

In the beginning was the cat. How cats appear in Katherine Mansfield's 'At the bay', 'Something childish but very natural', 'Bliss' and 'Mr Rendall and the cat'

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Abstract

The title of this essay is borrowed from the Bible, to show how cats are predominant in Katherine Mansfield's literature.

In 'At the bay', for example, Florrie is the first permanent inhabitant of the island. The cat speaks and judges what is going on around her. Far from an anthropocentric vision from which to establish definitive boundaries between humans and nonhumans, the animal herself imposes her opinions on us. In 'Something childish but very natural', a passing by cat, functioning as a *deus ex machina*, gives Henry the opportunity to be more and more involved in enacting a theatrical representation. The two protagonists are unable to let their childish state go away, and don't have the capability to face reality for what it actually is.

Fictionalization of the external world is also performed by Bertha Young, the protagonist of 'Bliss'. A couple of cats destroys a happy solitary circumstance by simply crossing her garden. They clearly anticipate the epiphanic moment when Bertha discovers the love affair between her husband and Pearl Fulton.

In 'Mr Rendall and the cat', a short story belonging to Mansfield's 'Scrapbook' which hasn't often been analysed, the animal jumps exactly at the centre of Mr Rendall's lawn, and this action is perceived by the human being as extremely cheeky.

A part from describing cats in her short stories, Katherine Mansfield also loved cats in her life. She even imagined that Wingley, one of his pets, had been the author of a pudding recipe.

Keywords: *cat, Genesis, species, anthropocentric vision, humans and nonhumans, depersonalization, holistic, performance, self-referential, Derrida, artificiality, fictionalization, prejudice, recipe, pudding.*



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It struck me that she is of the cat kind: alien, composed, always solitary and observant.
- Virginia Woolf

*It's bigger than a tiger,
Its eyes are jets of flame,
Its claws are gleaming daggers
Could it have once been tame?*
- Katherine Mansfield

In the beginning was the cat, we could write about some of Katherine Mansfield's short stories, paraphrasing Genesis. After describing the landscape and a sheep flock, the narrator of 'At the bay', for example, actually introduces the first permanent inhabitant of Crescent Bay: a cat. Sheep are nomadic, while the cat resides in the island and – as Pamela Dunbar correctly states in her *Radical Mansfield. Double discourse in Katherine Mansfield's short stories* – the cat Florrie is the first component of the Burnell's family to appear in the story. She behaves exactly like any other member of her species: "When she saw the old sheep-dog she sprang up quickly, arched her back, drew in her tabby head, and seemed to give a little fastidious shiver¹".

How often can we observe these reactions when something we haven't even noticed draws our feline pets' attention? But Mansfield's Florrie is far from being a common cat: she speaks and, most of all, she judges what is going on around her: 'Ugh! What a coarse, revolting creature!' said Florrie²". She is referring to the sheep-dog in an immediate direct speech. The narrator gives her voice without any sort of introductory explanation, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Yet, 'At the bay' is not an Aesop's fable; it is not specifically addressed to children, although they play an important role in the story. Nor does it end with a moral whatsoever. However, Florrie possesses a mind of her own. In her case it is not we, human readers, who project our thoughts and feelings onto this animal, it is the animal herself who imposes her own opinions on us.

"Florrie the thinking cat and her complex reactions bring into question the primacy of the human intellect on the self-aggrandizing positioning humans assume in the universe," declares

¹ Mansfield, K., *The collected short stories*, p. 106.

² Ivi, p. 166.

Kostkowska³. Far from an anthropocentric vision from which to establish definitive boundaries between humans and nonhumans, Florrie's point of view stands out in the foreground. We nearly forget that Katherine Mansfield has decided to give her life. As a matter of fact, one of the aims of her writing was to totally identify with the animal, or the object she was writing about: to lose her identity and acquire a new one. "One of Mansfield's greatest strengths," writes Gerri Kimber in her *Katherine Mansfield and the art of the short story*, "is her ability to 'become' her fictional characters, and to depict with acute psychological insight the workings of their mind, as well as delineating their physical attributes⁴". This is valid also for cats and, as Ascari states analysing the last period in her life when she was influenced by *Cosmic anatomy and the structure of the ego* by 'M. B. Oxon', identifying with other living beings might have enabled her to find an escape from her aching body⁵.

