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## THE FEMININE CONDITION: WOMEN AND MADNESS IN KATHERINE MANSFIELD'S "PRELUDE"

**Abstract:** This article discusses the representation of women and mental illness in Katherine Mansfield's short story, "Prelude." The theme of madness and psychology in feminist literary criticism has been an active field of contemporary research. Critics such as Phyllis Chesler, Elaine Showalter, and Jane Ussher view some forms of madness as traditionally gendered, feminine conditions in which women become mad due to their oppressive realities. Additionally, Louis Arnorsson Sass links madness to Modernism by examining its adoption as a symbol of rebellion. Although a recent volume of the Katherine Mansfield Studies Series, *Katherine Mansfield and Psychology*, paid special attention to the influence of mental illness in Mansfield's *oeuvre*, there is still much to be studied. Thus, this paper analyzes the ways in which Mansfield, as a Modernist writer, incorporates the themes of women's madness and rebellion in "Prelude." To do so, this work focuses on the figures of Linda and Kezia Burnell. Although the diagnosis of fictional figures is untenable, indications of psychological suffering in the context of the Burnell women's social and historical environment are undeniable. The narrative techniques Mansfield employs in describing their mental states serve to highlight implications of madness and the reasons behind their mental instability: their oppressed status and cross-generational desire for freedom. The examination of instances of hallucination, animization, apophany, symbology and other symptoms leads to the conclusion that for Linda and Kezia Burnell the only means of escape or rebellion is through madness.

**Key words:** women and madness, gender studies, modernism, Katherine Mansfield studies, madness as rebellion

Madness, one of the most enigmatic concepts of Western culture in recent and ancient history, has often been considered a feminine condition. In order to fully understand madness, it is important to view it not as an ontological given, but as a notion whose meaning is culturally ascribed. In other words, although it may have its origins in medicine and biology, the definition of madness depends on social ideology. Many scholars have previously encountered a pattern in the diagnosis and description of mental disorders: women, in their association with patriarchal systems of oppression, have often been situated within the parameters of psychological instability. Moreover, as Jane Ussher states, "the symptoms of the various syndromes are often indistinguishable" and current medical terminology often accommodates and fuses with previous disorders and symptoms.<sup>1</sup> This being said, the reality and distress of mental illnesses

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<sup>1</sup> Jane M. Ussher, *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* (New York; London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 103.

cannot be discarded because “the despair, the anxiety, the desperate misery is far more than a label, more than a construction without a firm basis in reality.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, madness works within an often obscure paradigm; for it is a product of the interaction between culture and biology.

This article seeks to examine the ways in which Katherine Mansfield’s short story “Prelude” discusses the female characters’ thwarted desire for social liberation, resulting in madness. This will be done by highlighting and analyzing certain indicators of mental instability and oppression encountered in Mansfield’s protagonists, Linda and Kezia Burnell. By examining the behavior and depiction of the characters in “Prelude” with regard to mental disorders, one can gain insight into the social causes and implications of their madness.

### Women and Madness

According to feminist criticism, women’s madness serves two interrelated functions: as a patriarchal label to oppress women and as women’s only method of escape from their assigned gender roles.<sup>3</sup> Concerning the latter, Ussher states that this misogynistic social context acts as an instigator of mental illness by creating “a culture of incarceration and oppression within which madness is the inevitable outcome for women.”<sup>4</sup> Elaine Showalter adds that “women’s high rate of mental disorder is a product of their social situation” of cultural subjugation.<sup>5</sup> In line with this argument, the analysis of “Prelude” suggests that, Mansfield depicts how Kezia and Linda Burnell fall or escape into madness as a result of misogynistic oppression and their desire to break free from their gender roles. And so, one must consider the complex relation between women, society, and madness within a specific historical context. The terminology of the field

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2 *Ibidem*, 7.

3 For more on the theories concerning women and madness, see also: Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2000; Busfield, Joan. *Men, Women and Madness: Understanding Gender and Mental Disorder*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996; Busfield, Joan. “Mental Illness as social product or social construct: a contradiction in feminists’ arguments?” *Sociology of Health and Illness* 10.4 (1988): 521-542; Howell, Elizabeth. “The Influence of Gender on Diagnosis and Psychopathology.” In *Women and Mental Health*, edited by Elizabeth Howell and Marjorie Bayes, 153-159. New York: Basic Books, 1981; Lerner, Harriet E. “The Hysterical Personality: ‘A Woman’s Disease.’” In *Women and Mental Health*, edited by Elizabeth Howell and Marjorie Bayes, 196-206. New York: Basic Books, 1981; Miller, Jean B. and Ira Mothner. “Psychological Consequences of Sexual Inequality.” In *Women and Mental Health*, edited by Elizabeth Howell and Marjorie Bayes, 41-50. New York: Basic Books, 1981; Mitchell, Juliet. *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975; and Russell, Denise. *Women, Madness and Medicine*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995.

