From the Waves to the Shore: The Deliberate Odds and Ends of Mansfield's Garden Parties

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ABSTRACT

Katherine Mansfield, a New Zealand modernist writer, demonstrates the power of indirect methods to create meaning in many of her short stories. Rather than relying on detailed character backgrounds, Mansfield uses figurative language, silences, and the implications within dialogue to convey emotional depth and insight into her characters. While these techniques are crucial in building the narrative, her use of suspense and the withholding of information until the story's conclusion also play a key role in her storytelling. Through a close reading of stories such as "Miss Brill," "The Voyage," and "The Singing Lesson," it becomes clear how Mansfield's revelatory endings—what I refer to as "wave moments"—serve as deliberate shifts in mood that contribute to the meaning-making process. These "wave moments" highlight Mansfield's non-linear storytelling approach and her careful crafting of stories—defying traditional narrative expectations.

The Opening Wave

In many of her short stories, New Zealand modernist writer Katherine Mansfield shows how effective an indirect method of creating meaning can be. Rather than provide detailed background information about a character, Mansfield relies on the figurative language, silences, and implications in dialogue to help create emotional meaning and insights into the character's lives. However, in several of her stories, the ending moment also reveals much about the characters. Thus, while the techniques of indirect speech, omission, and nonverbal communication are key to creating meaning and tension in the narrative, it is also necessary to devote time to discussing how Mansfield's decision to pack suspense and withhold information to the end speaks to her subtle art of avoiding linearity while crafting a short story. In "On Form/s: Woolf, Mansfield, and Plato," scholar Susan Reid notes how some Mansfield critics have dismissed Mansfield's choice of form as not being productive for dynamic analyses (14). Yet, as Reid points out, it is imperative not to generalize about the form of short fiction and its affordances (14). Stories such as "Miss Brill," "The Voyage," and "The Singing Lesson" contain powerful, revelatory endings. In conducting a close reading of these stories, the shifts in mood at the end of the narratives—what I call "wave moments"—reveal themselves as deliberate in the meaning-making process. Just as a wave can unexpectedly crash down onto shore, the way in which Mansfield structures her stories to have such significative endings indicates a consistent pattern in her writing style—one in which she writes against the current.

In the brief biographical piece included in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, the editors remark on the following characteristic regarding Mansfield's work: "The meaning is achieved most of all through the atmosphere, built up by the accumulation of small strokes, none of which seems more than a shrewdly observed realistic detail" (Greenblatt 2567). To refer back to the wave metaphor, the "small strokes" can be seen as ripples or currents before the ultimate rise and fall of the ending wave. In an essay for *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, Alda Correia comments on the effect and structure of Mansfield's signature moments, writing, "The moment … is in Mansfield more associated with daily situations and action and shows in an ironic, heartbroken, and intense way the clash of the character's consciousness with the exterior world" (25). In a sense, the "clash" Correia refers to mirrors the meeting of wave and shore, or inner consciousness and outer world. As further analysis into the aforementioned stories will show, these wave moments, while following Mansfield's own style, refuse to follow any sort of preconceived prediction forecasted by previous writers.

Fleeting Happiness in Miss Brill's Garden Thrill

In the story, "Miss Brill," the technique of shifting the mood near the very end leaves a lasting mark on the story as a whole. As discussed previously, it is necessary to closely analyze the changes in language from the beginning to the end of the story to understand the impact of this late shift. The main character, Miss Brill, who lives alone, looks forward to her weekly trip to the public gardens near her house. Apart from her English students and an elderly gentleman she visits a few times a week, Miss Brill seems to not have a lot of social interactions with other people. She "speaks" only in her own thoughts, and Mansfield turns to emphasizing the character's actions, thoughts, and lack of direct dialogue to tell the story. In an article for *Studies in Short Fiction*, Miriam Mandel observes how "Miss Brill" has "less action and more figurative language" (473). As such, Mandel posits that the narrative relies on "sense imagery"—yet all of the imagery is reductive. The result of this reduction is a limited perspective framed through Miss Brill's thoughts (Mandel 474). Yet, her loneliness becomes all the more apparent as the images Miss Brill keenly observes fill her mind with stories of make-believe—stories that fall apart at the story's conclusion.

