



Universidad
Zaragoza

Undergraduate Dissertation
Trabajo Fin de Grado

Womanhood and Sexuality in Katherine
Mansfield's "Bliss" and "Prelude"

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FACULTY OF ARTS

2019 - 2020

Resumen

La finalidad de esta tesis será el análisis de dos relatos incluidos en *Bliss and Other Stories* (1920, *Felicidad y Otros Cuentos*), de Katherine Mansfield: “Bliss” (“Felicidad”) y “Prelude” (“Preludio”). El principal objetivo será analizar ambos relatos aportando una perspectiva feminista, es decir, mediante la incorporación de la metodología de la narratología feminista desarrollada por importantes teoristas como Susan Lanser o Judith Butler, este ensayo mostrará la importancia del tema del género en los relatos de Mansfield. Concretamente, este ensayo se basará en explorar la dicotomía encapsulada por los personajes femeninos con respecto a dos nociones principales las cuales serán: la condición de las mujeres y la sexualidad. Para llevar a cabo el análisis de las dos nociones mencionadas anteriormente, esta tesis se apoyará en teorías feministas y en el análisis de las técnicas Modernistas recurrentes como la importancia de la conciencia interna de los personajes o la función del simbolismo, ya que ejercen un papel importante situando a los personajes femeninos en el centro de la narración y, por lo tanto, aportando una gran dimensión de profundidad feminista a los relatos. A través de este análisis, podremos establecer un paralelismo entre la situación de las mujeres en el siglo XX y la representación y disposición de los personajes femeninos en los dos relatos, conduciendo a una crítica hacia la tradicional ideología patriarcal que concluye con la posible liberación de estas mujeres a través del simbolismo de los elementos naturales.

Abstract

The main purpose of this dissertation will be the analysis of two short stories included in Katherine Mansfield's *Bliss and Other Stories* (1920): "Bliss" and "Prelude". The main aim will be to analyse both stories from a feminist perspective, that is, by making use of the methodology of feminist narratology developed by important theorists such as Susan Lanser or Judith Butler, this paper will show the importance of the issue of gender in Mansfield's short stories. More specifically, this thesis will be based on exploring the dichotomy encapsulated by female characters regarding two main notions which will be: womanhood and sexuality. In order to carry out the analysis of the two notions aforementioned, this paper will focus on feminist theories and on the analysis of recurrent Modernist techniques such as the importance of the character's inner consciousness or the role of symbolism, since they contribute significantly to bringing female characters to the very front of the narrative and therefore, adding a great dimension of feminist depth into the short stories. Through this analysis, we will be able to establish a parallelism between the situation of women in the twentieth century and the portrayal and disposition of female characters in both stories, leading to a critique against the traditional patriarchal ideology which concludes with the possible liberation of these women through the symbolism of natural elements.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Cultural and Theoretical Background	3
2.1 On Modernism	4
2.2 The Rise of Feminism	5
2.3 Feminist Narratology	7
3. “Bliss” and “Prelude”: Towards a Feminist Perspective	9
4. Conclusion	22
Works Cited	25

1. INTRODUCTION

**“I, a woman, with the taint of the pioneer in my blood,
Full of youthful strength that wars itself and its lawless”**

(Mansfield, 1938: 7-8)

Katherine Mansfield (1888—1923) was a prominent New Zealand Modernist writer of short fiction. She was born and brought up in Wellington into a middle-class colonial family. Her childhood is marked by loneliness and alienation as she did not conform to the rules of her parents due to her rebellious spirit. As Mansfield stated in one of her journal entries: “I imagine I was always writing. Twaddle it was, too. But better far write twaddle or anything, anything, than nothing at all” (1927: 327). In this quotation, her true passion for writing is irrefutable, as well as her determination in developing a literary career. Consequently, at the age of nineteen, she decided to leave for England to quench her desire to be a writer. She spent the remaining years of her eventful short life in Europe. Despite her deteriorating health, she made a considerable contribution to literature by publishing five fine collections of short stories: *In a German Pension* (1911), *Prelude* (1918), *Je Ne Parle Pas Français* (1918), *Bliss and Other Stories* (1920) and *The Garden Party* (1922). Posthumous works included collections of poems and a well-known journal, edited by her husband and critic John Middleton Murry, which contains wonderful descriptions of the New Zealand landscape but also personal thoughts, feelings and observations.

In her literary production, Mansfield’s short stories are the most prominent, being her main obsession to write the perfect short story. As historian Ian Ousby notes, “Mansfield’s penetrating and relentless intelligence, balanced by a sense of form, was ideally suited to the short story” (Ousby, 1996: 248). In her collection *Bliss and Other*

Stories, she focuses on depicting the inner life of characters and their surrounding atmosphere rather than on the plot. Mansfield leaves external events in the background to give more importance to the exploration of the mind of each character. Generally, the setting in most of her short stories is the domestic sphere of home, and she portrays marital relationships with a particular emphasis on the depiction of the real sufferings of the female community in an unjust male-dominated society of conventions. In this sense, Mansfield did not take such an active role in the feminist movement as her contemporary Virginia Woolf did, but she tried skilfully to present fiction according to female values, through a feminist perspective.