4 Ussher, *Women’s Madness*, 7.

5 Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987), 3.

of psychology has changed over time, yet different syndromes and symptoms of madness seem to overlap and become easily interchangeable.

The gradual and significant increase in female psychiatric patients from the Victorian period onwards, along with mainstream propaganda about the Victorian madwoman, led to a correlation between women and insanity and connotations of some forms of madness as inherently feminine conditions. And as with all binary constructions, women's madness served as a counterpart to male rationality. In the Victorian era, the reason for the predominance of female patients was believed to be "that women were more vulnerable to insanity than men because the instability of their reproductive systems interfered with their sexual, emotional, and rational control."<sup>6</sup> This establishment of women's insanity as solely within the female sexual or biological terrain led to the creation, or discovery, of specifically feminine mental illnesses. Some of the most recognized female mental disorders—puerperal insanity, hysteria, neurasthenia, and schizophrenia—are all analogous. As these forms of madness can be considered a result of oppression and the only method available to escape, many symptoms—such as dissociation from society (including from husbands and children), laughing, temporary paralysis, headaches, depression, and isolation, among others—correlate with women's defiance of their assigned gender role within society.<sup>7</sup> According to contemporary medical textbooks, this could lead to behaviors that were closely associated to depressive and self-destructive dispositions with "a total negligence of, and often very strong aversion to, her child and husband [...] explosions of anger occur, with vociferations and violent gesticulations [...] [and] most awful oaths and imprecations."<sup>8</sup>

Although symptoms and conditions were the same, the terminology of female madness slowly evolved from Victorian hysteria to modern schizophrenia. In contrast to the hysterical madwoman, the schizophrenic was constructed and adopted as a Modernist symbol of rebellion.<sup>9</sup> This connection between schizophrenia and Modernism is subtly implied within "Prelude," in which Mansfield imbues her characters with a need for independence that subsequently triggers their descent into madness. The term schizophrenia, according to Louis Sass, was recognized as a schism or split "in two main ways: in the relationship to external reality and in the relationship to the self" whereby the

6 *Ibidem*, 55.

7 For more on the symptoms of female madness, see: Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980*. London: Virago, 1987; Ussher, Jane M. *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* New York; London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991; and Appignanesi, Lisa. *Mad, Bad, and Sad: A History of Women and the Mind Doctors from 1800 to the Present*. London: Virago, 2008.

8 Quoted in Showalter, *Female Malady*, 57-58.

9 For a more in-depth study of schizophrenia and Modernism, see Sass, Louis Arnorsson. *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.

schizophrenic feels completely isolated from the world and fragmented into multiple selves.<sup>10</sup> In relation to this division between the personal and the public, schizophrenic symptoms included “lack of affect, disturbed associations, autism, and ambivalence.”<sup>11</sup> This isolation and apathy has clear origins in hysteria, a condition that was frequently the psychological result of a woman’s rejection of her social role. Further symptoms are defined as “delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech (frequent derailment or incoherence), grossly disorganized or catatonic behavior, and[...]‘affective flattening,’”<sup>12</sup> thus, an evidently feminist reading can be derived from the analysis of mental maladies and their symptoms.

As previously stated, madness can often be considered the result of misogynistic oppression, and its symptoms reflect unhappiness and desires for liberation on a sub-conscious plane. Mad women would escape into a psychological irrational realm as a means of freedom, and the clues for such a retreat would lie in their symptoms: hallucinations allowed them to create a different reality; dissociative behavior alienated them from actuality; and apathy or affective flattening would aid in such dissociation and further isolate women from society by severing emotional ties. These symptoms highlight a schism between women and reality and women and themselves in which their oppression and gender roles did not allow them to create stable, healthy relationships. Although this is not a novel theory of women and madness, delineating these maladies and symptoms and their causes and effects serves to provide a more in-depth basis for a fresh analysis of “Prelude.”

