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English 367

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Finding a Foreign Home in Katherine Mansfield's "The Daughters of the Late Colonel"

The latter end of Katherine Mansfield's life (1915-1923), a time considered by many to be the most fruitful years of her career, also marked a period of self-examination and introspection for the author. Much of this self-reflection focused on Mansfield's long-standing frustration with her New Zealand heritage—which she had abandoned in favor of a bohemian life of writing and creativity—with an emerging desire for a more traditional sense of home and domestic life. Two letters written by Mansfield during this time reflect the dissonance caused by these desires. The first letter, written in 1915 to her husband, John Middleton Murray, expresses Mansfield's unexpected longing for a life of more traditional domesticity. She writes, "Why haven't I got a real 'home', a real life—Why haven't I got a Chinese nurse with green trousers and two babies who rush at me and clasp my knees . . . Shall I ever have them?" (*Letters* 177). In a later letter, written in 1922 to her friend and South African writer Sarah Gertrude Millin, Mansfield's recalls with a tone of regret her former renunciation of the middle-class values and domesticity of her life in colonial New Zealand. "I am a 'Colonial' . . . I hated it. It seemed to me a small petty world. I longed for 'my' kind of people . . . And after a struggle I did get out of the nest finally and came to London, at eighteen, *never* to return, said my disgusted heart . . . It's only in those years I've really been able to work and always my thoughts and feelings go back to New Zealand" (*Letters* 80).

These letters illustrate how, as W. Todd Martin says, Mansfield's earlier "rejection of her family's middle-class values" became "more ambiguous later in her life" as she attempted to reconcile her rejection of domesticity with a new hope for a secure home and family (66). These personal yearnings for a stable home environment, as well as Mansfield's increased sympathy for her multicultural heritage, mirror Mansfield's public calls for increased literary and creative inclusivity and openness towards world fiction. During this same period of personal introspection, Mansfield—in addition to writing her own fiction—was employed as book reviewer and editor for the *Athenaeum* journal, owned and edited by her husband, John Middleton Murray. Scholars have noted how this journalistic period give way to the final and most prolific period of her career, which saw the composition and publication of many of her most renowned and innovative stories, among them "The Daughters of the Late Colonel," "The Garden-Party," and "At the Bay." Mansfield scholar Jenny McDonnell notes how "the environs of the *Athenaeum* and its literary network" became "a forum" for Mansfield to not only "hone her craft," but to recognize the cultural shortsightedness and global narrowness of what she was reading and reviewing (728). This literary frustration inspired Mansfield's 1920 essay, "Wanted, a New World," which raised what McDonnell terms a "rallying cry" amongst writers and editors of periodicals "for new approaches to the production and consumption of fiction" which whole-heartedly accepted literature and culture from anywhere (728). Thus, the tail end of Katherine Mansfield's career saw a newfound desire for inclusivity and belonging, both for Mansfield personally and in a broader literary sense.

In this light, I read the 1921 short story "The Daughters of the Late Colonel," as Mansfield's artistic attempt to resolve these personal and public concerns. The story describes two sisters, Josephine and Constantina, and their reaction to the death of their father, a former

British colonel and a domineering and oppressive tyrant over his two daughters' memories. Few scholars have analyzed the story in terms of this desire for greater global openness but have instead adopted the well-worn interpretive lenses of class or gender struggle. Emily Hinnov interprets the daughters' battle against the "despotic" and "monstrous omnipresence" of the colonel as Mansfield's fight for "freedom in the public world . . . of the patriarchy" (16). Saskia McCracken analyzes the way in which "classed tensions and thresholds prevent" the daughters from crossing "the boundaries of the home . . . and classed spaces" (2). These analyses, though aptly attaching the common modernist themes of class and gender struggle within Mansfield's fiction, fail to recognize the story's latent purposes: to explore Mansfield's inner yearnings for familial belonging, to rectify her former rejection of her colonialized past, and to steer British literature towards broader global awareness and inclusivity. In both the story itself and in its peripheral periodical context, Mansfield, through Josephine and Constantia, seeks a more stable sense of home and belonging, both for herself and for the literary culture in which she wrote and contributed. She does this throughout "Daughters" through her well-known technique of object-oriented aestheticism, channeling both the fictional sisters' emotions towards their deceased parents and Mansfield's desire for a renewed sense of home and familial stability through various foreign or domestic objects within the story. Ultimately, my reading of "Daughters" and its periodical context recasts both the story itself and Mansfield in a new light, a light that reveals the story's deep personal ties to Mansfield and to her own advocacy of global writing, cultures, and ideas within British periodicals and modernism.