In Mansfield's fiction "there is what must be called a feminist awareness running throughout her writing, in the sense that there is always a strong feeling of division and discontinuity in between male and female experiences of life" (Hanson & Gurr, qtd. in Kimber, 2015: 46). That is, this juxtaposition between male and female characters in a patriarchal society in which the role of women is constantly silenced or marginalized conforms one of the recurrent themes in her work. As can be seen, Mansfield insisted on bringing to the fore the crucial role of gender, being female characters at the centre of her narratives. This emphasis on female exaltation is strongly related to the opening quotation which clearly illustrates Mansfield's desire to give voice to every women. In the dissertation's opening quotation, extracted from her poem "To Stanislaw Wyspianski", the speaker, identifiable with Mansfield, expresses her awareness of her social inferiority for being a woman; she insists on her gender, not only to show her consciousness about women being regarded as the 'weaker sex', but also to show her pride as a woman determined to fight for her rights in a society where the role of women is undermined.

In this thesis, my intention is to analyse two selected stories from the collection *Bliss and Other Stories* by Katherine Mansfield, entitled “Prelude” and “Bliss”, from a feminist perspective (Susan Lanser, Judith Butler). In order to do so, “feminist narratology” will offer the tools to analyse the form and content of both short stories. Besides, I will also focus on the Modernist techniques used by the author, putting special emphasis on the use of symbols as Mansfield seems to establish an important connection between symbolism and the role of female characters in a society of conventions. I have chosen this particular short stories as my research material because I found that both stories are perfectly suited to explore the role played by women in different contexts. That is, women in both stories are somehow overwhelmed by their own lives, being under an oppressive atmosphere due to male domination. However, their attitude towards life seem to be represented in different ways. Therefore, through a broad exploration of womanhood and sexuality, we will be able to establish a connection between the situation of women of that time and the portrayal of female characters in both short stories, being able to identify a subtle critique by Mansfield with the intention of giving visibility to the issue of gender as well as giving a voice to all this women who have to live relegated to the margins of society.

2. CULTURAL AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this section, I will discuss the cultural and theoretical context of the short stories that I am analysing. Firstly, I will examine the development of Modernism in Britain as this is the time in which Katherine Mansfield wrote her short stories. Therefore, the evolution of this movement is certainly influential in Mansfield’s writings. It must be argued that, from the late 19th to the mid-20th century, period within which Modernism surfaced, changes in gender relations constituted a relevant aspect. During this period, the first

wave of feminism and the women's suffrage movement took place; hence, these events aroused in Modernist writers a great interest on the issue of gender.

As is the case in Mansfield's writings, it can be clearly seen that women's historical situation is deeply embedded in her short stories. For this reason, I consider that it is essential to have a broad exploration on the feminist movement, given that it constitutes a fundamental basis for a precise analysis on womanhood and sexuality in Mansfield's short stories. In order to carry out this analysis, I will focus on "a contingent relation between feminism and narratology" (Mezei, 1996: 1), known as "feminist narratology". Therefore, this theory will be first examined as it will subsequently serve as the main tool for the analysis.

2.1 ON MODERNISM

In this subchapter, I will focus on the Modern British literature movement which took place after the Victorian period. Modernism is a literary movement which began around the turn of the twentieth century. Even though there is not a clear-cut rule to determine the ending of the Victorian movement and the beginning of Modernism, there are some important changes that point to this transition, as for example, a strong and intentional break from former tradition, new ways of perceiving the world and a growing interest on the individual and its inner-conscious. According to Peter Childs "the starting point of Modernism is the crisis of belief that pervades twentieth century western culture: loss of faith, experience of fragmentation and disintegration, and the slathering of cultural symbols and norms" (Childs, 1999: 67). Therefore, Modernism surfaced as a reaction to changes such as new technologies, industrialization, new philosophical perceptions as well as the attitude towards the catastrophes of war. Consequently, "modernist artists emerged from the paralysis of absolute despair to an active search for meaning" (Childs,

1999: 67). Modernists' main intention was to search for meaning and order in an atmosphere of chaos and fragmentation caused by the modern materialist reality.

As is the case of Mansfield's literary production, it is inevitably a product of her own generation. For this reason, it is firmly possible to place Mansfield's work within the framework of Modernist literature because of "the body of work she produced, together with the philosophy behind her narrative art" (Kimber, 2015: 5). Moreover, as Modernism is not just a single movement, but it involves a number of movements, it is clearly noticeable that Mansfield's work touches on a range of those literary movements such as Impressionism, Naturalism, Symbolism and Realism.

2.2 THE RISE OF FEMINISM

Even though this previous introspection into Modernism seems meaningful for the further analysis of Mansfield's short stories, the main focus to carry out this analysis will fall on the rise of feminist awareness and its literary interpretation on the issue of gender through a burgeoning theory on the study of language and literature known as "feminist narratology". As mentioned above, the feminist movement and the fight for women's rights is well connected to the Modernist period. Thus, it had a huge influence on the writers of the time raising their interest in the issue of gender and the role of women.