In any case, Mansfield is often showing her holistic interests by multiple narrative levels and points of view. Florrie isn't actually the only living being to express her views. Wag, the ship-dog, has no better opinion on her than she has on him: "Only one of his ears twitched to prove that he saw, and thought her a silly young female⁶". This comic antagonism brings into light gender stereotypes, which Mansfield even attributes to animals. The passage, evidently ironical, focuses on an issue that the writer is interested in denouncing. Women in 'At the bay', Linda and Beryl, live a life they don't feel as their own, like animals imprisoned in a cage. Moreover, while a cat and a dog have their own personality, Linda and Beryl are constantly experiencing a depersonalization, acting roles inside the house and the family that are far from being spontaneously chosen.

When Florrie appears again, the story is about to end, as Dunbar underlines. The cat nearly has the last word, and says she is happy the day has finished. We, the readers, take Florrie at her word: indeed it has not been an easy day for most part of the characters. By letting the animal express her feelings, Katherine Mansfield overcomes the limits between humans and

³ Kostkowska, J., "All sort of lives": Katherine Mansfield's Eco-poetics in "At the bay", in «Tinakori. Critical journal of the Katherine Mansfield Society», Issue 3, (2019), pp. 3-14.

⁴ Kimber, G., *Katherine Mansfield and the art of the short story*, p. 20.

⁵ See Ascari, M., 'A raft in the sea of loneliness, p. 49.

⁶ Mansfield, K., *The collected short stories*, p. 167.

nonhumans. The first ones are not the only species that can arrogate the right to be self-referential: to say “I”, in a word.

Cats are predominant and a specific cat, valued in his or her own singularity as Derrida would state⁷, is mentioned in ‘Something childish but very natural’. The very young protagonists – Henry and Edna – after having met on a train and then started a relationship, go to a small village with no name, which they baptize as their own. Surrounded by a heavenly landscape, they discover a house and decide it will soon belong to them. Henry, a day-dreamer who is less attached to reality than Edna, transforms into a sort of stage-manager when a passing by cat, functioning as a *deus ex machina*, gives him the opportunity to be more and more involved in enacting a theatrical representation, also directing Edna’s actions. Standing in front of the house he would like to live in, Henry starts describing its interior as if he knew each room perfectly. Edna joins in the reverie, imagining they can “hear the river flowing and the sound of the poplar trees, far away, rustling and flowing in our dreams⁸”. A little cat, coming from the empty house of their dreams – a real animal that could bring back the couple to *hic et nunc*, and finally abandon their performance – reinforces instead the collective theatrical representation. Henry and Edna are in fact unable to let their childish state go away, (a prolonged childhood that is far from being “natural”). They don’t have the capability to face reality for what it actually is: they have no money, and it is not possible, for the moment, to live in that blissful village with no name. However, Edna calls the kitty who then approaches her, and rubs against her knees. Henry, soon directs the performance: ‘If we’re going for a walk just take the cat and put it inside the front door, [...] I’ve got the key⁹’. While Edna starts stroking the cat in her arms, Henry – merging in the fiction he is putting together – pretends to open the door of the house, but going on living something unreal is perceived as dangerous and scaring. Henry, therefore, “came down again quickly”. He is ready to supply a different stage direction: ‘Let’s go away at once. It’s going to turn into a dream¹⁰’. Henry pathetically tries to resume his reverie all the same, and suggests going back to the house, and feed the cat with what is left from the milk jug.

⁷ I’m referring here to Derrida’s book *The animal that therefore I am* in which the philosopher’s own cat plays an important role.

⁸ Mansfield, K., p. 513.

⁹ *Ivi*, p. 514.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

Although this real animal joins in the characters' story-telling, reality will lead to a final splitting up of the two characters, as Mansfield hints in the epilogue when Henry waits for Edna who doesn't come back. A separation is therefore characterised as something natural that can happen against any artificiality they tried to impose on their lives.

