connected to the cultural marginalization of unmarried women. Janka Kaščáková's study of Mansfield's representations of unmarried women demonstrates how such characters frequently occupy social and psychological margins (Kaščáková 2009). Miss Brill embodies this marginality with particular intensity because her social identity is not supported by family, marriage, or institutional power.

Yet the story should not be reduced to a portrait of a pathetic woman. Mansfield gives Miss Brill a rich imaginative life. Her ability to transform the park into a theatre demonstrates creativity and emotional resilience. Her tragedy emerges because the social world eventually refuses to validate the identity she has created.

The story therefore reveals a broader feminist problem: identity depends not only upon individual self-perception but also upon recognition by others (Goh 2022). Miss Brill possesses an internal sense of significance, but the social environment can destroy that sense through ridicule and exclusion.

6. From Victimhood to Agency: Rethinking Mansfield's Women

The three protagonists experience very different crises, but their stories reveal a common pattern: illusion, confrontation, psychological rupture, and incomplete awareness.

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Bertha begins with an idealized understanding of domestic happiness. Laura begins within a protected class environment. Miss Brill constructs an imagined community through theatrical fantasy. Each character experiences an event that destabilizes the identity she has previously accepted.

However, Mansfield does not transform these women into conventional feminist heroines. Their agency is subtle, partial, and often psychological rather than explicitly political. This is one of the most important aspects of Mansfield's feminist potential.

In "Bliss," Bertha's consciousness contains desires that exceed the conventional boundaries of marriage. In "The Garden Party," Laura's moral perception challenges the unquestioned assumptions of her privileged family. In "Miss Brill," the protagonist's imagination provides a temporary alternative to social isolation.

Consequently, Mansfield's women should not be classified simply as victims. They are subjects who experience, interpret, desire, imagine, and sometimes resist the social structures surrounding them.

This approach also complicates the concept of "fate" in Mansfield's fiction. Fate is not simply what happens to women because of patriarchy. It is the result of an ongoing interaction between social structures and individual consciousness.

Mansfield's modernist narrative techniques strengthen this interpretation. Her use of free indirect discourse, symbolism, interiority, shifting focalization, and ambiguous endings makes the reader experience the instability of female identity rather than simply observe it from outside.

The formal structure of the stories is therefore politically meaningful. Mansfield does not merely write about women's psychological fragmentation; she makes fragmentation part of the narrative experience.

7. Discussion

A comparative reading of the three stories demonstrates that Mansfield constructs female identity through multiple and intersecting structures of power. Gender remains fundamental, but it operates together with class, age, marital status, social visibility, and emotional dependence.

Bertha's crisis emerges primarily within marriage and bourgeois domesticity. Laura's crisis develops through her confrontation with class inequality and death. Miss Brill's crisis is associated with age, unmarried status, and social exclusion. These differences demonstrate that there is no single model of female experience in Mansfield.

At the same time, the stories share a fundamental concern with recognition. Bertha wants emotional recognition; Laura seeks a meaningful response to the suffering of others; Miss Brill seeks recognition as a legitimate participant in social life.

Mansfield's achievement lies in showing that social structures become psychologically powerful because individuals internalize them. Women do not merely experience external restrictions; they also construct themselves through the expectations, judgments, and desires of the societies in which they live.

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The modernist short story is particularly suitable for representing this process because its compressed form can capture sudden changes in perception. Rather than narrating a woman's entire life, Mansfield selects a decisive moment through which the reader perceives a much larger social and psychological history.

Thus, feminist interpretation and modernist formal analysis should not be treated as separate approaches to Mansfield. They illuminate one another. Mansfield's modernist narrative form provides the means through which the instability of female identity becomes visible.

8. Conclusion

Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss," "The Garden Party," and "Miss Brill" offer complex representations of women negotiating the contradictory demands of modern social life. Through Bertha Young, Laura Sheridan, and Miss Brill, Mansfield explores different dimensions of female subjectivity: desire within marriage, moral awakening across class boundaries, and loneliness produced by social exclusion.

The analysis demonstrates that Mansfield's women cannot be adequately understood as passive victims of patriarchal society. Although their choices are constrained, they possess psychologically complex inner lives and demonstrate various forms of imaginative, emotional, and perceptual agency.

Mansfield's modernist technique is central to this representation. Her fragmented perspectives, symbolism, psychological focalization, interiority, and ambiguous epiphanies allow female consciousness to become the primary site of narrative meaning. Social oppression is therefore represented not only through external events but through the internal conflicts produced by social expectations.

The concept of female "fate" in Mansfield should consequently be understood dynamically. Fate is not a fixed destiny imposed upon women; it is a continuous negotiation between social identity and individual consciousness. Mansfield's women experience moments in which the identities constructed for them become unstable, revealing possibilities for awareness even when complete liberation remains impossible.

This combination of feminist concern and modernist form explains the continuing relevance of Mansfield's fiction. Her stories demonstrate that the most significant transformations of women may occur not through dramatic external rebellion but through subtle changes in perception, self-recognition, and consciousness.

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