

# A House in the City: A Comparative Study of the Representation of Interiors in Katherine Mansfield and Vincent van Gogh

Utsha Roy

**Abstract**— This paper compares the depiction of houses by Katherine Mansfield and Vincent van Gogh. Throughout the course of the paper it will be seen that the traditional ideas of safety and privacy associated with the house does not hold true for the two artists in consideration. The house in the city represent for them thwarted ambitions and hopes and ultimately turns into an instrument that brings out their loneliness.

**Keywords**— city, privacy, loneliness, Impressionism

## I. INTRODUCTION

Katherine Mansfield identified the city as a cultural location that would allow her to live on her own terms. Kaplan, in her book, explicitly states, “Wellington, with its cultural isolation and her socially minded parents always on watch”, was a hindrance to her way of life (81). In this regard, her journey from nineteenth-century Aesthetic philosophy to Modernism is similar to those of other contemporary artists like T.S Eliot, James Joyce, and Impressionist painters like Manet, Pissarro and Renoir; all of whom migrated to major cities from smaller towns to be part of the revolution that was Modernism. Major cities like London, Paris, Berlin or others feature prominently in their works.

Mansfield’s love and longing for London are evident in her early pieces. “London Vignette”, published in Wellington’s *The Native Companion*, says, “It is at this hour and in this loneliness that London stretches out eager hands towards me, and in her eyes is the light of knowledge” (qtd. in Kaplan 67). Moving to London away from her parents, for Mansfield, was a rite of passage, the sexual implications of which she was keenly aware of. Juliet, the protagonist of her unfinished novel of the same name, acknowledges the potential of the city as a sexual catalyst when she admits to feeling a sexual drive, “Horribly-and in need of a physical shock or violence. Perhaps a smacking would be beneficial” (qtd. in Kaplan 69).

Though obsessed with the city, her conception of it differs from her contemporaries. She does not use her characters as symbols of the breakdown “of western culture or as contrasts with great figures of the past”; instead, she identifies with them, mainly insisting upon social injustice (Kaplan 75). Maybe this was because, even though she tried to live on equal terms in the city among men, she could see that the city “was compounded

of different elements, different emphases, reflecting the realities of another experience of urban life” (67). She was aware of the despair and danger that the city posed to women while also portraying it as having a potential for adventure, creativity and independence. This ambiguity resulted in her always providing her female characters in the city with a definite address- a house that would be her base in the city, a place to come back to or to initiate one’s journey from. This chapter shall look at Mansfield’s treatment of houses in the city in her stories and compare it with the treatment of houses by Vincent van Gogh.

Houses in the post-war English society had gone through an evolution of their own failing to provide the inhabitant with safety and comfort. Booth, in her analysis, wrote about the erasure of home:

“The dairies, memoirs, and novels of many veterans suggest [. . .] one of the most devastating consequences of fighting the war was combatants’ discovery that the concept of ‘home’ no longer existed as a geographical site. Instead, ‘home’ merely registered a set of collapsing imaginative expectations” (qtd in Cappuccio 85).

London, after the war had housed a curious mixture of people from all over the world. In terms of societal composition, it had become upwardly mobile with only the inner-city slums and overcrowded lodging houses remaining the few arenas where encounters with the social and racial ‘others’ could be staged in the literature of the time. It is often in apartment buildings that Mansfield’s lower-middle-class protagonists stay and encounter people belonging to upper classes and interact for the time being. Mansfield had stayed in a hostel while studying at Queen’s College and though it did not house women from the lower strata of society, it allowed her to share living space with women who came from vastly different social backgrounds and to observe encounters among the women which she later used in her short stories.

Clair Wills, in her essay, likens these lodging houses to Victorian trains, “a place where strangers can be encountered, a testing ground for how characters deal with difference” and asserts that each of such lodging houses had distinctions of class, sex and social mobility attached to them (4). The social distinctions might have been subtle, but Katherine Mansfield was shrewd enough to notice them and presents them as significant plot devices in many of her stories, most notably in the story discussed later in the paper. Wills also points out how

a rented room equated to a “hold on respectability, pitched as it was halfway down a rickety descending scale—down the staircase—from homeownership down through the serviced flat, a set of rooms with cooking facilities, a room in the landlady’s house, the hire of a bed in a privately owned house, and a bed in a public hostel (a Rowton House or the Salvation Army Hostel), to no bed at all” (4). Thus, women characters etched out by the modernist writers writing during the interwar years were always conscious of the reputation of their women characters living in such buildings, often using these housing conditions to hint subtly at sexual promiscuity like Eliot’s typist in “The Waste Land”.