The merging of global inclusivity and Mansfield's personal yearning for a more stable sense of home or familial relations emerges in "Daughters" through relationship between the two sisters, Josephine and Constantia, and their non-present, deceased parents. However, this

relationship between the sisters and their father and mother is not a literal, flesh-and-blood relationship between physical people, but between the sisters and various objects. The technique of object-oriented aesthetics, "a fundamental feature of Mansfield's creative sensibility" according to Mansfield scholar J. Lawrence Mitchell, clearly emerges in "Daughters" through my digital textual analysis, which links the comforting and joyful memories of Josephine and Constantia's mother are felt through foreign objects (Mitchell 32, see fig. 1).

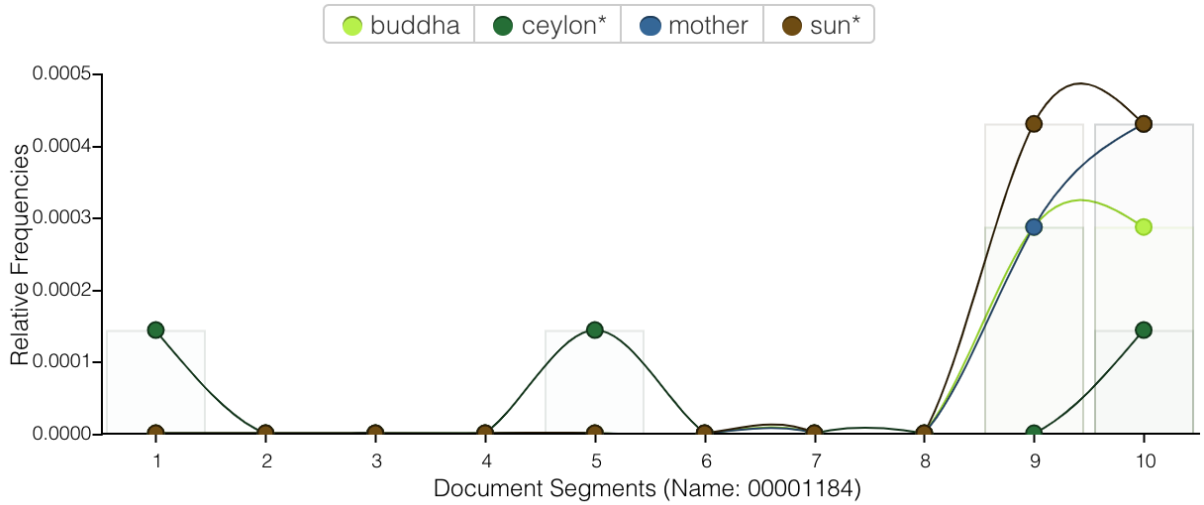

Figure 1 shows correlations between various foreign objects, such as buddha or the sun, and the sisters' mother. The x-axis shows the progression through each consecutive part of the story, while the y-axis gives the frequencies of the keywords, shown at the top of the figure.

