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"The Daughters of the Late Colonel": Feminine Temporality in Katherine Mansfield's Short Fiction

Abstract

This paper explores the close relation between the modern short story and Julia Kristeva's concept of "Women's Time". Departing from her distinction between "men's time"—historical and linear—and "women's time"—cyclical, repetitive, and eternal—and fine-tuning this terminology to avoid certain biologism (I propose "masculine and feminine temporality"), I connect the epiphany as the organising principle of the modern short story with Kristeva's women's time. Thus, this genre becomes a perfect receptacle to expose the cultural construction of femininity and its confusion with female identity. The second step is to illustrate this theoretical premise with the textual analysis of a story by Katherine Mansfield: "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" (1920). While Kristeva sees feminine temporality as a realm that allows women to express themselves and achieve a form of eternity, I show Mansfield's strategic use of this time to condemn the limitation and exploitation of women by patriarchal society. Mansfield's intention is to display the negative connotations of this temporality for women, who are obliged to accept it with its routine, frustration, and marginality.

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"Feminine" Temporality and Julia Kristeva

The short story genre and its traditional association with the epiphany, as theorised by James Joyce, becomes a suitable backcloth where to project and reconsider general representations of femininity. In particular, there is one feature that suggests a feminine side to this literary form: the connection of epiphany as its organising principle and Julia Kristeva's concept of "Women's Time". In her article of that title, Kristeva makes a distinction between "men's time", represented by the linear progression of history and politics, and "women's time", linked with repetition and eternity. She explains the two main traits of this last temporality:

On the one hand, there are cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature and imposes a temporality whose stereotyping may shock, but whose regularity and unison with what is experienced as extra-subjective time, cosmic time, occasion vertiginous visions and unnamable *jouissance*. On the other hand, and perhaps as a consequence, there is the massive presence of a monumental temporality, without cleavage or escape, which has so little to do with linear time (which passes) that the very word “temporality” hardly fits (1986b: 191).

Although Kristeva develops in this article her notion of women’s time, in subsequent writings she fine-tunes her distinction of two temporalities. Thus, in *Proust and the Sense of Time*, she discloses the source of her temporal dichotomy. Kristeva (1993: 3, 6) acknowledges in Proust “a completely new form of temporality [that implies] a return journey from the past to the present and back again.” This perception leads to the cyclical character of her women’s time, which she links, in turn, with that developed in poetry.

Later, Kristeva goes back to the difference between two temporalities: the “imaginary” one, which she terms “story”, associated with the myth in the Aristotelian sense of the word and, therefore, with the timelessness of the subconscious; and the “symbolic” one, which she calls “speech”, linked with the linear time of syntax and its chronological progression between subject and predicator. This temporal dichotomy corresponds with her early distinction between women’s and men’s time, respectively (1998: 191–192). The absence of linear advancement in her feminine temporality has led to its perception as closer to a spatial dimension. Thus, Kristeva links it with her concept of “chora” (1986a: 93–94, 98). In Greek, this term means “space”, and refers to a chaotic zone of the woman’s/mother’s body, characterised by a material aspect, as opposed to the abstract one that arises with the entrance in the symbolic order of language. It is the space shared by mother and son/daughter, which resists

any representation and is only perceived as desire. Kristeva defines it as constituted by drives and opposed to the symbolic domain of signification. She makes explicit the connection between her women's time and this spatial dimension: "when evoking the name and destiny of women, one thinks more of the *space* generating and forming the human species than of *time*, becoming or history." (1986b: 190)

Once clarified Kristeva's concept, it is necessary to propose an alternative label, since her term of "women's time" can lead to a certain biologism that the present study aims to overcome. According to this critic, women have access to an eternal and repetitive temporality, while men stick to the linear time of history. From this distinction, we infer that these two temporalities are pigeonholes that do not allow for the presence of men in women's time and vice versa. This biological assumption proves to be wrong, so that the label "feminine and masculine temporality" is more appropriate, since masculinity and femininity are terms that suggest a social construction of identity that allows more flexibility in the adoption of the temporal dimensions distinguished by Kristeva. In the case of Katherine Mansfield's fiction, although the focus of this chapter will be placed on her use of feminine temporality, there exist countless examples of men who have access to feminine time, which, in Kristeva's view, would only be allocated to women.¹ Therefore, this study departs from her concept of "women's time", but transcends her