War damage, poor living conditions, push towards building council housing, and other problems meant that lodging houses were never the ideal place of living, and people always looked for opportunities to move out. The Lodging house, thus, became the “literary shorthand for representing social climbing or social slippage” (Wills 5). If there were a prospect of social ascendancy, a person would move out of a lodging house and buy a furnished apartment. Naturally, lodging houses became a place of stay, that never acquired the label of a ‘home’, the socially marginalized encountered one another or, on rare occasions, someone from a higher class. In Mansfield’s “The Tiredness of Rosabel”, Rosabel dreams an affluent customer she had served during her shift at the millinery shop would rescue her from the squalid lodging-house she lives in and provide her with a much more comfortable life.

Other than social implications, houses also had the power of impacting the inhabitant’s mood. Particular places in the house could produce effective responses and changes in mood were “registered in discourses of bodily reactions and sensory perceptions” (Kimber, Maddison and Martin 6). Mood further complicated this object-subject relationship as it did not solely depend on the individual’s mental state but also on his/her relationship or attunement to the spatial environment. In a city full of uncertainties, a house had to be akin to a ‘safe haven’ or ‘a refuge’ for a woman, especially if it is not a lodging house but one owned by a family; however, Mansfield’s representation of the house is seldom that straightforward. In “Bliss”, Bertha is “overcome, suddenly, by a feeling of bliss!” while turning the corner of her street but is apprehensive of making a wrong move in her nursery before the nanny as she tries to steal a few moments alone with her baby (Mansfield 305). Berth’s mood had been radiant in the city; she was assured and self-confident; however, she is made to feel inadequate and subordinate as soon as she steps into the nursery. Contrary to logic, her house, nothing like a sordid lodging house, does not save her from the undue judgment of the nanny. It was also in this supposedly safe place that she discovers her husband’s adultery. The house forces her to play a part- she dresses up, puts the fruits in order, looks after her guests and feels guilty for being “too happy-too happy!” (308). The patriarchal connotations of ‘angel in the house’ are to be blamed for this phenomenon. Even though the participation of women in the workforce had increased during the war, the house was still considered a woman’s rightful place. As a result, a woman who strayed away from that role was subjected

to the scrutiny of patriarchy, often by other women who have remained in the so-called ‘womanly domain’. Thus, Bertha strolling down the city in absolute bliss risked “becoming ‘public’ in a very different sense than the socially accepted ‘public man’ as women strolling in the streets in nineteenth– and early twentieth-century “could be taken for prostitutes” (Perez 2). So when she returns home, the nanny deems her incompetent and not particularly good company; only her social status saves her further humiliation. Mansfield though her portrayal of women from different classes, living and working in different parts of the city exposes the dilemma of women of the time. Her lower class protagonists in “The Little Governess”, “The Life of Maa Parkar” and “The tiredness of Rosabel” all foray into hostile parts of the city to earn a livelihood and dream of having an establishment like Bertha, a house of their own. Ironically, Mansfield’s depiction of women prove house or no house, a women shall never at home, whether in a lodging house or in a house of her own.

In order to further understand Mansfield’s ambiguous treatment of houses, it is essential to look closely at her circumstances and her relationship to the city. Mansfield spent more than half of her adult life in London, but she was always treated as an outsider, a “colonial subject” from New Zealand (Kimber, Madison and Martin 5). According to Sydney Janet Kaplan, the “outsider in the city perspective strengthened her powers of observation” but did little to bring her acceptance (qtd in Kimber, Madison and Martin 7). After her disastrous marriage in 1909, while fleeing off to Brussels, she wrote in a letter to Garnet, “The carriage is full –but Garnie I feel that I am going home. To escape England it is my great desire– I loathe England [...]” Thus, the city which she had dreamt of settling in no longer aroused the same sentiments it once did. As for houses, she never lived in one long enough to be homesick for it. J.M Wilson, in his paper, sees Mansfield as having become “increasingly nomadic, constantly moving from one apartment or boarding house to another before and after her relationship with Murry” (4). He also talks Mansfield’s imaginative ability to discover ‘the homely’ within the ‘new and strange’ and states that the inability to find a proper home drove Mansfield to “create a symbolic home in writing” (6).