### **Katherine Mansfield’s “Prelude”**

The connection between women and madness and Mansfield’s work is a topic still left relatively unexplored. Although feminist literary theory has often been employed to analyze her oeuvre—scholars have interpreted Mansfield’s short stories as subversive of the misogynistic society of her times—literary analyses have only recently included psychological readings.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the *Katherine Mansfield Studies* volume on, *Katherine Mansfield and Psychology*, edited by Clare Hanson, Gerri Kimber and Todd Martin

10 Louis Arnorsson Sass, *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 76.

11 Showalter, *Female Malady*, 203-204.

12 Appiganesi, Lisa, *Mad, Bad, and Sad* (London: Virago, 2008), 202.

13 For more information on psychology and madness within Katherine Mansfield’s oeuvre, see Burgan, Mary. “Childbirth Trauma in Katherine Mansfield’s Early Stories.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 24.3 (1978): 395-412; Francis, Joan Rita. *The Chaos Within: Repressed Desires and the Divided Self in Katherine Mansfield’s Fiction*. Dissertation. California State University Dominguez Hills, 2007. UMI 1449130, 2008; and Wilson, Janet. “Where is Katherine?: Longing and (Un)belonging in the Works of Katherine Mansfield.” In *Celebrating Katherine Mansfield: A Centenary Volume of Essays*, edited by Gerri Kimber and Janet Wilson, 175-188. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

in 2016, is one of the first critical works to highlight psychology and the rejection of Western patriarchal roles within a wide array of Mansfield's works.<sup>14</sup> According to Josiane Paccaud-Huguet, "as the prevailing symptomatic constellation in Mansfield's stories, it is of course hysteria which brings forth the question of 'woman' as not being duped by the scenarios explaining gender division" and her struggle with such oppression.<sup>15</sup> To contextualize Mansfield's production, works such as "Bliss," "Psychology," "The Daughters of the Late Colonel," "Frau Brechenmacher," "At Lehmann's," and those belonging to the Burnell series "At the Bay," and "The Doll's House" all signal similar perspectives in Mansfield's subtextual or, in fact, evident preoccupation with mental illness and the influence of psychology in her larger oeuvre.<sup>16</sup> Functioning within this thematic paradigm, "Prelude" also contributes to the interpretation of madness as a reaction to misogynistic oppression and gender roles in Mansfield's female characters. As previously stated, female mental illnesses have flexible definitions and tend to encompass each other throughout history. Thus, the examination of madness in "Prelude" falls within the parameters of schizophrenia, yet connotations of other syndromes, such as hysteria, can be detected.

"Prelude" (1918) portrays the New Zealander Burnell family, chronicling their move to a new house in the countryside. Mansfield contrasts this framework of an ordinary familial transition with her characters' tumultuous mental dispositions, focusing especially on Linda and Kezia. As Meghan Hammond states "all [Mansfield's characters] appear before the reader in states of psychological isolation"<sup>17</sup> even though they are constantly in contact and surrounded by others and framed by social expectations. The author depicts Linda and Kezia with particular distinction in their relation to patriarchal impositions and the effects of such oppression on their mental states. According to Kate Fullbrook, "their struggles to find their identities, the masks they wear and the ways they perceive the world" are central to "Prelude."<sup>18</sup> The omniscient narrator

14 Some articles of note in *Katherine Mansfield and Psychology*, ed. Clare Hanson, Gerri Kimber and Todd Martin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016) are: Hammond, Meghan Marie. "Mansfield's Psychology of the Emotions", 56-67; Hanson, Clare. "Katherine Mansfield and Vitalist Psychology", 23-37; Thorndike-Breeze, Rebecca. "Feeling 'Like a Work-girl': Class, Intimacy and Alienation in 'The Garden Party'", 68-81; and Dickson, Polly. "Interior Matters: Secrecy and Hunger in Katherine Mansfield's 'Bliss'", 11-22.

15 Josiane Paccaud-Huguet, "A Trickle of Voice: Katherine Mansfield and the Modernist Moment of Being", in *Celebrating Katherine Mansfield: A Centenary Volume of Essays*, ed. Gerri Kimber and Janet Wilson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 133.

16 All these can be found in the anthology: Mansfield, Katherine. *Katherine Mansfield's Selected Stories*. Edited by Vincent O'Sullivan. New York; London: Norton, 2006.