¹ See Rodríguez Salas's study of the stories "Prelude", "At the Bay" and "The Fly" for examples of men who have access to feminine temporality (612–622).

biologism by adopting a different label that welcomes the presence of men within this cyclical perception.

Kristeva's distinction between men's and women's time is the one that has been traditionally applied to the two big genres in fiction: the novel and the short story. B. M. Eixenbaum (81) and Mary Louise Pratt (108) state that the first one derives from history and travels, while the second comes from folklore and anecdotes, qualifying these genres as the "big" and the "small" form respectively, something that prompts the comparison of the novel with the epic and the short story with lyrical poetry (Pratt 95). From this opinion, we can infer that, in its classical version, the novel develops an evolutionary temporal progression, while the lyrical story descends from popular and universal knowledge, combining cyclical and repetitive routine with transcendence and eternity, precisely the two distinctive aspects of feminine temporality distinguished by Kristeva. Following Wim Tigges's terminology (22), the novel develops the traditional notion of time ("cronos": linear or clock time), as opposed to the short story, which favours a psychological and cyclical temporal perception ("kairos"), the latter materialised in the famous concept of "epiphany", or central axis of the modernist story. Thus, considering those written by such authors as Woolf, Joyce or Mansfield, Dominic Head (10) speaks of "circular" or "spiral" stories. In turn, critics like Jean Pickering (49) or Charles E. May (133) insist on the timeless/eternal and static character of these stories, which allow Joseph Frank to call the short story "a spatial form" (cfr. in Pasco 119). This emphasis on space versus time in the short story links it with

feminine temporality in Kristeva's perception of cyclical time as associated with the space of the "chora".²

"The Daughters of the Late Colonel"

"The Daughters of the Late Colonel" stands as one of the best achievements by Katherine Mansfield, admired by writers as distinguished as Thomas Hardy, who suggested that Mansfield should write a sequel to the story (Lawrence 35). Divided in twelve sections, it narrates the story of two sisters, Constantia and Josephine (Con and Jug), whose father, an authoritative and dictatorial figure, has just passed away. Josephine is more active and practical, whilst Constantia is more dreamy and evasive, but both are ultimately presented as infantile and immature due to their father's repression upon them for years. This oppression is so intense that, even after his death, these women are unable to liberate themselves from his authority, being described as superficial, pathetic, and pitiful as they have been castrated for life. The original title of this story is "The Non-Compounders", which Mansfield subsequently changed to "The Daughters of the Late Colonel". "Non-Compounders" was the term used in Queen's College, where Mansfield studied, to refer to those students who attended classes but were not officially registered, which suits the two

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² The novel/short story debate as regards this temporal difference is highly complex, since there are, of course, examples of modernist novels that develop the feminine time discussed here. However, this study defends the premise that the short story is the brand-new form of modernism, while the modernist novel simply adopts its principles. For a more detailed analysis of this controversial issue, see a further explanation of the inductive/deductive approach to short story and novel (Rodríguez Salas 511–514) and of the arguments for the higher appropriateness of the short story as a vehicle of expression of femininity (Rodríguez Salas 567–572).

protagonists, at the same time members and marginal figures in the patriarchal social system.

