

**“GERMANY IS THE
HOME OF THE FAMILY”:
A CRITICISM OF
GENDER ROLES IN
KATHERINE
MANSFIELD’S *IN A
GERMAN PENSION***

Gerardo Rodríguez Salas
University of Granada

The present article departs from the concept of “mimicry” or “masquerade”, theorised by such feminist critics as Joan Rivière (1929), Luce Irigaray (1985), or Mary Ann Doane (1991). This implies that women deliberately assume the feminine style and posture assigned to them within patriarchal discourse with a subversive rather than merely imitative intention by means of what G  rard Genette calls “saturation”. In particular, this study focuses on Katherine Mansfield’s satire of gender stereotypes in Germany. Through this mimicry, Mansfield aims to prove that such stereotypes go beyond national boundaries and affect the people of different countries similarly—in this case Germany and England. The selected texts are two short stories included within her early collection *In a German Pension* (1911): “The Modern Soul” and “Germans at Meat”.

MIMICRY AND SATURATION

Katherine Mansfield’s literary experience was always heavily influenced by a cosmopolitan touch, as a result of her premature departure from New Zealand, which she left in 1908 never to return. Her target city was London, the nerve centre of culture where she believed she could become a universally acclaimed writer. However, despite her attraction for the metropolis, she was always a liminal figure who needed the nourishment of other cultures and values. As Patrick D. Morrow states (1993: 13), Mansfield’s life was characterised by the continuous change from one place to another to the extent that she performed 72

changes of residence in her 33 years of life. This constant uprooting favoured her protean identity since:

[b]eing always in the company of strangers meant Katherine Mansfield was never required to be consistent—to be one distinctive self without change—without freedom. She, by continually role-playing, could live outside the ordinary boundaries of identity and explore different lives without ever risking loss of control (Morrow 1993: 10).¹

Her adventurous predisposition and her personal circumstances led her to get in contact with other cultures, such as the German, the French, the Italian and the Swiss. The focus of this article will be her early attraction for Germanic values as a result of a miscarriage that she underwent in the German spa of Wörishofen in 1911. Her first collection of short stories published the same year, *In A German Pension*, derives its inspiration from this experience. Despite not being very successful, and despite Mansfield's own refusal to have it reedited because of its seeming inferiority to the rest of her work, this collection displays Mansfield's sharp-witted ironic and sarcastic style—which she would later refine—and the contrast between two cultures: the English culture that she represents and the German culture of the characters in the stories. More than stories, however, these narrative pieces are portraits of German people under the critical gaze of an English writer during her stay at a German spa—the autobiographical touch in this collection is evident. Crowded with stereotypical characters, especially as regards gender roles in an extremely patriarchal society, these portraits are strongly satirical of German customs through the critical look Mansfield inherited from Anton Chekhov and her mentor from the literary newspaper *The New Age* (A. R. Orage).

In her stories of *In a German Pension*, Mansfield makes an ironic use of the traditional gender stereotypes that have helped to keep women under male control from the beginning of our phallogentric history. She employs strategically the detached perspective of the narrator that is frequently found in utopian novels. This detached perspective—or “punto de vista del extrañamiento”—“tiene la función de desestabilizar los valores de la sociedad occidental” (Fortunati 1995: 66). In these stories, by means of the British narrator that observes German culture as an outsider, both as a foreigner and as a woman, Mansfield selects a powerful weapon to criticise gender roles that, under the cover of being intrinsic to this German phallogentric society, can be universally extrapolated.

To attain this critical aim, Mansfield uses a strategy later theorised as *mimicry*. Being originally developed by critics like Melanie Klein or Joan

¹ Lydia Wevers (1997: 27) offers a detailed list of all the names, and therefore different identities, adopted by Mansfield: Kass, Katie, K.M., Mansfield, Katherine, Julian Mark, Katherine Schonfeld, Matilda Berry, Katharina, Katiushka, Kissienska, Elizabeth Stanley, Tig, Jones, Lili Heron, Sally, Mrs. Bowden, Mrs. Beauchamp-Bowden, Mrs. Murry, Mrs. Trowell, etc.