Readers learn about the Sunday routine of Miss Brill—who is all too happy to put on her fur and go to the public gardens to watch people go about their lives from her "special" seat (Mansfield 110). Words like "glad," "brilliant," "pleased," and "enjoyed" populate the first few pages of the story as the action unfolds. Indeed, Miss Brill *enjoys* the imaginative possibilities of people-watching and creating her own stories for these individuals. The narrator describes: "Oh how fascinating it was! How she loved it! How she loved sitting here, watching it all! It was all like a play" (112). She looks forward to other people's conversation so much that she expresses her sadness when an old man and woman seated next to her do not speak: "This was disappointing, for Miss Brill always looked forward to the conversation. She had become really quite expert, she thought, at listening as though she didn't listen, at sitting in other people's lives for just a minute while they talked round her" (111). The fact that people are talking "round her" suggests that Miss Brill may be used to not being the center of attention or even being included in conversation with others. Rather, she finds comfort in knowing that there is conversation and life going on surrounding her, and perhaps this offside affiliation is what makes her feel as if she belongs to her community. The detail of "listening as though she didn't listen" further shows that Miss Brill does not want to make her eavesdropping obvious. However, the very act of eavesdropping alludes to a person not being included or purposefully placing themselves on the outside. What is most perplexing is that, up until

this point in the story, Mansfield does not offer any clues as to why Miss Brill should be the observer rather than an active participant in her own world.

In an effort to better understand her role, perhaps looking back to how Miss Brill considers everything before her to be "like a play" will shed light on her curious positionality. Ruminating further on how the scenes before her resemble a performance, Miss Brill ponders the following:

> Who could believe the sky at the back wasn't painted? … Miss Brill discovered what it was that made it all so exciting. They were all on a stage. They weren't only the audience, not only looking on; they were acting. Even she had a part and came every Sunday. No doubt somebody would have noticed if she hadn't been there; she was part of the performance after all. (Mansfield 112)

In this narrated observation, several key words stand out. First, the use of "they" to refer to the people that Miss Brill watches establishes a sense of exclusion. If Mansfield had switched the narration and used the pronoun "we" instead with Miss Brill's thoughts, the feeling of actual connection and belonging would be made stronger. But Miss Brill does not think in this way. To add, "even" connotes some sort of disbelief or hesitance at the thought of Miss Brill's also being a part of this act. The adverbial phrase "of course" would have better emphasized this imagined sense of belonging that Miss Brill maintains. And finally, the repetition of "she had/was a part" coupled with "no doubt" carries an ironic undertone—as if the narrator catches the suspended disbelief of Miss Brill's world. In effect, this narration achieves two purposes: first, it establishes Miss Brill's tendency to imagine circumstances, which signals to readers that her perceptions may be inaccurate or exaggerated; and second, it foreshadows the fleeting quality of her imagined happiness which dissipates at the end.

The phenomenon that Mansfield's shifting narration and implicit dialogue creates is a topic that Joanna Kokot reflects on in her chapter contribution to *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Modernism*. Kokot posits the following:

> The problem is tangible enough because the world presented in Mansfield's stories often hovers on the verge of reality. What is merely the figment of a character's imagination becomes fact on the page, mainly due to the narrative strategy adopted by the writer. The character's point of view blends with that of the narrator, and as a result, the narrative distance from the protagonist's fantasies is blurred; they are presented as facts, even if they become so only in the observer's mind. (68)

Indeed, as closely reading the "Who could believe the sky at the back wasn't painted?" passage shows, the narration and Miss Brill's own thoughts blend in a way that makes distinguishing the two types of speech difficult. Yet, this blending element, while perplexing, does not affect the readability. One manages to continue taking in the observations of Miss Brill and subsequent action without much glancing back to see where the narration stops, and Miss Brill's thoughts begin. Structurally, this technique accentuates how Miss Brill's own perception of reality and illusion are blurred. Like the sometimes-indistinguishable way different tones of water blend in the depths of the ocean, Mansfield shows how reality and fantasy exist parallel and so near each other that, at times, the difference is not clear.