The initial title also highlights the marginality of these women in their development of a “feminine” time, since this story is one of the most representative examples of such temporality in Mansfield’s narrative, together with “The Child–Who–Was–Tired”.³ The writer plays with the temporal dichotomy masculine (linear) and feminine (cyclical), showing the latter as a congenial ally to women. Although this cyclical temporality is dominant in Mansfield’s fiction, she always clarifies that masculine linear chronology pervades society, so that the feminine cyclical one is as marginal as any feminine value. In connection with Kristeva’s “women’s time” (or our concept of “feminine temporality”), authors like Don W. Kleine (1978: 436), Clare Hanson and Andrew Gurr (1981: 102) or Nigel Parke (1999: 225) acknowledge in Mansfield’s narrative a distinction between lack of temporality, associated with women, and the habitual time of the clock, linked with men and patriarchal control. In that sense, in her fiction men are described as “clock–watchers”, preoccupied by the external and social world, as opposed to the more passive realm of dream and desire left for women. This is precisely the dichotomy we encounter in “The Daughters of the Late Colonel”. Symbolic time, or “cronos”, is directly connected with the late patriarch. His dictatorial control is indisputable, as we observe in the continuation of his power over the daughters even after death, as well as in the symbolism of his stick like a sceptre and his hat like a crown.

³ See Rodríguez Salas (2004).

The late colonel's connection with linear and historical temporality is represented by the golden watch that has left after dying. It is highly meaningful that none of the daughters asks for the watch. Both suggest that either their brother Benny or his son Cyril should inherit it, since these men are clear instances of the masculine principle. Although initially Josephine proposes to entrust Benny with the watch, considering it as "the most suitable present" (*CS*: 273), she later thinks that Cyril, Benny's son and the late colonel's grandson, is the most likely to receive it:

Wasn't it more usual for the only grandson to have the watch? And then dear Cyril was so appreciative and a gold watch means so much to a young man. Benny, in all probability, had quite got out of the habit of watches; men so seldom wore waistcoats in those hot climates. Whereas Cyril in London wore them from year's end to year's end. And it would be so nice for her and Constantia, when he came to tea, to know it was there. "I see you've got on grandfather's watch, Cyril." It would be somehow so satisfactory (*Ibid.*: 274).

In principle, the two male successors to the patriarch are the suitable receptacles for this patriarchal jewel. The feminine acquiescence to such a present and its male inheritance from generation to generation point at patriarchal power and its unquestionable acceptance for centuries. Only men have access to this social command that leads to action, chronological and linear progression, and contact with the external world of politics. On the contrary, women have to accept their cyclical and reproductive function, remaining hidden in the domestic sphere, close to the spatial character of cyclical time (the "chora" theorised by Kristeva)

since it does not advance linearly, but remains static, like the everyday routine of home.

In the last quote, the outstanding aspect is that power is not endowed to any man, but just to those who follow the values dictated by Eurocentric patriarchy. At first sight, Benny seems the most suitable figure to succeed the late colonel in his "reign". However, the fact that he has left Europe and has become acculturated in the aboriginal life of Sri Lanka has displaced him to the margin. This cultural marginality, together with his advanced age, turns Benny's son into the most appropriate recipient, since he displays the youth and Eurocentrism that his father has lost ("a gold watch meant so much to a young man"; "Cyril in London wore them from year's end to year's end"). As can be seen in other male figures in Mansfield's fiction (like the Boss and Mr. Woodfield in "The Fly" or Mr. Neave in "An Ideal Family"), patriarchy progressively takes away the power from those men who lose their strength and youth, and passes it to the next generation.

Besides, Cyril proves to have his grandfather's nature, as his existence like a London gentleman is marked by the ubiquity of linear, clock time. In one of his visits to Constantia and Josephine, Cyril announces his departure calling attention to the clock: "I say, Auntie Con, isn't your clock a bit slow? I've got to meet a man at - at Paddington just after five. I'm afraid I shan't be able to stay very long with grandfather" (ibid.: 276). This comment indicates the young man's obsession with the linear time of social compromise and anticipates the system's rejection of those elderly men who have lost their vitality, which explains why Cyril makes up an excuse not to stay long with his grandfather. As opposed to this masculine fixation