Contrastingly, the sisters experience the oppressive presence of the colonel in their interactions with domestic, stereotypically English objects. As Josephine and Constantia attempt to muster the courage and enter their father's old study, Josephine experiences a thrill of terror, believing their father to be "in the top drawer with his handkerchiefs and neckties . . . with his shirts and pyjamas, with his suits . . . ready to spring" (Mansfield 21). Mansfield pairs this spectral, even predatorial aura surrounding their father's clothing with a description of the study's temperature or climate, which recalls the chill of an English winter. "Everything was covered" with a "coldness" and "whiteness" from which the sisters "expected a snowflake to fall" (20). This

chilly and haunting effect of their father's clothes contrasts the sisters' experience with their mother's old possessions. Despite the fact that "so little remained of mother," the cold spell of the colonel's presence is broken as sunlight, now making its first appearance in the story, "flashes" and illuminates "the ear-rings shaped like tiny pagodas and a black feather boa" that used to belong to their mother (28). The sunlight's warm presence in the room also triggers a memory for Constantia, wherein she recalls a moment of unexpected courage as a young girl while staring at "the horrible dancing figures on the carved screen" in their mother's room. This screen too is a foreign object, most likely a decorative folding screen with panels adorned with art and figures from Sri Lankan[1] culture or folklore. Ultimately, sisters' former feelings of fear and terror toward their father and his possessions are in this moment replaced with a "longing" for the down-to-earth, domestic life abroad which they had enjoyed with their mother. This longing brings a sense of clarity to Constantia's typical, foggy mental state, which is described throughout the story as "vague" (18, 26, 28). This sharper, clear feeling of longing echoes the language of Mansfield's aforementioned letters, wherein her desire for traditional domesticity collided with her frustration towards non-English ancestry and its colonial stigma. Thus, the two sisters'—and by extension, Mansfield's—sense of home, familial peace, and freedom is located among foreign objects, while those objects relating to their father, his propriety, and England itself are oppressive and fearful to them.

Another example of this object-oriented juxtaposition between the sisters' longing for their mother and fear towards their father occurs in the sisters' reactions to either native or foreign religious objects. Soon after the death of their father, the sisters invite Mr. Farolles, a

[1] Mansfield refers to "Ceylon" several times throughout the story, which was a British colony until 1948 and most likely where Mansfield envisioned sisters living with their father and mother during his service as a British colonel (Mansfield 16,22, 28).

clergyman of St. John's into their home. As Mr. Farolles attempts to offer his condolences to Josephine and Constantia, he offers to provide them with the ordinance of Communion—the service of Christian worship during which bread and wine are consecrated and shared—in their home, saying, "'A little Communion is often very help—a great comfort'" (Mansfield 18). But despite their implied familiarity with Christianity and prior relationship with Mr. Farolles, Mansfield writes that "the idea of a little Communion" as a means of comfort to them in the midst of mourning their father "terrified them" (18). The sisters' minds are filled with horrified images of Mr. Farolles trying to pass them "the chalice" while the sisters would have to wait "in torture" through the service (18-19). This fearful effect of the common Christian object and associated ordinance again contrasts the positive effects of a foreign object. Later, as the sisters are again in their mother's old room, Constantia "walked over to the mantelpiece to her favourite Buddha" (28). This buddha statuette, like the sunlight, the pagoda earrings, and the screen, gives Constantia that feeling of clear and focused longing for "this other life" of domestic stability which now eludes them in the wake of their father's death. These object-oriented connections between the sisters, their parents, and foreign and domestic spaces mirror Mansfield's own struggle for a sense of traditional domestic dependence.

With these parallels between the story's aesthetic qualities and Mansfield's own personal desire for a sense family stability in mind, I now turn to the story's periodical context. The periodical culture of *The London Mercury* provided the safe space for Mansfield to synthesize her public call for more globally inclusive and open-armed literary approaches with her private anxieties regarding her familial and domestic circumstances. Before the writing and publishing of "Daughters," Mansfield was heavily involved in her husband's work as the owner and editor of two avant-garde literary journals: *Rhythm* and the *Athenaeum*. Despite the time and effort