With such a blurred perception of reality, the abrupt ending of this story becomes all the more intriguing—as I would argue that the ending scene depicts more lucidity than any part of the rest of the story. Readers see how fragile Miss Brill's inner imagined world is when she overhears a young boy calling her stupid and saying, "Why does she come here at all—who wants her?" (Mansfield 113). As the narrator describes, Miss Brill would usually stop by the bakers for a piece of honey cake after her Sunday people-watching routine. However, after hearing the exchange between the young couple, she heads straight home—implying that her earlier happy mood has been completely ruined by this one outburst. The narrator relates, "But today she passed the baker's by, climbed the stairs, went into the little dark room—her room like a cupboard—and sat down on the red eiderdown" (114). Miss Brill sits alone for a while, and when she puts her fur away, she believes that she can hear crying coming from its box (114). This last image of Miss Brill shutting herself away from the outside world is one of stark contrast to the way she presents herself just moments before. From merriment and wonder, the mood quickly changes to disenchantment and letdown. The small actions that gave Miss Brill happiness and joy before—such as the little almond "surprise" in her honey cake—cease to exist in this moment (114). For all the build-up and attention to others shown in the gardens, Miss Brill's actual world at home reveals itself as isolated and lonely.

Clear Skies Ahead: No Storms on This Voyage

In "The Voyage," the withholding of plot information until later in the story creates an impact in meaning just as previously described with "Miss Brill;" however, unlike the latter story, the pattern changes from happy beginning/distraught ending to the opposite. In a bustling harbor scene, readers are introduced to young Fenella and her grandmother as the two prepare to take off on their voyage—with Fenella's father saying his goodbyes to them. Having just lost her mother, Fenella boards the Picton boat to the apparent

unknown. While the reason for their departure is not revealed immediately, contextual clues hint at Fenella's hesitance to leave.

In his critical study on Mansfield's writing style and literary form, W.H. New posits that the introductory details within "The Voyage" indicate "no immediate possibility of change" (111). He also conducts close analysis of the verb usage within the first few scenes of the story to indicate how subtle shifts between passive to active verbs suggest possibilities for a brighter future (New 111). Yet, these inklings toward a possible brighter future are also revealed through implicit dialogue and a particular narrative symbol.

The contextual clues employed by Mansfield vary between details in character actions and silent disclosures. When her father gives her a shilling, Fenella assumes that she will be "going away forever" (Mansfield 103). Additionally, the overall uneasy tone and absence of one member of the family—the mother—fill in plot details that would otherwise be revealed through narration. The mother's death is revealed through indirect conversation between the grandma and the stewardess later on—as the stewardess observes the black clothing on the grandma and Fenella once they board the boat: "'I hope—began the stewardess. Then she turned round and took a long mournful look at grandma's blackness and at Fenella's black coat and skirt, black blouse, and hat with a crepe rose" (105). All that the grandma offers in reply to the stewardess is "'It was God's will'" (105). Here, the lack of elaboration—as to what the cause of death was, for example—speaks to how sudden or unexpected the circumstance might have been. When the stewardess comes in to check on the two, she observes how sweetly Fenella has fallen asleep and exclaims, "'Poor little motherless mite!'" (107). What follows in response is one sentence of narration explaining how the grandma tells the stewardess "all about what happened" while Fenella sleeps (107). True to the writing methods previously described, Mansfield avoids the custom of revealing information as it unfolds in the narrative.

Withholding information and creating suspense connect to reveal the possibility of hope through the presence of one particular object—the grandma's umbrella. As a symbol that carries meaning throughout the text, the umbrella appears each time the action in the story changes. In the beginning, when young Fenella's father is saying his goodbyes and sending his mother and Fenella off on their journey overseas, Mansfield directs readers to Fenella and a specific object in her hands. The narrations offers, "As well as her luggage strapped into a neat sausage, Fenella carries clasped to her her grandma's umbrella, and the handle, which was a swan's head, kept giving her shoulder a sharp little peck as if it too wanted her to hurry . . ." (Mansfield 102). Such a focused image may pass by without

so much as a second thought during a first reading of the text. However, this insertion is strategic, as references to the umbrella continue to occur.