For centuries, women were relegated to an inferior position; "the world was male-centred and male-dominated. Male philosophers and social theorists were the ones who identified woman with disorder, savagery, chaos, unreason and the excluded 'other' " (Wrenn, 2010: 9). That is, women's inferiority was a social construct that has persisted over the years, and they were defined and treated according to those unfavourable characteristics that were merely a "fictitious invention of the male sex" (Adler, qtd. in

Wrenn, 2010: 10). Until the twentieth century, the portrayal of women as inferior and irrational beings was widespread within society.

The turn of the century, with the advent of Modernism, involved radical changes such as industrialization, which in a way, improved women's situation giving them the opportunity to enter the labour market. Therefore, it paved the way for women's independence as well as it contributed to defying the traditional portrayal of women. As time progressed, women started to react against traditional stereotypes, trying to deconstruct the conventional views imposed upon them. Therefore, all of these changes contributed to the emergence of "the new woman" as they started to acquire economic independence and also intellectual freedom which allowed them to combat the previous myths on feminine inferiority (Wrenn, 2010: 10).

As a result, the emergence of this "new woman" attracted the interest of the writers of the time, increasing their concern on the issue of gender and the role of women which became a great source of material for their writings. Thus, Mansfield's portrayal of women was shaped by feminism; even though her writings, in particular Mansfield's short stories, do not show an open view on feminism. Nevertheless, it is interesting to carefully explore a concealed critique on women's historical situation, that is, instead of including her personal thoughts on feminism, she rather thrusts sharp criticism at the patriarchal system which relegates women to an inferior position. In order to shape her critique towards the situation of women, she employs a series of Modernist techniques such as the use of the interior monologue or the stream of consciousness to explore feminist inner thoughts of the female characters and their changing views regarding sexuality. Therefore, by making use of different techniques, she manages to bring female characters to the very front of the narration, adding a great dimension of feminist depth into her short stories.

2.2 FEMINIST NARRATOLOGY

As the main tool for the analysis of Mansfield's short stories, I will focus on a theory on the study of language and literature known as "feminist narratology". In order to contextualize the social atmosphere surrounding the development of this methodology, it is essential to find its roots in the changes concerning the field of feminism aforementioned. Until the twentieth century, the question of gender had been neglected or even forgotten, however, with the growth of feminism, such issues as the question of gender or the role of women started to be taken into consideration, contributing to an enrichment of narrative studies which now took into account the existence of a feminist perspective.

"Feminist narratology" emerged in the 1980s and was developed by Susan Lanser. This field of study "is based on the assumption that gender is a category that is relevant to the analysis of the structural features of narratives" (Gymnich, 2013: 1). Therefore, the aim of this study is to link feminist theory and narratology, bringing to the fore the issues of gender, sex and/or sexuality by exploring their implications in narrative texts (Lanser, 2009: 206).

The methodology of "feminist narratology" involves three key terms which are: sex, gender and sexuality. Therefore, it focuses on exploring the impact of these three terms on narratives as it has contributed to the enrichment of the scope of narratology giving visibility to new perspectives.

Critic Susan Lanser admits that the combination of these two terms: feminism and narratology, would seem rather odd because feminism is "impressionistic, evaluative and political", whereas, narratology is "scientific, descriptive and non-ideological" (Lanser, qtd. in Clarke, 1991: 1). However, Lanser also argues that the merging together of these

two terms into one methodology would highly contribute to a greater understanding of the complexity of female texts (Singh, 2019: 556).

It must be stated that even though it was Lanser the one who coined the term “feminist narratology”, there are other theorists that have brought the perspective of gender into narratology. As is the case of Judith Butler, she developed the notion of “gender performativity” in which she states that gender identity is flexible and unstable and criticizes the distinction between gender and sex. According to Butler, sex and gender are the same thing since “biological sex does not determine gender” (Butler, qtd. in Ton, 2018: 7); that is, in her view, each human being is in power of defining their own identity as gender is performative.

In general terms, it can be stated that feminist theorists’ main purpose is to reconsider the notion of classical narratology by including new paradigms based on feminist perspectives which have not been previously accounted. According to an illustrious quotation by Jane Austen from her book *Persuasion*: “Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands” (Austen, 1818: 282). This quotation absolutely supports the importance to reconsider classical narratology to elaborate on its blind spots concerning feminist issues.

Therefore, the main objective of the subsequent chapters is to analyse Mansfield’s selected short stories bringing a feminist vision on the portrayal and representation of their characters taking into account relevant aspects such as sexuality and their role within society. By using “feminist narratology” and by doing a close reading of Modernist techniques as the main tools for the analysis, this dissertation will explore the dichotomy encapsulated by feminine characters leading to an open critique against the inadequacies of patriarchy.