Rivière, this concept or, as they called it, *masquerade*, has been more recently elaborated by the French feminist critic Luce Irigaray, who proposes a strategy that allows women to fight against the powerful symbolic order of men, not in a radical or utopian way, but by using a model that lets them dismantle the arbitrariness of the existing patriarchal system. This can be considered as a covert revolutionary strategy, as women apparently imitate gender roles, but they actually exaggerate them with a subversive intention. This revolutionary side can be inferred from the following words by Irigaray:

In other words, the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal. Which presupposes that women do not aspire simply to be men’s equals in knowledge (1985a: 78).

This critic’s initiative is original and ironic, as she encourages women’s conscious reproduction or *mimicry* of traditional gender roles, or what she calls “femininity” (1985b: 101). In playfully imitating this cultural artefact, women will ultimately expose the artificiality of these “feminine” roles by means of exaggeration—or “saturation” in Genette’s words (1962: 107).

Irigaray herself reveals the artificiality of the notion of *femininity* when she declares that “in fact that ‘femininity’ is a role, an image, a value, imposed upon women by male systems of representation. In this masquerade of femininity, the woman loses herself, and loses herself by playing on her femininity” (1985a: 84). Coinciding with the rest of the critics who develop the strategy of *mimicry*, Irigaray departs from a concept of femininity that, like Kristeva’s (1973: 114; Moi 1982: 219), implies a lack of identity. This is also Mary Ann Doane’s opinion, when she concludes that “it is femininity itself which is constructed as a mask—as the decorative layer which conceals a non-identity” (1991: 25), aligning with her predecessor, Joan Rivière, who equally perceives femininity as a mask that hides a void (1929: 95).

As has been already anticipated, the concept of *mimicry* is Irigaray’s particular version of the psychoanalytic term *masquerade*, coined by Melanie Klein’s disciple Rivière, in her 1929 article “Womanliness as a Masquerade”. As the title suggests, this critic establishes a connection between “womanliness” and “masquerade”, and she thus explains that the former “could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it” (1929: 94). For her, there is no distinction between this mask and the “real essence” of women, and this strategy therefore constitutes the perfect tool to expose the artificial construction of femininity. Rivière’s concept of “masquerade” was later re-used by Doane who, following her, considers this *masquerade* as a strategy to which women can resort to detach themselves from the construct of femininity (1991:

25). All of them participate in a “strategic essentialism” or a temporary assumption of positionality to dismantle femininity and expose how artificial it is through an exaggerated imitation of it.

In the case of the stories that compose *In a German Pension*, Mansfield’s intention is to show that traditional gender roles are universal, so that they go beyond the idiosyncratic cultural traits of any nation. Acting as an outsider, the British narrator detaches herself from the German values of the characters (“punto de vista del extrañamiento”) to prove that the apparently new feminine poses adopted by the German women in the stories are ultimately recognisable as the familiar gender roles that we have always known. Thus, Mansfield makes use of her strategic mimicry, exaggerating these women’s roles to display how artificial and rooted they are in the patriarchal machinery of early twentieth-century Germany.

“THE MODERN SOUL”

In “The Modern Soul”, one of the stories from *In a German Pension*, the protagonist, Sonia, stands for the stereotype of the early twentieth-century New Woman, rebellious in her quasi-lesbianism and desire for freedom, but deeply rooted in traditional values, as the British narrator proves in the end. The story starts with the conversation between the narrator and Herr Professor. Two women, mother and daughter (Frau Godowska and Fräulein Sonia) join in and the four of them come back to the pension to attend a concert for the benefit of afflicted infants, where Sonia and Herr Professor will participate. After the performance, Sonia—called the “Modern Soul” by Herr Professor—invites the narrator for a walk and reveals her desire to free herself from her mother. Suddenly, she decides to faint while the narrator runs for Herr Professor’s help. Next morning during breakfast, the narrator discovers that Sonia and Herr Professor are spending the day together in the forest, so that the girl seems to have renounced to her feminist ideal of freedom.

From the beginning, Sonia is presented as an impersonation of the *New Woman*. Herr Professor describes her in the following way:

the daughter is an actress. Fräulein Sonia is a very modern soul. I think you would find her most sympathetic. She is forced to be in attendance on her mother just now. But what a temperament! I have once described her in her autograph album as tigress with a flower in the hair (Mansfield 1945: 713).²

² From now on, references to Mansfield’s work will be done parenthetically in the body of the text and only the page number will be mentioned.