During their journey on the boat, Fenella is responsible for making sure the swan-neck umbrella does not break. Once they are alone, Fenella's grandma mentions, "And be careful the umbrellas aren't caught in the stair rail. I saw a beautiful umbrella broken in half like that on my way over" (Mansfield 104). Fenella takes great care with the umbrella, yet so much emphasis is placed on this one object—causing one to wonder why Fenella is responsible for it and why the grandma cannot simply carry the umbrella herself. In a moment where the two are finally able to unpack their things and rest—where one could say that Fenella might have her guard down—she recalls with a start that she left the umbrella standing up on the couch. Yet, Fenella merely wrestles with this worry in her thoughts—no direct speech occurs. The narrator relates: "Fenella remembered she had left the swan-necked umbrella standing up on the little couch. If it fell over, would it break? But grandma remembered too, at the same time" (107). As this observation ends, the dialogue picks back up with the grandma asking the stewardess to lay the umbrella down. In a seamless blend of inner thoughts, Mansfield shows how interconnected Fenella and her grandma have become. As a result, they understand the effect that this one object has on their consciousness. If the umbrella did not hold much significance, then neither Fenella nor the grandma would worry about its being left outside or breaking.

At the end of their voyage, the grandma asks "You've got my—" as they are leaving the boat. Readers can assume that here, she is referring to the umbrella—as Fenella is described as merely showing "it to her" (Mansfield 108). The umbrella, the it that has a superstitious hold on the success of their voyage, maintains a constant thread of hope for better tidings throughout the story. All the while on their journey, cold imagery and language follows Fenella, as readers do not get the sense that she is comfortable by any means. For example, the wind "tugs" at Fenella's skirts; the bed sheets are "stiff," and she has to "tear" her way in (104-106). The atmosphere around them is described in bleak terms as well: "But if it had been cold in the cabin, on deck it was like ice. The sun was not up yet, but the stars were dim, and the cold pale sky was the same colour as the cold pale sea" (108). On top of the already dreary circumstances, Fenella grows even more guarded as she is constantly worried about this umbrella. Yet, an incredible shift occurs when the pair finally make it to their destination—home. Once they make it home to her grandpa, Fenella lets go of the umbrella: "Fenella smiled again, and crooked the swan neck over the bed-rail" (109). This holding on/letting go displays Fenella's desire for her family unit to be whole again and for things to no longer be "broken." The attempts

by both Fenella and her grandma not to lose the umbrella and make sure it stays in one piece reflect the effect that the mother's death may have had on the family as a whole. With the father not offering any explanation as to why he cannot join the rest of his family from the very beginning, and the mother's death, the story begins on a broken note. Commenting on the shift between bleak beginning to hopeful ending, New writes, "Mansfield's story works to a different and more sophisticated kind of revelation, one that requires the sense of bleakness to recur and permits the counter-powers of action and life to deal again and yet again with it, before stasis slowly loosens its hold on Fenella's future" (112). What occurs at the end of the story is a sweeping shift from discomfort, sorrow, and unhappiness to that of comfort, togetherness, and hope. The "wave moment" at the end here, rather than projecting confusion, instills a surge of comfort—potentially washing away the sadness that Fenella wished would disappear.