3. “BLISS” AND “PRELUDE”: TOWARDS A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

As mentioned above, Mansfield was greatly involved in the use of Modernist techniques in her literary production as well as in providing her writings with a certain degree of feminist depth. It must be stated that despite the fact that she wrote different genres, such as poetry, letters, journals or reviews, she was considered a prolific writer of short stories, a genre in which she insisted on the importance of character and human behaviour rather than of the plot. Therefore, in order to carry out this analysis, I have selected as my research material two of Mansfield's short stories which are: “Bliss” and “Prelude”. The selection of these particular short stories is not incidental, as I considered that both of them are perfectly suited for a broad analysis on the representation of feminism and its portrayal on female characters.

“Bliss” and “Prelude” both belong to the same collection of short stories which is entitled *Bliss and Other Stories* (1920). It might seem coincidental that the title of the collection coincides with that of the first short story, that is, Mansfield used “*Bliss*” as the main title for the collection, giving special emphasis to this very first short story and relegating the rest of stories to the position of “the other” as if they were of less importance. However, it must be noted that “Modernist writers exploit language awareness by means of selecting words with a strong connotative potential and a large range of suggestiveness” (Eysteinnsson & Liska, 2007: 683). Therefore, Mansfield's choice of *Bliss* as the main title might be related to the previous quotation in an attempt to give her stories a sense of playfulness.

The Modernist short story “Bliss” was written in 1918 and published within the collection in 1920. “Bliss” is well-related to the social context of the time as it deals with social attitudes towards womanhood and it touches on controversial topics of the time such as the repression of homosexuality. Being under the strict rules of society, we find

our protagonist, Bertha Young, a thirty-year old woman who, from the very beginning, claims to be “overcome, suddenly by a feeling of bliss—absolute bliss!” (1). Feeling overwhelmed by a sentiment of pure happiness, she begins to prepare for the dinner they are hosting that evening. Focusing on that dinner party, the story explores Bertha’s inner life as well as her relationship with the different guests. As the evening party unfolds, there will be debates on relevant topic such as marriage, repressed sexuality, adultery or social transformation. Even though the exploration of such topics will allow readers to uncover Bertha’s personality traits and behaviour, the story certainly develops in her own mind, through which we will be able to access Bertha’s deeper thoughts and emotions.

The short story “Bliss” begins with the word “although”, which seems relevant to learn that “today” is not a usual day for our protagonist Bertha as she is experiencing an absolute and rare feeling of bliss. From the very first lines, she expresses her desire for freedom; however, she soon realizes that the only way one could express this feeling of bliss could be by being “drunk” or “disorderly”. This association between the expressions of ‘pure happiness’ with the state of ‘being drunk’ could be closely linked with the Victorian idea of women as closeted, trapped in a male-dominated society and disenfranchised (DeKoven, 1999: 177). That is, Bertha is aware of her situation as a woman but tries to show a rebellious attitude by questioning those restrictions she finds in showing her feelings freely. This sense of rebelliousness is perceived in some rhetorical questions Bertha poses such as: “How idiotic civilization is! Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?” (1). These rhetorical questions point to the necessity of liberation from “an oppressive domestic feminine ideal: the Angel of the House; the notion that a woman’s virtue is measured by her dedication to domestic life, self-sacrifice, and servitude to her family” (LaGreca, 2009: 3).

From the very beginning, readers can observe that Bertha tries to break her own barriers from the oppressive notion afore mentioned: “The Angel of the House”, which assumes that all women were “expected to be devoted and submissive to her husband” (Thackeray, 2011: para. 1). This fight for liberation from the image of “The Angel of the House” towards a rebellious woman can be clearly seen in the moment that Bertha decides to look into the mirror: “She hardly dared to look into the cold mirror—but she did look” (1). In this quotation, the ‘mirror’ becomes a powerful symbol standing for women liberation as “it gave her back a woman, radiant, with smiling, trembling lips, with big, dark eyes and an air of listening, waiting for something...” (1). Therefore, the importance of the mirror is that it allows Bertha to look at herself as a wonderful woman who needs to liberate and forge her own way into the enduring cultural icon of the “New Woman” (Ledger, 1997: 2). The mirror appears as a powerful symbol within Modernism because it serves as a great source for self-reflection; it features “the antinomy between externality and inwardness, between surface and depth” (Petrov, 2010: 1). In this sense, through the mirror, Bertha is aware of her limitations as a woman, but she is also conscious of her own vibrant image.

According to Lacan, this mirror phase splits the subject into two different images: the real condition of the subject and that idealized version of herself reflected in the mirror (Lacan, qtd. in Moran, 1996: 57). By applying this split perspective to our main character, Bertha, it can be seen that she is aware of her feminine qualities as well as of the necessity for change. Mansfield announces this necessity for change and progression in a very subtle way, but it can be easily perceived that the mirror scene is well connected to the feminist movement pointing to a possible transformation into a new and rebellious woman.

In this basis, the previous connection between Bertha and the significance of the mirror is uncovered through a third-person unnamed narrator whose voice seems to be akin to that of the author. In “Bliss”, this third-person narrator acts as an omniscient observer who is all-knowing and shows readers the inner world and emotions of each character. As to provide a broad introspection into our characters’ mind, the narrative employs the free indirect narrative point of view, that is, there are shifts between the narrator’s telling voice and our central character, Bertha. This shifting point of view, “is exemplary of Mansfield’s well-attested ability both to project herself into people and things and to assume masks and personas” (Wheeler, 1994: 121). Like in many of Modernist fiction works, this narrative technique is most often used to deviate the reader’s attention from content and plot to a deeper dimension by exploring the character’s inner conscious.