17 Meghan Marie Hammond, *Empathy and the Psychology of Literary Modernism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2014), 107.

18 Kate Fullbrook, *Katherine Mansfield* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), 67.

conveys the inner workings of their minds and allows the reader glimpses into the way they perceive the world.

Of this mother-daughter duo, Linda exhibits the most advanced symptoms of schizophrenia. Characterized as the typical domestic figure or “Angel in the House,” Mansfield portrays Linda as trapped in her role as an upper-class lady wishing to escape from the duties of continuous reproduction, child-rearing, and the maintenance of her household. “Linda is woman-as-wife, the woman of childbearing age, lost in a nightmare of fertility, the passionately desired prey of her robustly animal husband.”<sup>19</sup> Her desire to reject this oppressive gender role results in schizophrenic symptoms and gradual insanity. As a younger counterpart to her mother, Kezia is “the girl-child who is in the process of being deformed into one of the wounded and wounding adults who populate the fiction.”<sup>20</sup> Mansfield establishes parallelisms between mother and daughter throughout the story, which strengthen the analysis of their mental illnesses, and provides a frame of reference for the development of madness from childhood into adulthood. The descriptions of both characters indicate forms of psychological disorders, which seem to be proportional to their age and their experiences in a misogynistic society: whereas Kezia’s symptoms are brief instances and sometimes difficult to recognize as such, their amplification in Linda draws direct correlations between the two.

In the opening scene of “Prelude,” Mansfield highlights Linda’s mental and emotional distance and rejection of her children with the depiction of her departure from the old house. When deciding whether to take her youngest daughters, Lottie and Kezia, along in the buggy, Linda contemplates abandoning them as there is no space, and she does not want to carry them. “We shall simply have to leave them. That is all. We shall simply have to cast them off,” said Linda Burnell. A strange little laugh flew from her lips; she leaned back against the buttoned leather cushions and shut her eyes, her lips trembling with laughter.”<sup>21</sup> In this short scene, Linda’s distaste towards her children is palpable; she wants to be free, and they tie her down. This desire to leave the girls behind, consequently rejecting her role as mother and wife, and her joy at such a thought serves to isolate Linda from her family and her surroundings—another symptom of schizophrenia—as she closes her eyes and retreats into her humorous notions of abandonment.

The “strange little laugh” directly correlates to Linda’s desire to repudiate her maternal role and reflects another symptom of schizophrenia characterized by “a frequent, causeless, sudden outburst of laughter.”<sup>22</sup> With this short passage, Mansfield also

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, 68.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, 76.

<sup>21</sup> Katherine Mansfield, “Prelude,” in *Katherine Mansfield’s Selected Stories*, ed. Vincent O’Sullivan (New York; London: Norton, 2006), 79.

<sup>22</sup> Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad, and Sad*, 204.

implies Linda's lack of control over said laughter and her body: it "flew from her lips" as if with an agency of its own. This mad mirth has physical repercussions and makes her body "tremble" with the effort of containing it, thus emphasizing Linda's lack of authority and control over her body and social situation. Shortly after, Linda creates an even larger dissociative distance between herself and her daughters by dehumanizing them and making them analogous to furniture: "How absurd they look! Either they ought to be the other way up, or Lottie and Kezia ought to stand on their heads, too. And she longed to say: 'Stand on your heads children, and wait for the storeman.' It seemed to her that would be so exquisitely funny that she could not attend to Mrs Samuel Josephs."<sup>23</sup> Linda's disconcerting amusement at wanting the children to stand on their heads indicates a queer, irrational humor, which denotes schizophrenic irony or "a bizarre form of satisfaction" which will "further alienate the patient from the possibility of satisfying intimacy with others."<sup>24</sup> Instead of empathizing with her children who are being left behind for want of space, Linda finds irrational, incomprehensible humor and pleasure in isolating herself, further signaling schizophrenic detachment. This reverie distances her and hinders communication not only with her children but with Mrs. Samuel Josephs, a neighbor who, in this case, acts as an extension of society.

This odd temperament includes a lack of empathy and "affective flattening" so that Linda feels no real affection towards her progeny; both symptoms and causes for the schizophrenic's isolation. Because of this alienation from society—her family and her neighbors—the schizophrenic retreats into her private sphere and devalues her public self. She does this by "[abdicating] the public self entirely—either by hermitlike isolation or through refusal to interact in a more than perfunctory way—and this is accompanied by a tendency to locate the source of being in the tremors and yearnings of the inner life."<sup>25</sup> Mansfield depicts Linda's interactions with others as stunted and awkward, emphasizing, instead, her private self and the inner workings of her mind.

