Introduction

“The Escape” is one of the short stories in *Bliss and Other Stories* (1920) by Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923). During the winter of 1919 to 1920, she was in Menton, France for a change of air. She had to bear life there without her husband, John Middleton Murry, which made her feel deeply lonely, nervous and irritated, a condition which was exacerbated by her failing health. She wrote “The Escape” after coming back to England in 1920. The state of her mind and the unstable relationship with Murry during her stay in Menton are reflected in this story, which portrays a moody and irritable wife and a husband who seems to find no joy in his marriage.

As seen in Mansfield’s other works, she uses a subtle network of hints and symbolism to depict the nature and personality of her characters and, also, in this story, the relationship between a wife and husband. In my paper, I will explore how this symbolism functions in ways which are very specific to Mansfield and to her ideas about marriage.

I

As with some of Mansfield’s other stories, “The Escape” makes an abrupt and strident start: ‘It was his fault, wholly and solely his fault, that they had missed the train.’ This sudden, emphatic statement emphasizes that ‘he’ has done something (although the reader does not know what), and the speaker’s anger about it, a
technique which awakens the reader’s interest extremely effectively. Further, it conveys to the reader the discord which is present between ‘he’ and the speaker, who is soon discovered to be his wife. The wife’s irritation is described persistently in the whole first paragraph and through her interior monologue, her impatient and nervous character is revealed. The jerky, snatched and disconnected nature of the wife’s thoughts give glimpses of her, but only from a distance. By keeping the reader at a distance in this way, no empathy is established between the character and the reader. This sense of distance is underlined by the fact that the characters are given no names; the reader becomes a witness to their relationship as to a conversation between strangers overheard in the street.

The couple miss their train and have to take a carriage instead. Being distraught, and irritated by the man’s bad organization of their departure arrangements, the woman starts to cry, but her way of crying is presented as rather theatrical:

Her voice had changed. It was shaking now – crying now. She fumbled with her bag, and produced from its little maw a scented handkerchief. She put up her veil and, as though she were doing it for somebody else, pitifully, as though she were saying to somebody else: ‘I know, my darling,’ she pressed the handkerchief to her eyes.

She seems to be acting rather exaggeratedly to blame him for having missed the train and to emphasize his failure.

While she is crying, he sees her belongings in her silver bag on her knee: ‘her powder puff, her rouge stick, a bundle of letters, a phial of thin black pills like seeds, a broken cigarette, a mirror, white ivory tablets…’ Then, he makes an unexpected comment regarding them: ‘In Egypt she would be buried with those things’. Linking his wife to the idea of death in such an offhand way is unsettling. We are uncertain whether he is being flippant, or whether he really sees his wife, via her possessions, as embodying a form of deathly presence. His way of looking at her is suggested to be very objective and the distance between them within their relationship is hinted at through this technique. After all, some of the objects he refers to are everyday items any woman would carry in her handbag. From this perspective, his remark is cruel and, by implication, insulting to all women who carry makeup and suchlike in their
bags. At the same time, the presence of the ‘black pills’, the ‘broken cigarette’ and the ‘white ivory tablets’ tell us something about his wife: they indicate her possible dependence on medication, the fact that she may not clear out her handbag very often, and that she carries some sort of totems. The implication is that she may suffer from addiction, anxiety and a distracted state of mind (the broken cigarette). However, the symbolism could also be interpreted from a very different perspective: it could be that he is emphasizing the importance of the trivial objects in her bag, since they are presented as equivalent to the treasures which Egyptians were buried with. Thus, Mansfield’s symbolism presents the husband as viewing his wife, and her handbag’s contents, in a way which is potentially both elevated and trivial, in one short sentence.

However, there is a scene later where she complains about his smoking, so it is very possible that the broken cigarette in her bag is not hers. Maybe it is a cigarette which she took from him and broke in a fit of anger. If this was so, she could have thrown it away immediately, but instead she keeps it. This suggests that she does not intend (or even want) to separate from him, and that maybe she will be with him to the grave like the treasure of the Egyptians, although she is constantly irritated by his overly relaxed attitude and actions. In their relationship, we can observe a couple who continue to live together in spite of their frequent quarrels; a situation which reflects that of Mansfield and Murry who were sometimes forced to separate because of her medical treatment. Indeed, Mansfield often blamed Murry for his cold attitude toward her when she was alone in a foreign country for recuperation.