As the short story develops, there are significant marks that allow readers to trace connections between our main character, Bertha Young and the situation of women at the time. For instance, the image of Bertha as a maternal figure is questioned all along the story each moment she tries to have contact with her daughter, Little B. In order to have a better understanding about this distancing between mother and daughter, it is essential to consider that during this time, it was conventional to employ nannies to take care of children. As is the case in “Bliss”, it is Nurse the one who rises Little B, as it would be improper for an upper-class woman like Bertha to take on those responsibilities. Consequently, there is a closest bond between Nurse and Little B than with her own mother, a fact which causes frustration on our protagonist. However, Bertha tries to escape from social conventions and tries to get involved in her daughter’s life, feeling like an intruder when she approaches Little B; she even asks Nurse for permission: “Oh, Nanny, do let me finish giving her her supper while you put the bath things away” (2),

which is soon denied arguing that “She oughtn’t to be changed hands while she’s eating” (2). Again, Bertha shows a rebellious attitude as she tries to cross class boundaries to get closer to her own daughter, however, she soon conforms to those social conventions as she feels she has any authority over her little daughter. This resignation is expressed in a poetic comparison in the form of interior monologue, in which she claims: “Why have a baby if it has to be kept—not in a case like a rare, rare fiddle—but in another woman’s arms?” (2). In this quotation, Bertha questions the absurdity of social conventions, in the same way she complained about not being able to express her feeling of pure bliss, without being considered “drunk or disorderly” (1). Hence, it can be seen that she is brave enough to express her discontent towards her situation as a woman, but in the end, she conforms to the rules taking the position of a resigned and silenced woman.

As mentioned above, it is through the use of the interior monologue technique that we, as readers, have deeper access to the character’s thoughts. By using this recurrent Modernist technique, which is classified as a form of stream-of-consciousness writing, we can decipher the inner thoughts of the different characters. In the case of “Bliss”, the use of interior monologue is essential to explore the characters’ perceptions in relation with the feminist field. It is through the use of this technique that we can achieve a great dimension of feminist depth in the representation of womanhood and sexuality in this short story.

Another recurrent theme for the exploration of womanhood within the frame of feminist narratology is the relationship between Bertha and her husband, Harry Young. Their marriage typifies a conventional pair between man and woman, but yet “their association as ‘pals’ rather than true lovers reveals either a flash in their marriage or a larger imperfection in contemporary society” (Yahya, 2006: 7). As can be seen, they do not symbolize a perfect marriage; while Bertha shows to be a passionate woman, Harry

embodies the characteristics of a conventional masculine figure of the time, that is, he is portrayed as rather cold towards his wife, not showing any kind of affection. Throughout the story, they are constantly described as being good pals: “Harry and she were as much in love as ever, and they got on together splendidly and were really good pals” (5). This quotation seems paradoxical and certainly ironical as this intense love seems merely to result in a good relation of simple pals. Even though, this perspective on the couple’s relationship prevails along the story, it is noticeable that Bertha shows an idealized vision of her husband: “Harry had such a zest for life. Oh, how she appreciated it in him. And his passion for fighting—for seeking in everything that came up against him another test of his power and of his courage” (6).

Furthermore, it must be mentioned that the possible distancing between Bertha and Harry extends to other external characters in the short story. That is, Bertha does not seem to belong in the group of guests, and it solely complements her feeling of bliss by being surrounded by people. In this basis, “Bertha’s position as hostess to a bizarre group of bohemian pseudo-intellectuals does not qualify her to enter into communion with them” (Yahya, 2006: 3). Yet, it will contribute to the climax of the story awakening Bertha’s awareness in discovering the hidden reason for her intense feeling of bliss. At this point, Pearl Fulton, one of Bertha’s guests, becomes an important figure for Bertha’s inner discovery. At the time, Pearl Fulton enters the narrative, Bertha describes her as a ‘find’ and as a “beautiful woman who had something strange about them” (4). This leads to a possible connection between our main character, Bertha and Miss Fulton which culminates by the time Pearl Fulton “gave the sign” (9) by suggesting the two of them to admire the garden. This garden which has a “slender pear tree in fullest, richest bloom” (4) becomes the main symbol contributing to Bertha’s epiphany; a Joycean concept commonly used among Modernist writers pointing to a moment of revelation typically

located within the story's climax (Tigges, 1999: 460). In Bertha's case, the epiphanic moment, which she experiences with an intense feeling of bliss, takes place by the time both female characters look at the admirable pear tree which stands for a symbol of sexuality pointing to a perfect bond between both women, that Bertha has imagined, in which "both [...] understanding each other perfectly" (9). This union between both women, "which takes place at the symbolic level of the story, significantly paves the way for another discovery" (Gregor, 1997: 70), which is a certain realization of her hidden sexuality, that is, her possible bisexuality.