Both Linda and Kezia also seem to suffer from hallucinations—another typical schizophrenic trait. When walking through her old, empty house, Kezia has a vision of "IT" following her: "IT was just behind her, waiting at the door, at the head of the stairs, at the bottom of the stairs, hiding in the passage, ready to dart out at the back door."<sup>26</sup> Although critics have interpreted this scene as part of a child's vivid imagination,<sup>27</sup>

23 Mansfield, "Prelude", 80.

24 Sass, *Madness and Modernism*, 114.

25 *Ibidem*, 100.

26 Mansfield, "Prelude", 82.

27 See Hammond, Meghan Marie. "Communities of Feeling in Katherine Mansfield's Fiction." In *Empathy and the Psychology of Literary Modernism*, by Meghan Marie Hammond, 56-67. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2014; and Miao, Tracy. "Children as Artists: Katherine Mansfield's 'Innocent Eye.'" *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 32.2 (2014): 143-166.

the parallelism between this hallucination and Linda's "THEY"—analyzed below—indicates a manifest association with mental illness. In a moment of solitude and grief regarding the departure from her home, which marks a stage in her own psychological development and maturity, Kezia experiences a haunting hallucination. Mansfield's capitalization of the pronoun imbues this figure with more textual significance, while Kezia's recognition and fear of "IT" indicate sinister psychological undertones, not mere childish fancy. Encountering "IT" within this abandoned household symbolizes Kezia's notions on domesticity and female gender roles that trigger an atmosphere of foreboding and fear of such domestic oppression. By denying her the ability to see "IT," Mansfield also withholds from the reader a full narration and representation, which further contributes to the scene's menacing and illusory significance. As Kezia is still young and her future status in society uncertain, "IT" merely haunts and frightens her; a spectral looming which may later consume her as an adult.

Linda's delusion is more detailed and vivid, signaling her increased immersion in madness and her status as an adult. Possibly alluding to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, this hallucination occurs while Linda is observing her own bedroom wallpaper.<sup>28</sup>

Sometimes [...] she woke and could not lift a finger, could not even turn her eyes to left or right because THEY were there [...] THEY knew how frightened she was; THEY saw how she turned her heart away as she passed the mirror. What Linda always felt was that THEY wanted something of her, and she knew that if she gave herself up and was quiet, more than quiet, silent, motionless, something would really happen.<sup>29</sup>

Linda's more ominous "THEY" is strikingly similar to Kezia's "IT." During this episode, Linda seems to suffer from various schizophrenic symptoms: she is unable to move, which indicates some form of temporal paralysis; she imagines beings or voices that seem to request something from her; and she is silent and passive in her fear. Linda's terror parallels Kezia's: it is encountered in the private, domestic sphere and can be associated to her fear of "giving herself up" to her gendered duties as a mother and wife. Thus, the hallucinatory affinity of "IT" and "THEY" emphasizes "their roles as females who are likely to undergo the trauma of sex and pregnancy and birth" as well as other oppressive obligations that are required of upper-middle class women in the

<sup>28</sup> It is also noteworthy that this scene may allude to, or at least is reminiscent of, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), a short story in which the protagonist, trapped in a room with yellow wallpaper, suffers from madness and hallucinations. Although there is much that can be said as to the similarities between both works—probably an entire article in itself—the scope of this study does not allow for a more in-depth analysis.

<sup>29</sup> Mansfield, "Prelude", 91-92.

late nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup> The multiplication of Kezia's singular "IT" into Linda's plural "THEY" suggests that Kezia's youthful worries are less threatening; her obligations and oppressions lie in her possible future while Linda's "THEY" signal her current, numerous, and inescapable encumbrances—her progeny, her husband, the stress of maintaining her status in society, etc. As Kezia is still a child, Mansfield subtly insinuates mental illness; Linda, however, is fully immersed in Western patriarchal society causing amplified and strengthened madness.