Mansfield expended contributing both as an editor and reviewer for these journals, as mentioned earlier in this essay, she eventually cut ties with these journals at the end of 1920. She then published "Daughters" in *The London Mercury* in 1921, rather than in one of her husband's journals. Some scholars have interpreted this shift as a sign of Mansfield's anxiety over her own standing as a reputable and respected author. However, by comparing the literary affordances of *The London Mercury* compared with those of *Rhythm* or the *Athenaeum,* Mansfield's shift away from her previous periodical environment becomes clearer. This shift, preceded by her journalistic exposure to a wide array of literature working for the *Athenaeum,* was Mansfield's attempt to achieve greater independence from the editorial and creative control of her husband and his journals and to establish herself within a periodical culture and environment more accepting of a wider array of literary styles and authors. Her departure from her husband's and his journals' influence can no longer be viewed as a "melodramatic . . . jealous . . . or envious" move of an "insecure author who aimed to run down the work of more talented rivals in order to offset her own limitations" (McDonnell 729). Rather, as McDonnell writes, Mansfield's move away from her husband's journals was her attempt to "perfect her short story aesthetic" and assert herself independently amidst the globally expansive environment of modernist literature (McDonnell 730).

This environment, absent of the high-brow avant-gardism of *Rhythm* and the *Athaeneum,* flourished in *The London Mercury,* a more established and widely read journal. While *Rhythm* and the *Athenaeum* often lent itself towards a more elitist and high-brow audience, *The London Mercury* focused on cultivating a broad-minded and globally-inclusive readership. This global focus not only occurred in the original literature published in the journal, but also in its advertisements. Each issue carried about fifteen to twenty pages of ads almost exclusively from

bookshops or book venders, sellers, collectors. These ads marketed titles of new works, reprinted or new editions of previous classics, and—most significantly—pointed readers towards global literature outside of the traditional English canon. This is true of the issue in which "Daughters" was first published; several pages of advertisements for fresh editions of Goethe, Cervantes, and Chekhov precede the start of Mansfield's story (*London Mercury* 20-25). However, the *Mercery*'s focus on and curation of global literature was not filtered through an Anglo-centric or colonial exceptionalism; it was instead motivated by the editor J.S. Squire's belief in a universal standard of good art, independent of any political, cultural, or linguistic hierarchies. Writing about *The London Mercury* and other prominent English publications of the twentieth century, Patrick Collier claims that "Squire's belief in intrinsic, literary values . . . implied not a rejection of the authority of literary institutions and middlemen, but a denial of their historically contingent nature" (146). Considering Mansfield's own anxiety surrounding the "historically contingent nature" of her non-English heritage, *The London Mercury* would have appeared as an appropriate home for a story like "Daughters," a story where Mansfield, through Josephine and Constantia, attempts to find a sympathetic space where her desires for family, literary expansion, and global harmony could flourish.

Despite all this, the ending of the story, much like Mansfield's own life, ends without full resolution of these simultaneous desires for harmony at home and in the world of literature. Josephine and Constantia, despite the momentary glimmer of hope at the memory of their mother, both admit that they have "forgotten" what they were going to say to one another (Mansfield 30). This non-resolution however, like object-oriented aesthetics, falls in line with another element of Mansfield's literary MO: to merely raise questions, to bring elements of an answer into conversation with each other, but to ultimately leave those questions unanswered. In

another of her letters, this one addressed to Virginia Woolf, Mansfield defends her own preference for writing with questions rather than answers in mind: “What the writer does is not so much to solve the question but to *put* the question. There must be the question put. That seems to me a very nice dividing line between the true & the false writer” (*Letters* 320). This essay has attempted to show “Daughters” to be another example of Mansfield’s own putting forth questions. The particular questions at work in “Daughters” intertwine matters of personal and professional significance for Mansfield herself: home and family life versus a bohemian literary life, and a foreign, colonial heritage versus an adopted one. In its periodical context and within the literary elements of the story itself, “Daughters” reveals Mansfield’s desire “to live more fully in community” with those in her family and with a wider, more inclusive world of authors and writers (Martin 68).

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