This first epiphany paves the way for Bertha's inner discovery through which she has imagined a perfect connection with Pearl Fulton. Consequently, it can be seen that this ideal bond between both women points to Bertha's homosexuality. However, the short story leaves subtle clues pointing to a further consideration, that is, that of bisexuality. It allows a further consideration on Bertha's sexual desire as she stills admits that she loves Harry: "Bertha Young desired her husband. Oh, she'd loved him—she'd been in love with him, of course, in every other way, but not just in that way" (10). As seen in this quotation, the importance of the epiphany is not just that Bertha has discovered an intense and hidden desire for the female sex, but it has also contributed to a deeper realization, that is, Bertha has discovered that both sexes can complement her in different ways. Taking the consideration of bisexuality into account, it is essential to consider Butler's notion of "gender performativity" in which she argues that "gender is thus not a stable attribute of identity, but something that must be constantly revealed and restated" (Butler, qtd. in Callis, 2009: 227). In relation with this quotation, Bertha's recent sexual discovery is important for the construction of her own gender which can be performative leading to the possibility of bisexuality.

This consideration of Bertha as having desire for both sexes could conform a love triangle, being Bertha at the centre of this union. However, it is soon disrupted as the second epiphany takes place. This second and last epiphany occurs at the moment that Bertha's husband takes Pearl Fulton in his arms, ending with an important revelation in which Harry pronounced "I adore you" (11). Bertha witnessed this moment as an external observer discovering her husband's infidelity through a negative epiphany which breaks up the climatic atmosphere created with the first revelation. At this point, Bertha has undergone a kind of transformation as the deep feeling of harmony caused by the first epiphanic moment has been sharply disrupted. The ending of the short story is left open, being the symbolism of the pear tree one of the final images. This pear tree, which represented Bertha's awakening bisexuality, now represents her own disillusion and the destruction of all her hopes. She feels that some change is about to take place and rushes to look at the pear tree but "it was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still" (12). This final description suggests that the connection between Bertha and Pearl through the symbolism of the pear tree was just an illusion which has not led to the fulfilment of Bertha's sexual desire.

After having analysed the previous short story, "Bliss", bringing to the fore the major aspects concerning the field of "feminist narratology" such as the importance of the issue of gender, together with the role of womanhood and sexuality in a patriarchal society; the subsequent analysis will focus on the short story "Prelude" which was published in 1918 and belongs to the same collection of short stories entitled *Bliss and Other Stories*. The short story "Prelude" was first entitled "The Aloe", which still prevails as an important symbol within the story, and it received great recognition, leading to place Mansfield "as one of the significant writers in the literary scene of the time" (Woodcock, 1983: 433). "Prelude" narrates a family move, that is, the Burnell family are emigrating

to settle in the countryside, however, as in the previous story, the plot does not seem to be the most relevant part, being the main focus on each particular character's reaction towards this move. Hence, it emphasizes on the importance of human minds and inner consciousness, allowing the exploration of a feminist world view through the analysis of female characters and their function within society.

“Prelude” is divided into twelve sections and in each of them, the short story captures the psychological state of each character through their personal crises, putting special emphasis on the limitations of female characters encapsulated by gender stereotypes. As the short story opens, it is noticeable the feminist touch that the first paragraphs contain, allowing for the establishment of a close link between the main characters and the social context of the time, particularly, women's situation around the turn of the twentieth century. In this sense, the story opens with the loading of their goods in the buggy, emphasizing on the mother's, Linda Burnell, rejection of her own children as “there was not an inch of room for Lottie and Kezia in the buggy” (1). Linda does not seem to consider her children important enough to deserve a seat on the buggy, stating that “these are absolute necessities that I will not let out of my sight for one instant. [...]. We shall simply have to leave them [referring to the children]. That is all” (1). She seems to appreciate more dearly her belongings.

Through the previous quotations, it can be seen that Linda rejects the Victorian ideology of ‘The Angel of the House’ trying “to discard their role by drifting away from their husbands, neglecting their children and household chores” (Aihong, 2012: 105). This attitude can have two possible interpretations; on the one hand, it can be a search for self-comfort and happiness, trying to deconstruct the stereotype of being “ornaments or dolls of their husbands” (Aihong, 2012: 105), in an active search for meaning. On the other hand, Linda's attitude towards her daughters can be seen as rejection of her own

role as a mother due to a prevailing desire of “regression to a state of asexual, childlike dependence upon her mother” (Wilson, 2011: 119), that is, she acts as an immature wife and mother in order to reject the roles imposed upon her. This desire for regression to the past, might be associated to the idea that during her childhood she did not have to take on such responsibilities as in adulthood; consequently, she longs for those days of freedom reinforcing this attitude of rejection, in an attempt to retrieve liberation. In this sense, Linda Burnell faces a personal dilemma: “to remain a doll or to be a rebel, to escape or to be free” (Aihong, 2012: 105). This dilemma will arouse contradictory feelings in Linda which will serve for the exploration of her internal thoughts regarding relevant themes such as the institution of marriage or the role of women within the domestic sphere of home.