Especially revelatory is Mansfield's suggestion that Linda is familiar with "THEY," she has encountered them on other occasions, and they comprehend her and her fear. Mansfield states that Linda "turns her heart away as she passes the mirror." This allusion to the mirror, a significant symbol in literature, highlights its psychological typology: for when we look at our reflection, "we soon discover the inner turmoils of our soul."<sup>31</sup> Linda, therefore, avoids the confrontation with the confrontation with her true self because she fears facing the desire to be free of the social and cultural confines of her gender role and the ensuing internal conflicts this would cause. Hence, she "turns her heart away" from any revelations these reflections may cause, choosing dissociation and apathy—symptoms of schizophrenia—as coping mechanisms. If "THEY" embody the haunting specters of Linda's obligations and duties, in submitting to what "THEY" want, she will truly lose herself. By using the term "give herself up," Mansfield subtly implies that this would result in Linda's death—"something would truly happen"—as she would become "more than quiet, silent" and completely "motionless."<sup>32</sup> Thus, Linda walks the line of madness: a no-man's-land between complete submission to the heteronormative social order and suicide.

Similar to schizophrenics, Linda and Kezia (mentally) animate objects. As stated by Sass, schizophrenics "may sometimes experience the world in an animized fashion (as if even the walls were listening and the clocks staring)."<sup>33</sup> When Kezia arrives at the new house, upon viewing the "hundreds of parrots" in the hallway, she attempts to remind herself that they are painted on the wall.<sup>34</sup> However, they "persisted in flying past Kezia with her lamp."<sup>35</sup> This animation of the wallpaper parrots is also ambiguous, for it could be due to Kezia's lively imagination; still their persistence in becoming alive

30 Marvin Magalaner, *The Fiction of Katherine Mansfield* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1971), 33.

31 Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 309.

32 Mansfield, "Prelude", 92.

33 Sass, *Madness and Modernism*, 25.

34 Mansfield, "Prelude", 85.

35 *Ibidem*.

affords these painted animals their own will and reality out of her control. As with the hallucinations of “IT,” Kezia’s animization is triggered by her fear and doubts about this transitional period and her new environment. While the parrots are free and “fly past her,” she remains trapped within her new, more socially-elevated household and the private, domestic domain.

The fact that both characters’ animization occurs on wallpaper—another allusion to Perkins Gilman’s story—symbolizes the superficial nature of their situation and provides connotations of entrapment: wallpaper presents a pleasing façade to the viewer, but what lies underneath is unknown, hidden, confined. Likewise, both women present an appealing and complacent exterior, yet by depicting their psychological dispositions, Mansfield demonstrates that they are oppressed and suffering.<sup>36</sup> The uncanny parallelism between Linda’s and Kezia’s animation of objects strengthens the notion that Kezia’s hallucination could be due to her own incipient madness. While Linda observes her bedroom wallpaper, more images seem to come alive. She begins to animate a flower and moves on to other objects in her bedroom: “Things had a habit of coming alive like that. Not only large substantial things like furniture but curtains and patterns of stuffs and the fringes of quilts and cushions.”<sup>37</sup> Linda’s quilt tassels become a “funny procession of dancers,” and the medicine bottles turn into “a row of little men with brown top-hats on.”<sup>38</sup> These objects that Linda personifies also express a lack of control. The tassels are like puppets in a procession in which they dance without being able to escape. The medicine bottles, which beggar the question why Linda has so many, connote illness and resemble doctors. Whereas Kezia’s parrots only flew away, Linda’s animated objects share “their sly secret smiles” seemingly acknowledging her struggles and taunting her inner desires.<sup>39</sup>

On the first night in their new home, Mansfield portrays an intimate scene between Linda and her husband, Stanley. When Linda attempts to fall asleep, dismissing his sexual desires with a quick kiss, Stanley demands intimacy by “[drawing] her to him” and she responds, “‘Yes, clasp me,’ said the faint voice from the deep well.”<sup>40</sup> In utilizing the forceful, active verb “draw” Mansfield indicates the ways in which Stanley exerts physical control over Linda in order to satisfy his need for sexual intercourse and his all-consuming desire for a male child; in fact, she resembles a puppet such as the tassels

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<sup>36</sup> Mansfield provides many scenes in which both characters seem to wear a mask or façade. One of particular note is Linda’s reaction to Stanley’s sexual advances in which she dissociates. After said encounter, she dreams of birds flying free and escaping, which all seem to trigger, upon waking, what can be considered a great hallucinatory episode.