Laments of Love, Sense Withholding

Similar to the sudden shift in mood with "The Voyage," in "The Singing Lesson," short and punctuated lines of dialogue reveal much about a character in the place of lengthy visual descriptions. This story revolves around a recently heartbroken music teacher, Miss Meadows, detailing no more than an hour of present literary time as she arrives at school to teach her class. While the fact that Miss Meadows's fiancé has called off their wedding is not revealed until after the opening scene and a bit of dialogue, readers are met with such strong emotion from Miss Meadows that the inference of something bad transpiring is only logical. When on her way to her classroom, Miss Meadows runs into the Science Mistress, who states, "You look fro-zen" (Mansfield 121). Here, the description of "frozen" may not only refer to the fact that it is cold, but that Miss Meadows, because of her heartbreak, looks meaner and icy in a way—as she does not smile. Rather, she is "hugging the knife"—a meticulous use of metaphor on Mansfield's part that both creates an unsettling and dramatic feeling. The knife is figurative—made up of Basil's cutting words—which Miss Meadows reveals through interior monologue later on.

The sudden jumps in narration to where readers see excerpts from Basil's letter calling off their marriage are unannounced, nor are they formatted in a different font style or offset from the rest of the narration. On the matter of jumps in narration and time, the *Norton Anthology* editors offer the following observation: "Mansfield also manipulates time masterfully: she makes particularly effective use of unobtrusive flashback, where we find ourselves in an earlier phase of the action without quite knowing how we got there but fully aware of its relevance to the total action and atmosphere" (Greenblatt

2567-2568). While the shifts to letter writing never show specific time makers, the minimal—or lack of—transition phrases from Mansfield balance the narrative to where one paragraph manages to flow into the next. This combination of withholding information and unchanged formatting helps show how Basil's words are lingering over Miss Meadows's head, ultimately affecting her in a major way. Her body language and speech reveal this effect as well; she stalks to the piano, and her voice is made of "ice" (Mansfield 122). The blending of time reflects how Basil's rejection permeates Miss Meadows's thoughts and actions—shaping the tension that is woven through the story.

There are further details that show how the icy behavior and tenseness are not typical of Miss Meadows. When young student Mary Beazley approaches Miss Meadows, the narrator explains that Mary "was waiting for this moment" and that the presenting of a yellow chrysanthemum had become "a little ritual" for quite some time (Mansfield 122). However, the given circumstance refutes any routine, as the narrator continues, "But this morning, instead of taking it up, instead of tucking it into her belt while she leant over Mary and said, 'Thank you, Mary. How very nice! Turn to page thirty-two,' what was Mary's horror when Miss Meadows totally ignored the chrysanthemum, made no reply to her greeting, but said in a voice of ice, 'Page fourteen, please, and mark the accents well'" (122). The word "horror" indicates that Mary—and perhaps the other girls in the class—would not have been accustomed to such coldness and dismissive behavior on Miss Meadows's part. Miss Meadows then asks the girls to sing a lament, "without expression" at first (122). She is so focused on the lyrics and music of this powerful lament that the girls begin to tremble and cry, and the overall feeling in the room is one of tension and unease. Because all of the commentary on Basil and the heartbreak are shown through interior monologue—rather than direct speech—these glimpses of Miss Meadows's determined movement and abruptness are all the girls have to witness. Thus, there is a simultaneous nature to the fear of the girls being juxtaposed against Miss Meadows in her dismay. In her work looking at the juxtaposition in Mansfield's diction, Aimee Gaston writes, "It is an example of Mansfield's deftness in selecting from her word-hoard and juxtaposing her treasures, making words yield far more than their literalness and letting language coruscate" (273). Indeed, the short, punctuated phrases in the moment described above reflect and reverberate across the page. And by contrasting these two emotions as the interplay between Miss Meadows's preoccupied thoughts and the students' unease, Mansfield demonstrates yet again the "clash" (to refer back to Correia's observation) between a character's awareness and the exterior world (Correia 25)