Having left her first husband, George Bowden, and completed a stint at Bad Worishoffen, Katherine Mansfield returned to England and took up residence in Cheyne Walk in 1910; the following year, she moved to Clovelly Mansions, which had an entirely Japanese décor. In 1913 she made her “indiscreet journey” to Brussels to be with Francis Carco (Alpers 162). After returning from her escapade, she and Murry moved to No.5 Acacia Road, St. John’s Wood and then moved to Villa Pauline in Cornwall at the insistence of the Lawrences. Before moving to a studio in Chelsea in 1917, they had lived intermittently at Gower Street and with Lady Ottoline in Garsington. 1918 saw the couple dreaming of a lovely farmhouse “where they would live in peace when the war was over and be successful authors-married at last” (Alpers 262). However, that was put on hold for a while as Katherine had to leave England for the winter due to her worsening health. When she got back, they had their eye on a House in Hampstead

which they called the 'Elephant', but as they waited to acquire it, Katherine had to be sent to Looe to be cared for by Anne Estelle Rice. Katherine started enjoying married life in the 'Elephant' hosting parties for Murry, who had recently been made editor of *Athenaeum*. However, her body failed her again, and this time, she was sent to Italy and lived in a little cottage in San Remo called Casetta in 1919. She continued changing houses until she finally died in Fontainebleau in 1923 and never lived long enough in a house to feel safe or emotionally attached to it.

Mansfield's female characters had their forbears her inability to find safety and comfort in a house and fell prey "to fantasy and delusion and to the encroachment of predatory male figures" in the absence of a protective house (Wilson 10). The above phrase, however, should not be taken at face value; it does not imply that Viola, the protagonist of the story under discussion- "The Swing of the Pendulum", has no house to live in, only that the house she lives in provides her with no sense of security. The house fails at its primary function of providing privacy and safety to its occupant as she faces an assault within the confines of her own room.

Viola belongs to the lower middle class, where few avenues are open for women to earn a livelihood respectably. Living in a society still holding on to Victorian ideals, she sees association with a man as the easiest way out of her poverty and even considers prostitution for a while. However, her morality forbids her. The only relief afforded to her comes through imagination, "she began to dream of a wonderful house, and of presses full of clothes and of perfumes. . .that was the life for her", however, the sunlight streaming into her room rudely shatters her illusions ("Swing of the Pendulum" 84). She pulls down the window blinds of her room:

"but they gave a persistent, whitish glare which was just as bad. The only thing of life in the room was a jar of hyacinths given by her landlady's daughter: it stood on the table exuding a sickly perfume from its plump petals" ("Swing of the Pendulum" 81).

There is an apparent disconnection between her reality and her imagination, and her squalid room reflects it. Instead of having carriages and a wealthy man to care for, she is troubled by the landlady, whom she cannot pay, and the fear of facing her makes her tiptoe out of her accommodation, like a thief fearing detection. Mansfield thwarts all motifs of wealth and comfort that her dreams produce with motifs related to discomfort in the house. The house reminds her of her entrapment, poverty and isolation, which her poor lover cannot dispel. Her only escape from it would be moving from this house to a better one which will bring about social promotion; however, she currently faces the prospect of being turned out the following day for failing to pay rent.

Consumption becomes a form of liberation, where the ability to afford a house brings about class elevation, respect and privacy if not happiness or safety. Rosemary in "A Cup of Tea" can afford a house, a car and clothes from Paris, whereas the beggar woman not even a cup of tea, while Viola falls somewhere in the middle; on the verge of losing the home

where she suffers an invasion of her privacy and a disillusionment of her fantasies. Houses in Mansfield's stories bring her characters face-to-face with the reality they are trying to evade. Such encounters regularly occur in "ambivalent domestic spaces", such as by windows, mirrors or staircases (Kimber 35). Kimber also says that "space linked to freedom, escape, or even perhaps confinement – stairs – a *place in-between* – fascinated Mansfield" (36). Considering the vast number of pieces where the author or her persona is at the window observing life, Alpers comments, "A trick of her mind is evident: she is constantly inhabiting one space while observing another and has her characters doing the same" (121). In a letter to Dorothy Brett, Mansfield wrote:

"Don't you think the stairs are a good place for reading letters? I do. One is somehow suspended. One is on neutral ground - not in one's own world nor in a strange one. They are an almost perfect meeting place. Oh Heavens! How stairs do fascinate me when I think of it. Waiting for people - sitting on strange stairs - hearing steps far above, watching the light playing by itself - hearing - far below a door, looking down into a kind of dim brightness, watching someone come up. But I could go on forever. Must put them in a story though! People come out of themselves on stairs - they issue forth, unprotected" (Letters 229-30).

The staircase allows Viola to take a peek into her dream while still inhabiting the real world. As she meets the gentleman in the staircase, it acts as a plane for the interaction for two different classes through which Viola hopes to get a taste of a life of leisure, but soon after, as the scene shifts to her room and she is offered a vision of what that life might entail- physical abuse at the hands of a man of limited intelligence. Viola's rented apartment does not provide her privacy and safety, only a glimpse of the truth, but the loss of it would bring upon her total loss of agency and liberty and with it the fate of the beggar girl in "A Cup of Tea".