Fictionalization of the external world is also performed by Bertha Young, the protagonist of 'Bliss' when, while looking at a pear in the garden with the fascinating Pearl Fulton, she imagines that the latter is sharing the same emotions, feeling an undercurrent of attraction flowing between them even without verbalizing it. Before this blissful moment, Bertha had already admired the beautiful flowered pear, but a couple of cats had disrupted her happy solitude by simply crossing the garden: "A grey cat, dragging its belly, crept across the lawn, and a black one, its shadow, trailed after. The sight of them, so intent and so quick, gave Bertha a curious shiver¹¹". She exclaims that cats are creepy and Dunbar, in this latter regard, comments that they represent "an instinctual sexuality which she [Bertha] herself perceives as bestial and emphatically rejects¹²". Apart from this interpretation, the couple of cats clearly anticipates the epiphanic moment when Bertha discovers the love affair between her husband Eddie and Pearl Fulton. In this latter regard, Mansfield establishes a very explicit simile when she writes, very near the end of the story: "And then she [Pearl] was gone, with Eddie following, like the black cat following the grey cat¹³". Left alone, Bertha wonders what is going to happen now that she has discovered the betrayal, but the pear in her garden appears careless and "as lovely as ever¹⁴".

In the beginning was the cat, we could state in order to underline the importance of this animal, either as an independent being endowed with specific thoughts, or as a focalizer on human feelings. To the first group belongs a "large, strange cat¹⁵" in 'Mr Rendall and the cat', a short story appearing in Mansfield's *Scrapbook* which hasn't often been analysed. The animal jumps exactly at the centre of Mr Rendall's lawn, and this action is perceived by the human being as the cheekiest behaviour he/she could ever have. This is, of course, a human projection onto the animal's intentions that cannot actually be interpreted by means of an anthropocentric

¹¹ Ivi, p. 72.

¹² Dunbar, P., *Radical Mansfield. Double discourse in Katherine Mansfield's short stories*, p. 109.

¹³ Mansfield, K., p. 80.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ Mansfield, K., *The scrapbook of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 250.

judgment. Mr Rendall, however, does not even question a prejudice that is strongly intruding on his mind: the cat has just jumped into his garden with the specific purpose of provoking him. The man thinks that the cat's actions are careless, and aimed at claiming a possession of the garden.

If the human endows the animal with a power he/she doesn't own in the least, he is also powerless in front of the cat. Mr Rendall actually makes a spiteful noise to express all his rage, but the animal doesn't even hear it. He would like to throw an object at the animal but "even supposing there had been something – a shell off the mantelpiece, or a glass paper-weight from the centre table," writes Mansfield, "surely old Mr Rendall knew he could no more throw it at the cat than the cat could throw it back at him¹⁶". Trying to merge into the animal's point of view, no matter how distorted it proves to be, the human protagonist deems the cat capable of physically hurting him by throwing an object at his direction. What is certain is that Mr Rendall is an old man, as Mansfield underlines by positioning him in front of a window – as if he had plenty of time to spend – with a rug on his knees, and glasses and newspaper at his disposal. The old man is the king of a small realm, composed of small daily things that, in his opinion, the cat wants to invade and destroy. But Rendall is also a slave to his compulsory thoughts. As Derrida would argue, he is a human being who can say "I", and who attributes his own judgments and obsessions to a free animal. Moreover, he thinks his world is completely separated and far more rational than the animal's world.

Mansfield, however, lets the cat win this humorous fight with a fully irrational epilogue. A cold wind in fact rises and "it seemed to old Mr Rendall that the wind was against him, too, was in league with the cat, and made that shrill sound on purpose to defy him¹⁷". The writer, by presenting the old man so instinctively furious as to surrender to irrational thoughts, makes us muse on the feline's superiority.

Mansfield also liked cats during her life, and three of them lived with her in Portland Villas, number two, London. She was fond of Charlie Chaplin (though then discovering this cat was surprisingly a female when she got pregnant), Athenaeum – who bore the name of the review Katherine and John Middleton Murry wrote in – and Wingley. The latter was also the author of a recipe, as she wrote in her diary assuming his identity, and dissolving boundaries

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 251.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

between observing and observed subject: “A *Recipe: Wingley Pudding*. Fill a glass dish with cream. Put it on the floor and go out, shutting the door, with me left in the room. Wing.¹⁸”.

Fictionalized cats are not only able to think and talk, they can also write and cook, or play a fiddle made of wool, as Mansfield wrote in a letter to her friend Dorothy Brett. In another one addressed to Murry, Katherine declared that she was absorbed in animals, and wondered how it could be possible to live far away from them. It’s not possible, we could answer.

Let’s then, as readers, be conscious of animals’ ontological status without trying to exert our human dominance upon them. After all, in the beginning was the cat. It’s not a question of recognizing thoughts or words as belonging to these living beings, it’s a question of admitting their multiplicity and, at the same time, their singularity.

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¹⁸ Mansfield, K., *Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 180.