Linda’s rejection of her role as a mother prevails along the narrative; however, it is the grandmother who acts as a kind of maternal figure and “represents maternal love” (Jensen, 2002:119). It can be seen in relevant passages, as for example, at the moment in which the two girls, Lottie and Kezia, arrive to the new house, it is the grandmother the one who goes outside to meet the girls: “the grandmother came out of the dark hall carrying a little lamp” (6), whereas Linda still rejects her role as a mother, not showing any interest in her children: “Are those the children? [...] she did not even open her eyes to see” (7). This attitude can be interpreted as a rejection to female submission for having to accomplish such roles. Therefore, Mansfield’s intention in portraying Linda as an uncaring mother might be related to her discontent towards the oppression women were submitted to by “being trapped by their motherhood in the patriarchal society” (Aihong, 2012: 102). In this sense, Linda’s behaviour is merely a rebellious attitude to express disgust towards the roles imposed upon her, being well-connected with the authors’ perspective regarding the issue of gender:

Mansfield angrily rejects womanhood and motherhood as the most divine and sublime mission of women. She not only expresses her deep sympathy towards those women's pathetic position, but also voices her anger over their silence and complete submission to their fate. (Aihong, 2012: 102)

As in the previous short story, "Bliss", in "Prelude" there is not a single narrative voice, even though the third-person omniscient narrator prevails throughout the narrative, there are shifts between the different characters' narrative voice in order to allow a deeper access to their internal consciousness as well as giving the short story a great sense of fluidity. As in the case of Linda Burnell, it is not through her actions that we discover her real personality, but it is rather through her own revelations that we are able to discover her inner frustration. In relation to this sentiment of frustration, it has its roots in the issue of pregnancy embodied by Linda, which is revealed through a dream. In this dream, she recalls the past and imagines birds which become an important symbol representing Linda's refusal on keeping having children:

She was walking with her father through a green paddock sprinkled with daisies. [...] She made a cup of her hands and caught the tiny bird and stroked its head with her finger. [...] As she stroked it began to swell, it ruffled and pouched, and grew bigger and bigger and its round eyes seemed to smile knowingly at her. [...] It had become a baby with a big naked head and a gaping bird-mouth, opening and shutting. ("Prelude", 11)

Through this quotation, Linda makes a comparison between birds and children which might be interpreted as a clue to reveal her pregnancy. In this case, Linda's dream could have the category of nightmare, as she is frustrated by the idea of having more

children. On this basis, Mansfield depicts these women as victims of society, but she also criticizes their behaviour, as they play a submissive position not reacting against social conventions. This submissive position leads to acceptance, as she “could not find an escape from the absurd life. She has to accept her destiny” (Simaporn, 2017: 124). This acceptance of her role as an ‘Angel of the House’ is firmly declared as she states: “I shall go on having children and Stanley will go on making money” (33). In this quotation, she resigns to accept the social conventions regarding the duties of both sexes. As a result, Linda assumes her role as a fertile being, whereas Stanley embodies the male figure who must be in control.

Regarding Linda’s and Stanley marriage, it seems to be a conventional one in which Stanley is “portrayed as a type of businessman who has a strong ambition and dedication to build his family and raise the standard to the highest peak. He also represents a male chauvinist and an egocentric and authority figure” (Simaporn, 2017: 124). That is, he is portrayed as being very concerned with his business, but when he is at home, he acts as an authority figure who gives orders to the other characters. Stanley’s authoritative behaviour can be seen in numerous passages, as for instance: “I suppose you did not expect me to rush away from the office and nail carpets—did you?” (8) claiming that he, as male figure, does not take part on those household chores, or stating that “that’s where my boy ought to sit” (20), pointing to the place at the top of the table, which must be occupied by a male figure according to gender conventions. Therefore, Stanley tries to show that he is in control, but at the same time he is insecure as he is afraid that something might happen in his absence at home due to business affairs.

Even though Stanley’s authority role is not questioned by the female characters, who take a submissive position attending to his requests, it is easily noticeable that when he leaves home for the office, female characters feel certain relief and freedom as they are

not under his control anymore. This feeling of liberation can be seen in Linda's behaviour: "she did not rest again until the final slam of the front door told her that Stanley was really gone" (12). On this basis, Linda has a double perspective concerning her marriage; "on the surface, Linda seemed to be happy and contented because her husband was a successful business man of high social status" (Simaporn, 2017: 122). However, "deep down inside, she was not happy" (Simaporn, 2017: 122), as she has to confront her inner conflicts which primarily derive "from the role imposed on her by marriage. She is supposed to shoulder responsibilities of a careful mother, an obedient wife, and a hard-working housewife" (Aihong, 2012: 105). Nevertheless, she rejects her role as a woman as she fears being swallowed by these social conventions.

As in many in Modernist short stories, Linda's revelation of her inner conflicts, is experienced through an epiphany in which she becomes aware of the inner turmoil she is confronting. At this stage, this moment of revelation points to her hatred towards her role as a woman and especially towards her husband: "It had never been so plain to her as it was at this moment. There were all her feelings for him, sharp and defined, one as true as the other. And there was this one, this hatred, just as real as the rest" (32).