Sonia is a professional actress, which highlights the idea of artificiality and pose in her, since this girl acts even outside the stage. There is irony coming from the label "modern soul", as Sonia ultimately proves to be a completely traditional woman. In consonance with that label, Sonia is "forced" to look after her mother, but we imply that her desire is to break free. Herr Professor also emphasises Sonia's "modern" character, when he speaks of her excessive temperament and compares her with a "tigress", although her delicate and feminine vein can be perceived in the image "tigress with a flower in the hair", diluting her feline aggressiveness. The girl's exoticism, in line with the avant-garde movement, can be observed in her comparisons: "there are swallows in flight; they are like a little flock of Japanese thoughts" (714), an idea that seems strange to a conservative mind as Herr Professor's, who rebuts this comparison by saying she could have referred to the thoughts of his country, Germany.

To enhance the artificiality of the role that Sonia adopts as an actress, both on the stage and in real life, Mansfield exaggerates her drama, making use of the strategy of intentional mimicry. Sonia is presented as an extraordinary interpreter when she is on the stage, so that when she performs in the concert, everybody is "touched" and "thrilled" (717) and Sonia herself admits to the narrator: "I am always successful [...]. You see, when I act I *am*" (718). Maybe for this reason she has decided to extend her performance to real life. However, her dramatic attitude becomes too artificial in real life, causing her to make a fool of herself before the narrator and the reader. Mansfield uses exaggeration (or "saturation" in Genette's words) when, in the most artificial and hilarious way, Sonia decides: "I am going to faint here and now" (720). The narrator is aware of her play, but she pretends not to be: "'You can't,' I said, shaking her. 'Come back to the pension and faint as much as you please. But you can't faint here. All the shops are closed. There is nobody about. Please don't be so foolish'" (720). Irony reaches its peak when, once we discover Sonia's artificiality, after the question of what she is going to recite on stage, she answers: "'I never know until the last moment. When I come on the stage I wait for one moment and then I have the sensation as though something struck me here,'—she placed her hand upon her collar brooch—'and ... words come!'" (716). There is no doubt that there is nothing spontaneous in her and yet, Sonia plays to be "natural".

Mansfield carries out a study of drama in this girl and her tragic and affected pose to call people's attention. Thus, speaking to her mother, Sonia names her situation with her as "the *curse* of my genius", "my *tragedy*", and explains: "Living with her I live with the *coffin* of my *unborn* aspirations" (emphasis added; 719). She also states that, before abandoning her "poor, little, sick, widowed mother", she would rather drown herself (719-20). The lexical selection denotes her attitude towards life, marked by a pessimism she seems to

enjoy. She perceives her mother as an obstacle for her independent and “modern” life and the force that has inhibited her great aspirations. In a way, it is true since we discover that Sonia has inherited part of her dramatic stance from her mother. At the beginning of the story, Frau Godowska’s look is described as “tragic” and, when Herr Professor contradicts her momentarily, she reacts violently adopting her daughter’s same dramatic pose: “Frau Godowska looked into the distance, then the corners of her mouth dropped and her skin puckered. She began to shed tears” (715). This connection between the two generations—traditional and new—suggests that both commune with the same values associated with femininity: the victimization assimilated by women due to sentimental novels.³ The fact that “Fräulen Sonia acted a poison scene with the assistance of her mother’s pill vial” (718) indicates the union of both characters in this dramatic attitude, a union that goes beyond national boundaries and seems to affect women in all societies.

Sonia’s “modernity” is also shown in her apparently revolutionary values. She suggests a lesbian vein in her:

“Do you know that poem of Sappho about her hands in the stars I am curiously sapphic. And this is so remarkable—not only am I sapphic, I find in all the works of all the greatest writers, especially in their unedited letters, some touch, some sign of myself—some resemblance, some part of myself, like a thousand reflections of my own hands in a dark mirror” (719).

Her reference to Sappho and her sapphic desire suggest a dark side in her, like the unedited letters that remain anonymous and the dark side of that mirror that reflects a multiple identity. Nevertheless, our impression is that her lesbianism is more a false trend than a real lifestyle. After observing this girl’s artificiality, we cannot believe what she says, since everything is reduced to a pose that she adopts with incredible easiness.