II

Returning to the story, when the couple reach the bottom of the valley riding in a carriage, she says she heard her parasol fall and leaves him to find it alone. While she is gone, he hears the sea sound ‘hish, hish’ and ‘he feels himself, lying there, a hollow man, a parched, withered man, as it were, of ashes’

This is an image of a dying man. He is portrayed as lethargic, physically and mentally, and seems to be resigning himself to his fate (whether this is literal or symbolic is not clear from the narrative at this point). Then, he notices the tree just beyond a garden gate. From the appearance of the tree: ‘a round, thick silver stem and big somber copper leaves’, it is
almost surely a beech tree. According to *The Green Man Tree Oracle*, beech trees can signify the death or end of something, the crossing of a threshold. It is not clear that this is Mansfield’s intention, but interestingly, the symbolism of the tree matches the husband’s physical and mental state at this moment.

Mansfield gives trees and plants significant symbolic value in her other works, too. For example in “Bliss” (1918), ‘a pear tree’ symbolizes happiness for Bertha until she finds out about her husband’s affair and in “The Prelude” (1917), ‘aloe’ is the symbol of freedom for Linda. Both images, in those stories, function like the idea of an ‘epiphany’, a term used by the Modernist writer, James Joyce, in his novels to signify a moment of illumination, when a person suddenly sees an everyday object differently, in a new way. It is a moment of clarity of understanding. ‘Pear tree’ and ‘aloe’ work like an epiphany, but the tree in “The Escape” does not have such an uplifting effect. While the husband is looking at the tree, it seems to grow and expand until the big carved leaves hide the sky, which could be a sign of something sinister. Then he hears a woman singing from within its depths or from beyond there.

There is an air of fantasy about this scene, reminiscent of that found in the paintings of jungles by the French artist, Henri Rousseau (1844 – 1910). For example, in ‘*La Charmeuse de Serpents*’ (1907) Rousseau portrayed trees with dark green big leaves in a thick forest and a female snake charmer with a dark body. In this painting, it looks as if the strange sound of the snake charmer’s flute is floating in the silence, like that of the woman’s singing voice which the husband hears in Mansfield’s story. Also, in another work, ‘*The Dream*’ (1910), Rousseau drew a naked woman in a jungle and dark trees with big leaves, which cover most of the sky. The leaves look very similar to a species of huge silver fern seen in Mansfield’s mother country, New Zealand. Thus, the tree scene in Mansfield’s story share similarities and a common atmosphere with Rousseau’s paintings. And, in “The Escape”, it is as if the enticement of the woman’s singing shares a dangerous element similar to that of Rousseau’s image of the snake charmer, a danger which is portrayed in the husband’s experience: he becomes assimilated into the stillness around him, hearing the woman’s ‘warm untroubled’ voice which is floating upon the air, and then, all at once, his chest is attacked by ‘something unbearable and dreadful’. He writhes in pain and tries to get rid of it in vain:
Suddenly, as the voice rose, soft, dreaming, gentle, he knew that it would come floating to him from the hidden leaves and his peace was shattered. What was happening to him? Something stirred in his breast. Something dark, something unbearable and dreadful pushed in his bosom, and like a great weed it floated, rocked… it was warm, stifling. He tried to struggle, to tear at it, and at the same moment – all was over. Deep, deep, he sank into the silence, staring at the tree and waiting for the voice that came floating, falling, until he felt himself enfolded.¹⁰

It looks as if he is dying in this scene, suffering from his wife’s behavior as if it was a deadly attack by a serpent, suggesting, perhaps, that his wife’s behavior (and his acceptance of it) is connected with sacrificing himself in some way, because he desires to hold on to whatever form of attraction and enticement which she offers within their relationship. Yet, since he is present again at the end of the story, he does not appear to have died in physical terms in this scene. However, in such a scenario, the trees (which would normally be a symbol of growth and happiness) are presented as having turned into a symbol of suffocation and are shown as potentially life-threatening.