As in the previous short story "Bliss", in "Prelude", Mansfield also recurs to natural elements accompanying the epiphanic moments in order to establish a connection between nature and female characters, this relation might be due to the power of fertility that both, women and the natural world, contain. In "Prelude" the natural element is the aloe plant, and it is described as a "huge plant with thick, grey-green, thorny leaves, and out of the middle there sprang up a tall stout stem" (17). It is exotic and an unknown plant for the characters; nonetheless, female characters admire the enigmatic shape of this plant and it also acts as a union between women. That is, for the first time in the short story, we can perceive a sort of connection between Linda and her daughters through the

admiration of the aloe. In this sense, the aloe stands for a powerful symbol of womanhood, depicted as a source of union between women and epitomizing their urgency for freedom and necessity to escape. This need for freedom can be seen in the imagism applied to this aloe plant: “the high grassy bank on which the aloe rested rose up like a wave, and the aloe seemed to ride upon it like a ship with the oars lifted. Bright moonlight hung upon the lifted oars like water, and on the green wave glittered the dew” (31). In this quotation, the aloe is imagined as being a ship which symbolizes female freedom and their need to escape from their current situation which is limited by gender stereotypes.

Through the symbolism of the aloe, Mansfield masterfully manages to bring to the fore the importance of the issue of gender as well as the need for change in women’s lives. Even though the short story is left open, and there is not a clear ending showing women’s freedom, we can see a remarkable quotation within the short story that, in a subtle way, points to this change in women’s lives: “I have been looking at the aloe. [...] I believe it is going to flower this year” (31). This flowering of the aloe plant adds the short story a great dimension of feminist depth and it can be interpreted as an imminent change in women’s situation, a final and deserved escape from the oppression of patriarchy.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, and as my analysis of the two selected short stories by Katherine Mansfield, entitled “Bliss” and “Prelude”, both the form and the content point out that the notions of womanhood and sexuality are deeply embedded within these narratives. For my analysis, in order to provide a broad approach on female roles, I have used Judith Butler’s feminist theories as well as feminist narratology developed by Susan Lanser. By relying on these feminist theories, I have been able to provide an analysis bringing the

perspective of gender into narratology. Therefore, the use of these feminist theories results fundamental to explore womanhood and sexuality as it allows to elaborate on its blind spots concerning the issue of gender, which to a great extent, has not been significantly considered within the conceptual framework of classical narratology studies.

In the first section, I have provided an overview on Katherine Mansfield's life, emphasising the importance of her literary production on gender—related issues. Subsequently, in the second section, I have offered the necessary cultural and theoretical context to grant a better understanding of the importance of gender issues during the period when the short stories were written and published. This section is divided into three subsections, which are: on Modernism, The Rise of Feminism and Feminist Narratology. The first subsection serves to provide a contextual framework of the Modernist movement as it involved a radical change on the writer's perception of the world in an attempt to search for new meanings in an atmosphere of turmoil and chaos. The second subsection focuses on the rise of feminist awareness and its inclusion in works of literature as there was an increasing interest in the issue of gender. In relation to the increase of feminist awareness, the third subsection deals with the field of study of "feminist narratology", emphasising the importance of this methodology to include a new perspective to narratives bringing a feminist vision on the representation of female characters.

Taking the previous contextual framework into account, the third section relies on the cultural and theoretical context in order to provide an analysis on the short stories "Bliss" and "Prelude". Through this analysis, which approaches the role of female characters within society and the implication of the notions of womanhood and sexuality, it can be observed that by making use of different techniques, Mansfield manages to bring female characters to the very front of the narration, focusing on the importance of their

inner conscious as well as on the symbolism adhered to natural elements such as the pear tree or the aloe plant which paved the way for the uprising of women in an active search for freedom and their rights as human beings.

On the whole, the previous analysis has shown that Mansfield's short stories are certainly a reflection of the realities that women had to confront in a patriarchal society in which their role was undermined. Through this analysis, the use of feminist narratology has contributed to bring to light numerous hypotheses concerning the issue of gender that can be made by doing a close reading of Mansfield's stories. This leads to label Mansfield's short stories as a subtle critique against the inadequacies of patriarchy which is revealed through the exploration of the characters' inner lives within the framework of feminist narratology.

Accordingly, Mansfield exposes the oppression women are submitted to and she even magnifies these injustices in order to reinforce this idea of need for change in women's situation. Even though both short stories suggest an open ending, they clearly point to the liberation of these women through the symbolism of natural elements. The intention behind Mansfield's open endings might be related to this idea of change, offering readers the possibility of free interpretation as well as showing her interest in crossing the boundaries of narrative texts in order to suggest a change in the lives of real women during the twentieth century. It is undeniably that Mansfield's works have greatly contributed to increase feminist awareness, being interesting "to comprehend how contemporary feminist writers have been influenced by Mansfield's work and how it continues to survive and add towards the critical thinking behind feminist literary criticism right into the twenty-first century" (Knickelbein, 2010: 9).

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