with progressive time, Constantia displays total indifference. After this comment by Cyril about the clock delay, we are informed that “Con was still gazing at the clock. She couldn’t make up her mind if it was fast or slow. It was one or the other, she felt almost certain of that. At any rate, it had been” (Ibid.). These words show how unworried is Constantia about the passage of time. Both she and Josephine live in their own world, characterised by repetitive routine, so that they are unable to break with it; thus, time goes by almost imperceptibly to the extent that they see themselves aged and single, but more immature than ever. We intuit that there has been no evolution in them, as their personality is as cyclical as the reiterative temporality in which they are immersed. After remembering this incident with Cyril, Con’s temporal clumsiness becomes more acute with the following comment: “I seem to remember last time he came there was some little trouble about the time” (Ibid.: 278), which reveals her indifference to the clock and the notion of linear time. Therefore, the contrast between masculine attachment to linear time, represented by the grandfather and Cyril, and feminine predisposition to cyclical time, represented by the two sisters, is clearly established.

Another significant aspect as regards temporality in this story is its formal structure. Mansfield makes use of the “12-cell structure” that she employed in other stories like “Prelude” and “At the Bay”. This structure is deceptive, since it leads the reader to expect a linear progression in the story, similar to the time of “cronos”, but what we finally encounter is cyclical time, or “kairos”. This linear division in sections numbered from I to XII is an ironic use of masculine moulds to

subvert them and thus show the scope of this cyclical temporality, as important here as the chronological one. This apparent linear progression becomes a mirage if we analyse temporality in the story. In one of his manuscripts kept in the “Alexander Turnbull Library” in Wellington, Ian A. Gordon (1999) outlines a scheme of the temporal development in “The Daughters of the Late Colonel” that shows its continuous temporal shifts. These shifts give us an idea of the cyclical character of the story, and of how this numbering of sections is just a formal aspect, since the story does not evolve, but it is stuck in repetitive cycles that end up displaying the protagonists’ routine and their eternal imprisonment in a childish role.

Psychological introspection in Jug and Con is the true centre of attention, whilst masculine temporality remains secondary. However, the supremacy of the patriarchal system over these two women cannot be ignored, since they are portrayed as victims of society, who are momentarily given credit in the course of the story in connection with feminine values. Here, dramatic irony and its subversive effect on the reader turns up: we realise the protagonists’ limitation, since they stick to feminine temporality to continue those values cyclically imposed by patriarchy since long ago. However, Mansfield claims in silence to go beyond this passive acceptance of the repetitive and eternal feminine role and its re-employment with a new subversive force. This awareness only happens in the reader, who transcends the ignorance of the protagonists that unconsciously unchain this social and extra-textual projection.

Conclusion

The use of feminine temporality plays a central role in Mansfield's fiction. However, her treatment of this cyclical time can be twofold: negative or positive. In stories like "The Child-Who-Was-Tired" or "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" she uses feminine time to display the negative effect that it may have in women when they stick to it just to reproduce faithfully those cyclical and repetitive values that society expects from them (basically, their domestic role). This is the case of Jug and Con, whose role is even more pathetic because they are secluded for life in the domestic sphere, but they cannot even fry an egg or do the cleaning. In stories like this, Mansfield triumphs in her denunciation of the traditional feminine role, since, by means of dramatic irony, the reader realises, as opposed to the characters, of the degrading limitation of women in a patriarchal society, so that their grotesque status becomes outstanding. Thus, although in this initial story feminine time appears as annihilating, in subsequent ones, like "Prelude" and "At the Bay", she will focus on its positive side as an alternative to patriarchal restrictions. The short story genre stands as the perfect receptacle to develop this cyclical time; while Mansfield seems to criticise its effect on women, if used strategically, it is perceived as an alternative to the limitations of the system. She concludes herself that "[i]n this imperfect, present world we have failed each other, scores of times, but in the real unchanging world we never have nor come down from our high place" (1987: 146). After all, eternal time can be the "real" alternative for change.

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