### III

Guessing from his posture in the scene just described, when he stretches himself out, folds his arms, and his head is sunk on his breast, it is likely that he is, in reality, merely dozing and that what is happening to him is somewhere between dream and daydream. It is said that dreams often reveal our true feelings which are latent in the depths of our minds. Mansfield describes the man’s feelings by showing his physical state as one of extreme discomfort. He does not welcome the sensations he feels. He struggles against them, but is overwhelmed. The sense of understanding or clarity he experiences is not, at that moment, comfortable or fulfilling. It seems that this moment is possibly linked to a realization that his relationship with his wife has symbolically ‘died’. If he continues with the relationship, then the suggestion is that he is risking his own life.¹¹ So, death works in this story on a deeply symbolic level, although in the scene just described, it is not clear at the time to the reader whether
what occurs is literal or not, whether the husband has physically died or not. It is only at the end of the story, when at first it seems confusing that he is still alive, that the reader realizes the previous scene had contained such a symbolic level. In this way, both the ‘dream’ scene and the story’s ending have an extremely disorientating effect on the reader, who does not know what level the story is operating on – the literal or the symbolic. As such, Mansfield plays with our expectations of how a story should work, either as realism or as symbolic of a ‘depth’ beneath realism, and she mixes the two perspectives in ways which shock the reader’s desire for clarity of understanding. We are forced to retrace our steps, so to speak, on our ‘journey’ of interpreting what we read.

Turning, now, to the end of the story, we find this sense of disruption occurring again, this time on a temporal level. There are a few blank lines between the last and penultimate paragraphs, which show that there is a break in the timeline of the narrative. Where, precisely, this break occurs within the timeframe of the story is, however, unclear: it could be that the final scene precedes the entire story, or it could be that it is a continuation of the action previously depicted. All we know is that the scene is different: it is night and they are on a train, possibly on another journey. The husband is standing in the shaking corridor of a train rushing and roaring through the night, holding on ‘with both hands to the brass rail’. ‘The shaking corridor’ could possibly refer to the shaky relationship between the couple. From the open carriage door he overhears his wife talking to the other passengers in her carriage. She is always irritable, nervous and hysterical when she is with him, so it may be that she usually talks to him rather loudly. But here, her voice is like a murmur to him, a monotone which suggests that her conversation is happening in another world, a world apart from him. That is to say, he is shown as possibly having crossed over a threshold in his relationship with his wife and a threshold between their separate ‘worlds’. His feelings at being on the other side of this threshold are described as ‘so great was his heavenly happiness as he stood there he wished he might live for ever.’ Thus, the implication is that he can be absorbed in great happiness only when he is a certain distance away from his wife and, indeed, she also seems happier when she is talking to the other passengers than when she is alone with her husband. Being apart from each other to a certain extent is shown as letting them be happy and cheerful.
IV

I now want to consider the motif of the train and ‘the journey’ and how these are presented in Mansfield’s story. Using trains symbolically is a technique found frequently in literary history. It has been used as a place where people accidentally meet, separate, take time to think, work on something, and even as a place of rest and relaxation. We can see some of this symbolism in the last paragraph of “The Escape”.

The door of the carriage seems to refer to the threshold, or border, between the wife’s world and the husband’s heavenly (maybe, by implication, his ideal) world. The door is open, which denotes that he is still connected with his wife’s world, even though he does not want to be completely submerged in it. However, since he is holding on tightly to the brass rail with both hands, this could possibly signify his effort in trying to cling to his sense of happiness, having escaped, if only momentarily, the space which is dominated by his turbulent relationship with his wife.

The train carriage, for the wife, could be seen as a place to relax: as mentioned before, the wife is talking contentedly with the other passengers, while the husband is absorbed in his solitary emotions of happiness, apart from her, in the corridor. Their juxtaposition refers to two different worlds, and suggests that from a gender point of view, the worlds of men and women do not cohere seamlessly.