Furthermore, even as the waves of her emotions continue to dominate the narrative, an exterior force changes the direction of the story. When Miss Meadows is called to head mistress Miss Wyatt to receive a telegram from Basil, her mood completely changes, as does her tone. Kokot notes how, in Mansfield's short fictions, "a character's attitude towards reality often changes on an impulse, thanks to a defined stimulus or emotion—and it changes drastically" (73). Upon receiving the pink envelope, Miss Meadows's first thought is that Basil has committed suicide—yet throughout the story, there was no indication of Basil's sadness. What Mansfield does provide is just a couple of nods to his characteristics through Miss Meadows's own inner deliberation. In the letter excerpt, Basil reveals how the idea of marriage fills him with "disgust" (Mansfield 122). Miss Meadows later thinks about how surprised she was that he even confessed his fondness for her (with her being thirty and him twenty-five, the age gap could indicate uncertainty in the relationship). She also makes a nod to him being aware of his attractiveness (123). These qualities all indicate that Basil really only thinks of himself, and nothing about the glimpses of him show how he had any deep concern for Miss Meadows's own wellbeing. Then, the format and lack of punctuation in the one-line telegram reveals more about Basil's character: "Pay no attention to letter must have been mad bought hat stand today Basil" (125). First, Basil instructs Miss Meadows to simply *ignore* the rejection letter, then places the blame on shift in emotional state, to finally end with an unrelated aside—that he bought a material item. Perhaps the purchase is his way of calling back to the idea of the two of them getting married and preparing for life together. Regardless of his intent, what Mansfield is masterful at showing is how the focus placed on Miss Meadows's reaction and emotions reflects more about both her and her relationship with Basil. Yet, this is another instance where the specifics are left for the reader to decide; Mansfield does not explain her character's actions one way or the other.

Consequently, after receiving Basil's change of heart, Miss Meadows experiences a change in mood and is now "on the wings of hope, of love, of joy" (Mansfield 125). Such gaiety contrasts incredibly with the opening images of her stalking with "despair – buried deep in the heart like a wicked knife" (121). Back in her class, she tells the girls to turn to "page thirty-two" and sing a happy song as opposed to the earlier lament (125). She tells her students, "Don't look so doleful, girls. It ought to sound warm, joyful, eager" and her own voice resounds, "glowing with expression" (126). While the girls struggle to match the tempo and feel of the new song, Miss Meadows has no trouble at all. What is so striking about this shift in character mood is how quickly it occurs—another example of the "wave moment" effect. The story itself spans only five pages, and it is not until the last full page that readers see this change in Miss Meadows.

Therefore, there is neither the space nor the time for any of the reactions of the girls to be captured. One may consider how shocked the girls must be to now see Miss Meadows in a happier and lighter mood—a change that in the real-time action of the story might have occurred over a few minutes. Yet again, the focus stays on Miss Meadows and her transformation over the course of the story. What Mansfield's story construction reveals is the way that emotions can take hold of someone—just like a crashing wave. Rather than offer extensive backstory and present chronological time markers for Basil and Miss Meadows's relationship, Mansfield only offers what is necessary for readers to grasp how Miss Meadows functions within this heartbreak. All the rest—what others around her may think or feel, the build-up to why the engagement was broken off, more context into Miss Meadows's life—seems irrelevant to where (thinking in terms of Mansfield's writing style) the information would just cloud the story with over-explanation.

Drawing Conclusions in Disappearing Sand

With each of the stories explored above, the manner in which Mansfield saves a punctuated revelation for the very end maintains similar plot and character development patterns. Still, it is in the words of the last sentence or two in each story that welcomes an immense amount of significance and consequence to flow all the way to the final word. As reflected by scholars, Mansfield's use of such strategies reveals her own aversion to the typical structure of story writing. Because Mansfield's stories provide brief glimpses into a short period of time in character's lives, zeroing in on what is said versus what is left unspoken becomes imperative to understand the behaviors and motivations of a given character. Especially considering how Mansfield withholds information from readers, minute details become the building blocks to understanding the jarring shifts that occur at the end of her stories. Providing limited perspectives, in turn, allows for more imagination when analyzing the figurative language, absences in dialogue, and implied feelings of each character. As opposed to revealing everything about a character's life through lengthy narration, Mansfield gives readers the chance to figure things out on their own. The resulting implicit techniques in Mansfield's writing are what make the endings more meaningful than surprising, more deliberate than accidental. Her "wave moments" may seem like they come out of nowhere, but in taking the time to look past the water's (or word's) surface, the indications reveal themselves as being there all along—simply waiting for the right time to break.

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