Suddenly, she abandons her progressive stance and declares that:

“Sometimes I think the solution lies in marriage [...]. If I find a simple, peaceful man who adores me and will look after mamma—a man who would be for me a pillow—for genius cannot hope to mate—I shall marry him.... You know the Herr Professor has paid me very marked attentions” (720).

We feel lost. There is a clear interest in Sonia’s attitude towards marriage; she would not marry for love, but out of the interest to have someone by her side who flatters her and looks after her mother. In this sense, marriage is just a cover for her lesbianism to avoid social ostracism. Sonia rejects her “modernity” and her conservative side turns up when, after the narrator’s suggestion that Herr Professor should marry Sonia’s mother, the girl reacts

³ See “Pastiche de la novela sentimental” in Gerardo Rodríguez Salas (2003: 267-291).

violently saying: “The cruelty. I am going to faint. Mamma to marry again before I marry—the indignity” (720). Sonia thus proves that her label “modern soul” is totally ironic, since she is as stuck in the patriarchal order as her mother. This girl uses Herr Professor for her social aims, contemplating marriage as an exit. Mansfield dismantles the falsity of the New Woman, not only in England, but also in other countries like Germany.⁴

With respect to Herr Professor, this character represents the prototype of *the* man manufactured by the patriarchal system where he lives; therefore, he is a chauvinist man both as regards women and his German culture. His comments reflect a masculine air of superiority and his consideration of women as the “weak sex”. As soon as the story begins, he addresses the narrator with the following comment: “It is your innate feminine delicacy in preferring etherealised sensations” (712). He adopts a biologist belief according to which both men and women are determined to perform certain cultural roles due to their physical differences. In this case, he takes for granted feminine delicacy and women’s preference for feelings and abstract sensations as opposed to masculine materialism, considering this separation of roles as “innate”. His idea of masculine superiority becomes more evident when he asks the female narrator: “The conversation is not out of your depth? I have so seldom the time or opportunity to open my heart to a woman that I am apt to forget” (712). His suggestion is that the narrator, being a woman, will not be able to understand his intellectual reasoning. Herr Professor proves to be a man full of prejudice against the female sex, which he perceives as a toy for the man and an instrument to satisfy his primary needs.

On the other hand, his obsessive nationalism indicates the strength with which the ideology of the system takes hold of such figures as this dominant male. Patriarchy encourages the obsession with its institutions, especially among those who will be privileged by the power of the system; namely, the men who will adopt a patriarchal, dominant role. Nationalism contributes to this attitude and favours the intolerance of men, who end up believing in the superiority of their country and their sex. When Sonia compares some swallows in flight with Japanese thoughts, Herr Professor’s nationalism comes to light: “But why do you say ‘Japanese’? Could you not compare them with equal veracity to a little flock of German thoughts in flight?” (714). His prejudice for foreign cultures can be implied from the following comment to the English narrator: “It is a great pity that the English nation is so unmusical” (716), and his fanatic nationalism reaches its peak when he plays a typical Bavarian dance and the National Anthem (718). Thus, as Mansfield proves with her intentional

⁴ For examples of other fake New Women in Mansfield, see my analysis of “The Advanced Lady” (also included in the collection *In a German Pension*), “Marriage à la Mode” and “A Cup of Tea” (Rodríguez Salas 2003: 400-409).

mimicry, gender roles are not so geographically specific; on the contrary, cultural and gender prejudice is universal.

“GERMANS AT MEAT”

No other story within the collection *In a German Pension* is more illustrative of German prejudice against other cultures and of the contrast between English and German values than “Germans at Meat”. The setting is a meal at the pension where the English narrator is staying. With the exception of the narrator, the fellow guests are German and through their conversation we discover not only their food habits, but also their conservative opinion about other issues.

The German prejudice against England is emphasised all throughout the text, so that a series of British stereotypes turn up. The first one is “the nation’s preposterous breakfast” and eating habits on the verge of gluttony: “Soup and baker’s bread and pig’s flesh, and tea and coffee and stewed fruit, and honey and eggs, and cold fish and kidneys, and hot fish and liver” (683)—the repetitive use of the conjunction is quite significant to create the sense of food excess. However, Mansfield’s clever technique is displayed from the beginning. The narrator’s detached viewpoint helps the reader to notice the Germans’ exaggerated prejudice and to realise that it is these Germans themselves who are creating their own image as voracious food consumers, while the English myth vanishes: “I felt I was bearing the burden of the nation’s preposterous breakfast—I who drank a cup of coffee while buttoning my blouse in the morning” (683). Besides, the English are described as people who eat a lot, but paradoxically the English narrator is a vegetarian (684), as opposed to the greediness of the German guests all over the meal.