<sup>37</sup> Mansfield, “Prelude”, 91.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, 88.

in her hallucination. Linda's only means of resistance and attempt to escape from her duties is through dissociation by utilizing a remote, disaffected voice coming from her deep, private, isolated well. This voice can be considered

the involuntary reaction of a woman living in terror of her body and its astounding, unwilling capacity to generate life. [...] Her body is her enemy, collaborating with and subjected to the men, who, in her imagination as in her life, trigger its involuntary response. Linda is alienated, exposed, threatened, and she cannot see beyond the threat to any positive action.<sup>41</sup>

The only possible means of relief is through the dissociation provided by an escape into madness, the only realm free of males that has been allotted to women.

This constant oppression due to men's desires is signaled in both Linda's and Kezia's dreams where they are apprehended by rushing animals who are constantly seeking to subjugate and impose upon them. When travelling to her new house, Kezia states how she loathes them: "I hate rushing animals like dogs and parrots. I often dream that the animals rush at me."<sup>42</sup> Linda also equates Stanley to a Newfoundland dog and thinks

If only he wouldn't jump at her so, and bark so loudly, and watch her with such eager, loving eyes. He was too strong for her; she had always hated things that rush at her, from a child. There were times when he was frightening—really frightening. When she just had not screamed at the top of her voice: "You are killing me." [...] "I have had three great lumps of children already"<sup>43</sup>

This image of rushing animals serves to link both Linda and Kezia in their fear of, and resistance to men and procreative, among other, duties. Mansfield equates patriarchal men to dogs who are seemingly loyal and submissive, yet parasitic and violent. Linda's passage is especially poignant and more detailed in her detachment and love/fear of Stanley. His physical strength and social domination overpower Linda, and she wishes to tell him that maintaining her image and continuing to have children is physically and mentally killing her. In his desire for a male heir, he is putting her life at risk, yet Linda is frightened and feels powerless to stop him. In accordance with the Victorian notion of madness, Mansfield seems to suggest that Linda's psychological frailty is rooted in her physical and biological weakness, yet, directly correlates Linda's rejection of her reproductive role with her mental instability.

One of the most important and loaded symbols in "Prelude" is the aloe plant.<sup>44</sup> This natural element serves to link Kezia and Linda once again by captivating their attention and providing the only moment of meaningful conversation and connection between mother and daughter. Throughout the short story, the aloe holds symbolic precedence;

<sup>41</sup> Fullbrook, *Katherine Mansfield*, 78.

<sup>42</sup> Mansfield, "Prelude", 84.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, 111.

<sup>44</sup> In fact, the first working title and original, longer draft was titled "The Aloe," published posthumously in 1930.

as a representation of both characters' desires for freedom, it triggers symptoms of madness. In their long periods of profound contemplation of the plant, Linda and Kezia appear as schizophrenics who "often take pleasure in this prolonged concentration on objects."<sup>45</sup> Mansfield returns to the plant on various occasions to depict the ways in which the women interact with it and with each other. Kezia enquires as to the aloe's nature. "Does it ever have any flowers?' 'Yes, Kezia,' and Linda smiled down at her, and half shut her eyes. 'Once every hundred years.'"<sup>46</sup> In this brief interaction, both women bond over the pleasure in their enthrallment with the plant. Linda's smile and queer humor is perceived once again, resembling the schizophrenic's "famous empty smile" which "expresses a certain irony and shyness stemming from preoccupations with a private inner world."<sup>47</sup> Linda is amused by the irony of the aloe's less persistent obligation to reproduce; as it only yields flowers "once every hundred years," while her inner world is preoccupied with her frequent, damaging reproduction.

Linda revisits the aloe with her mother, Mrs. Fairfield, in the evening. Her second encounter and interaction with her own mother trigger an *apophany*, a trance-like experience in which "every detail and event takes on an excruciating distinctness, specialness, and peculiarity—some definite meaning that always lies just out of reach, however, where it eludes all attempts to grasp or specify it. The reality of everything the patient notices can seem heightened."<sup>48</sup> Mansfield highlights Linda's apophanic experience and significance of the aloe by transforming it into a ship; its vitality surpassing and dulling the rest of Linda's surroundings.