The story began with the couple missing their train and ends with a scene on a train. I would suggest that Mansfield intentionally uses the symbol of the train journey at the beginning of the narrative to demonstrate the emotional gulf between the husband and wife, a state which is shown to be highlighted if they spend time in too close proximity to each other. In the story’s ending, Mansfield suggests, by their positions in the separate (yet adjoining spaces) of the train compartment and the corridor, that perhaps, in a marriage, a certain amount of distance between individuals is more comfortable for both of them.

V

The idea of marriage (and in more philosophical terms, life) as a journey occurs
when, after missing the train, the wife and husband take a horse drawn carriage, either to meet the train at a different station, or to catch a later train. This symbol of the carriage could be interpreted as a metaphor for the way in which we make our final journey to death. In fact, in olden times, and even now in some cultures, coffins are carried in horse drawn carriages to their last resting places. Death, of course, causes a physical separation from the world, and also it could sometimes be seen as a way to be released or escape from the hardship in this world. As we have seen, while he is waiting for his wife in the carriage, the husband suffers from sudden, unexplained, and intense pain, and he appears to be dying in a physical sense – crossing the threshold between life and death – whilst, at the same time, the scene articulates the possibility that his relationship with his wife is also dying. Thus, we can see that Mansfield’s use of the carriage symbol in this story is clearly related to a theme of separation and death, not just in a generalized philosophical sense, but also in terms of the spectrum of emotions experienced by individuals within the most familiar male/female relationship, that of love and marriage.

VI

The power struggle within the couple’s relationship comes to the fore in the narrative when the husband suggests to his wife that he fetch her parasol which had fallen from the carriage, and she says ‘No, thank you!’ And ‘I’ll go myself. ...trust you not to follow…. if I don’t escape from you for a minute I shall go mad.’ which is a brutally biting remark. So, while she is gone, he stays in the carriage. When she gets out of the carriage, she takes her bag with her. It is suggested, here, that if she intended to return soon, she would not need her bag, but the fact that she does not leave any of her possessions in the carriage with her husband shows that the distance between them is growing increasingly remote, and becoming something that she has begun to desire.

The symbol of the parasol was very popular in the Victorian era, and was a token of the wealth and power of aristocrats and upper-class people. Since the wife rejects his offer of help and goes to find her parasol by herself, her action appears to symbolize how she does not want to hand over the initiative to her husband, even for a moment,
and wants to be continually dominant over him. There is a power struggle occurring here, between the genders, where the woman is depicted as desiring dominance over the man in a world, which she feels, has been badly ‘organized’ by men during the long history of their control.

Another hint that the couple’s relationship is deteriorating as they go on their ‘journey’, is found in the description of the houses which they pass during their journey in the carriage. The houses reflect the couple’s discord and the path which their future may take: ‘those small straggling houses with bits of broken pot flung among the flowerbeds and half-naked hens scratching round the doorsteps.’ Disorder, barrenness, incompleteness are shown here. Besides, their relationship is alluded to by Mansfield metaphorically in her description of their journey as slow and difficult: ‘they were mounting a long steep road that wound round the hill and over into the next bay.’ Furthermore, the hill is shown to be getting steeper and steeper: ‘the horses stumbled, pulling hard. Every five minutes, every two minutes the driver trailed the whip across them.’ This also hints that their relationship is likely to deteriorate in the future.