The topic of food connects with that of gender when, after the narrator explains that she does not know her husband’s favourite meat, the Widow asking the question replies with another one: “How can a woman expect to keep her husband if she does not know her favourite food after three years?” (687). These Germans’ obsession with food gives us an idea of the biologism and primitivism that characterises this culture as regards the gender issue: women must conquer their husbands by being good housewives. Indeed, women’s ultimate function is endless procreation, as if they would become better wives on account of the number of children they can bear. Another English stereotype emerges out of German women’s prejudice, when the Widow accuses the narrator with the following unjustified comment:

“But you never have large families in England now; I suppose you are too busy with your suffragetteing. Now I have had nine children, and they are all alive, thank God. Fine, healthy babies—though after the first one was born I had to—” (685).

The biologist, reproductive role that women are brainwashed to perform in such a patriarchal society as Mansfield is portraying in the story becomes evident in the Widow’s words, while she extends the stereotype of the emerging figure of the early twentieth-century suffragette to the whole of England. Maybe she has heard about that feminist movement and she has just made a rather inconsistent generalisation that does not obviously apply to all English women. In fact, Mansfield herself supported the suffragette movement for a while, but she soon discovered its drawbacks, which she criticised in stories like “Marriage à la Mode” or “The Advanced Lady”. If we investigate Mansfield’s narrative, most of it is populated by women as obsessed with marriage and procreation as these German characters.

The cult of procreation encouraged not only by patriarchy but also by women themselves can be observed when, after confessing that she has given birth to nine children, the Widow proves to be in favour of such reproductive role: “A friend of mine had four [children] at the same time. Her husband was so pleased he gave a supper-party and had them placed on the table. *Of course* she was very proud” (Emphasis added: 685). In order to enhance the German stereotype of fertility, Mansfield continues using her mimicry by ridiculing the German characters and turning them into deplorable figures: the Widow is proud to have had nine children, even when that action has eroded her vitality as a woman and she has acted as an automatic piece of the patriarchal machinery. Then, the Traveller, a German too, corroborates this stereotype: “‘Germany,’ boomed the Traveller, biting round a potato which he had speared with his knife, ‘is the home of the Family’” (685). The verb “boomed” is significantly selected by Mansfield to suggest that German men think of themselves as gloriously virile in a country based on the family structure with clear gender roles to be performed by men and women.

The division between the narrow-minded German culture and the eclectic English one is also clear in the narrator’s behaviour. There is a distinctive lack of communication that proves these German people’s conviction that their ideas are the “correct” ones. As a result of the politeness that can be observed from the beginning (“I said , attempting to infuse just the right amount of enthusiasm into my voice”, 683) , the narrator does not express her thoughts openly, so that some sort of dramatic irony appears: while the Germans remain narrow-minded and proud of their cultural values, the narrator and the reader realise their intolerant attitude and Mansfield’s saturation has a strong critical effect. However, Mansfield proves to be more open-minded than these characters: on the one

hand, the whole collection of *In a German Pension* is based on a strong satire, so that Mansfield implicitly suggests that these German stereotypes are exaggerated in order to be criticised; on the other hand, even though as a result of this criticism it seems that her viewpoint, and thus the English one, is presented as the “right” perspective, if we compare these stories with later ones, we realise that the same gender roles are criticised in a similar way in England, so that Mansfield’s ultimate word is that they are universal despite the idiosyncratic features of each country.

CONCLUSION

Although one of Mansfield’s intentions is to offer a harsh satire of early twentieth-century German society, the main aim is to prove that gender roles are exactly the same as those found in early twentieth-century England. Maybe she is a bit far-fetched in her portrait of German characters, but her “saturation” and intentional mimicry prove to be quite useful in revealing a universal conventionality of gender roles despite their disguise behind progressive labels such as the New Woman, a conventionality that goes beyond geographical boundaries. As the German mother in “Frau Brechenmacher Attends a Wedding” says: “Always the same [...] all over the world the same; but, God in heaven—but *stupid*” (711).

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