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. "Do you feel it, too," said Linda, and she spoke to her mother with the special voice that women use at night to each other as though they spoke in their sleep or from some hollow cave—"Don't you feel that it is coming towards us?"<sup>49</sup>

In this excerpt, Mansfield repeatedly uses similes to compare the aloe to a large ship travelling on the sea, using alliterative phrases focusing on /s/ /g/ and /w/ sounds with simple, natural vocabulary to evoke the sound of waves and air. The author's style here highlights the significance of (Mother) Nature by creating an atmosphere of magical luminescence with hanging "bright moonlight" and "glittering dew" that resemble the reflections of mirrors. As opposed to the mirrors in her house, which are placed in the oppressive, domestic sphere, Linda's connection and apophanic experience with the aloe, as a symbol of her private desires, creates a liberated, feminine environment

45 Sass, *Madness and Modernism*, 72.

46 Mansfield, "Prelude", 97.

47 Sass, *Madness and Modernism*, 112.

48 Sass, *Madness and Modernism*, 52.

49 Mansfield, "Prelude", 110.

in nature which allows her to glimpse the inner turmoils that she previously tried to avoid. When she utilizes her "special voice" that seems to come from deep within her, it parallels the one she employed when being intimate with Stanley, yet in this case, it corresponds to the spaces exempt of men.<sup>50</sup> Mansfield highlights that this voice resembles sleep-talk or hollow caves, both isolated places where women can truly be themselves and reflect on their desires. Her apophany with the aloe allows Linda to retreat into madness and imagine a comfortable, unimpeded space in which she can escape such obligations and recognize her yearnings.

The aloe advances towards Linda like a ship in an attempt to rescue her from social oppression. Looking upon it in a schizophrenic apophanic state triggers a symbolic vision in which the main element is Linda's desire to escape from the domestic role imposed upon her by a misogynistic society. She

was caught up out of the cold water into the ship with the lifted oars and the budding mast. Now the oars fell striking quickly, quickly. They rowed far away over the top of the garden tree, the paddocks and the dark bush beyond. Ah, she heard herself cry: "Faster! Faster!" to those who were rowing. How much more real this dream was.<sup>51</sup>

In this dream vision, Linda still lacks the authority to free herself. She is "caught up," in other words, she is not the agent of the action. Her only command is to plead with the unknown rowers to go "Faster," yet even then she "hears herself" as if she was still dissociated. The repetition of "quickly" and "Faster!" signals her immediate need for escape, while she remains inactive. Although she is in a ship, she seems to be flying in the air, echoing Kezia's visions of flying parrots. As in a true apophany, this madness-induced hallucination is fantastic and irrational, yet it seems "more real" and more tempting to Linda than her domestic reality. With this, Mansfield indicates that the only instances in which Linda has any semblance of freedom from her oppression are in her mad dreams or fantasies.

## Conclusion

This analysis of Linda and Kezia's experiences serves to exemplify Mansfield's use of mental illness within "Prelude," connecting this short story with her larger oeuvre. In basing this examination on traditional, established definitions of the "female maladies" triggered by social oppression, this work correlates descriptions in "Prelude" with (women's) madness. Although some instances could be interpreted as childish imagi-

<sup>50</sup> This seems to anticipate the notion of "*parler femme*" or womanspeak coined by Luce Irigaray which describes a particular maternal, feminine language utilized specifically by women. See Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Translated by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.

<sup>51</sup> Mansfield, "Prelude", 110-111.

nation or simple daydreams, the direct connections between both characters and the symptoms they exhibit demand a more profound reading of their psychological states. Linda struggles with her role as a mother and wife, likewise, Kezia displays discomfort towards the domestic sphere, and Mansfield's portrayal of these internal conflicts, corresponding with episodes of unnatural laughter, hallucinations, animation of objects, and apophanic experiences, insinuates some form of insanity.

Linda's rejection of her social position, which leads to madness and its consequent related symptoms, seems to serve as a barrier against intrusive patriarchal oppression, yet is futile, for Linda is trapped within these social confines and continues to fulfill, albeit unwillingly, her gender role. As opposed to this bleak depiction of Linda's entrapment, one should note that Mansfield provides some hope. Linda's internal conflict is reflected within Kezia in the regeneration of the desire for female emancipation. However, Kezia's madness is not completely developed. In fact, the ambiguous nature of her experiences reinforces an optimistic narrative. As her future oppression is not predetermined, her feminine condition could change, and she could achieve the freedom her mother craves. With prospective liberation and escape from patriarchal confines, her onset of schizophrenia could just as well dissipate, and Kezia could break the cycle of women and madness.

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