A particularly striking use of symbolism to portend the couple’s future is found in Mansfield’s use of flowers in the story, in the scene when they are in the open carriage, with the children running and trying to hand bunches of little flowers to them. In Mansfield’s other works, many varieties of flowers appear, such as the lily, rose, tulip, pansy, violet, lavender, and carnation. In Victorian times, ‘flower language’ was very popular and people used flowers to express their feelings or to deliver a message which was difficult to convey directly. It is likely that Mansfield had knowledge of this symbolic language of flowers. As such, she may well have chosen to use specific types of flowers in her works to convey, or question, the traditional associations and symbolic meanings accorded to them by Victorian culture. Even if this was not the case, we frequently see in her works that she utilizes flowers of her own choice which are worked into the narrative in such a way that they come to represent a certain situation or emotion experienced by the characters in her stories, and which also hints
at their futures. In “The Escape”, the children offer the couple ‘Lilac, faded lilac, greeny-white snowballs, one arum lily, handful of hyacinths, .... one even threw into her lap a bunch of marigolds.’ Traditionally, lilac symbolizes humility, first emotions of love, youthful innocence according to its colour. Mansfield adds ‘faded lilac’ to just ‘lilac’ here. It seems that she deliberately does this in order to suggest that the love between the wife and husband is fading away. The symbolic meaning of the snowball is winter, and that of the arum lily is beauty, but the latter is also a popular flower at funerals and ceremonies that commemorate death. Marigold is red and orange, but in contrast to its vivid colour, it symbolizes grief. Purple hyacinth means sorrow, and white ones loveliness. On the whole, most of the flowers in the story are of a pale colour, except the marigold, and most of them are related to love, sadness and death. The husband tries to accept these flowers from the children, but the wife rejects them fiercely: ‘she hurled the bunch out of the carriage with, “Well, do it when I’m not there, please.”’ This indicates that she rejects both the implied positive and negative aspects related to the symbolism of those flowers, whereas her husband, by contrast, shows a desire to accept the good with the bad, an attitude possibly representing, also, his attitude towards his wife’s behavior in the story. Thus, from the perspective of flower symbolism, their ideas about love, and about how it should be displayed in everyday behavior (and maybe also their ideas about life in general) are presented as completely at variance and a great gap is shown to exist concerning what each character will and will not accept in their relationship.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Mansfield uses a combination of symbolism and hints to describe the barren relationship between a wife and husband, and also their gender and personality differences. Further, through her portrayal of the couple’s relationship, we can glimpse what are possibly Mansfield’s ideas concerning her own marriage. She captures the sense that relationships are not composed of smooth, unchanging, interactions between persons, but that the relationship ‘journey’ is, instead, uneven and often difficult and frustrating for individuals. Sometimes people need to feel their
separateness from others, it is posited, rather than try to exist in a state of constant cozy togetherness. Furthermore, we could say that Mansfield questions the romantic expectation that the relationship between a wife and husband can, or indeed should, always be harmonious. In doing so, she implies that to see being part of a couple as the ideal recipe for an individual’s happiness is unrealistic. Further, Mansfield suggests that maybe all relationships contain moments of ‘death’, of epiphanies (so to speak): moments of awareness that in any relationship there exist elements which are unbridgeable, where separateness cannot be overcome, and that such elements may even be a necessary component of any relationship, romantic or otherwise, in order for it to continue.

Notes:

1 For example, “The Garden-Party” starts with: ‘And after all the weather was ideal.’ “The Wind Blows” begins by announcing ‘Suddenly – dreadfully – she wakes up.’ We also can see the same abrupt way of starting a story in works by Virginia Woolf, for example, “The String Quartet” (1920):‘Well, here we are, ….’ And in To the Lighthouse (1927), Part III : ‘What does it mean then, what can it all mean?’


3 James Joyce and Virginia Woolf are the most well-known representatives of literary modernism amongst Mansfield’s contemporaries who adopted the technique of interior monologue (also known as ‘stream of consciousness’) in their works. In the realm of the short story, Mansfield’s “Bank Holiday” (1920), written using ‘the stream of consciousness’ technique, is sometimes compared with Woolf’s “Kew Gardens”(1919).


5 Ibid., p.158.

6 Ibid., p.158.

7 Ibid., p.160.

9 Mansfield and Rousseau lived in the same period and, as she stayed in France for her medical treatment, it is very likely that she knew Rousseau’s works, and quite possible that she described the husband’s dream scene with those paintings in mind.


11 It is particularly interesting that in this story Mansfield, as a woman writer, privileges the man’s (rather than the woman’s) perspective, trying to understand his psychological state and the effects of his wife’s behavior on his emotions.


13 Other works where trains and railways appear include Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1853), Nesbit’s *The Railway Children* (1906), Dickens’ *The Signalman* (1866).


18 For example, red (symbolism: declaration of love) and yellow (hopeless love) tulips, and jonquil (to desire a return of affection) in “Bliss” (1918), Roses (love), pansy (thoughts), lavender (distrust), daisy (innocence) etc. in “Prelude” (1917).

19 *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield.* p.158.


21 *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield.* p.159.

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