The Impressionist painters, on the other hand, had been mainly preoccupied with rendering light and other natural elements and hardly painted the interiors. It was not until Degas that the interiors of a house or a theatre were impressionistically depicted on the canvas. His painting "Interior" shows a situation much like the one faced by Viola in Mansfield's story. However, the painter who had most in common with her in his perception of interiors, especially houses, is Vincent van Gogh. Van Gogh, too never had a stable life, seeming to fail at everything he tried to be - a pastor, an art dealer or a family man. By the age of 34, he had lived in over thirty rented rooms in four different countries. He was searching for a home that would represent his fondest hope and provide him with a permanent address. He thought he had found it in the 'yellow house' when he moved to Arles. In this simple house by the Mediterranean coastline, in a city where his artist heroes- Delacroix and Monticelli, had lived, the perpetual wanderer sought a home.

Exhausted of constantly painting in the fields, Van Gogh sought rest and recovery while painting the popularly known "Van Gogh's Bedroom". He describes the painting in a letter to

Theo as:

“This time it’s just simply my bedroom, only here colour is to do everything, and giving by its simplification

a grander style to things, is to be suggestive here of rest and of sleep in general. In a word, looking at the picture ought to rest the brain, or rather the imagination” (qtd in Brettell 7).



Indeed the room is filled with the simplest of things; in the background is one closed window. There are very plain rush-bottom chairs and a solid, unpainted wooden bed with white, green, or yellow pillows and a red blanket. Behind the bed hang work clothes and a straw hat. A variety of artworks cover the wall over the bed, and the entire canvas is painted basically in two sets of complementary colours- yellow and violet/lilac; red and green. However, despite its simple conception, the viewer’s interest comes not from what the painting shows but rather from what it conveys.

The room has no human protagonist explicitly shown, but as Alina Kwiatkowska says, the vivid colours are expressive markers and hints embedded by the painter. The viewer’s gaze is essential for the proper interpretation of the painting to invoke the presence of the painter in the room, “metonymically by the items of furniture and other practical objects: the washbasin, the mirror, some items of clothing” (226). She further explains that since the painter is rendering his room, he could not have done so impassively, and the painting is imbued with his experience and memory of using the objects in his room. Thus, the work as a specimen embodied with experience

goes far beyond the artist’s pure perception during the act of creation. The room is, indeed, as Jung said, a symbol of the painter’s self. (qtd in Cooper 10).

The expressive use of colours, a trait learnt from his Impressionist painter friends, is notable. The colours used in the painting and mentioned in the letters written to his brother and Gauguin are warm colours hardly associated with repose or sleep. Kwiatkowska explains, “that the painter meant by ‘repose’ was perhaps some respite from his depression.” This depression spoken of here makes the bedroom, like Mansfield’s houses, ambiguous. In his letters to his brother Theo, it is evident that Van Gogh went through much trouble to make the house an abode for painters like himself or at least his brother and Gauguin. In the letter, he says:

“I am very anxious to arrange it so that you will be pleased with it, and so that it will be a studio in an individual style; that way, if I say a year from now you come here and to Marseilles for your vacation, it will be ready then, and the house, as I intend it, will be full of pictures from top to bottom./The room you will have then,

or Gauguin if he comes, will have white walls with a decoration of great yellow sunflowers” (qtd in Brettle 5).

He intends to design the room like the boudoir of a very artistic woman, but as it turns out, he has no one to share this house with. This anguish is pretty evident in another letter to his brother stating, “How I’d like to settle down and have a home” (4). So this bedroom depicts not the ideal bedroom but, as is hinted by the colours, a painful, thwarted dream of Van Gogh’s!

The very setting of the bedroom gives it away; it is not conceived as a typical bedroom at night in an intimate atmosphere like Degas or Vuillard’s bedroom; instead, as Brettle notes, the bedroom is brightly lit, too brightly.

“The green shutters have been closed, but the brilliant yellow light manages to seep around the thick, dark shutters. However, because of the total lack of shadows, the light in the bedroom is unreal, unspecific, and, in the end, unbelievable” (Brettle 13).

The bright light dispels the evils of the night, nothing is closed or invisible and indicates a safe place, yet it is essentially empty. “There are two pillows, two chairs, two portraits, two doors, and two Japanese prints”, Brettle notes, but there is no sign of the second occupant; it registers the despair of waiting (14). He further compares this painting with “Night Café” and states that though they differ in composition, both the paintings make the viewers feel trapped:

“The shutters are closed, and the door open only wide enough to suggest the existence, but not the nature, of the room on the left. We are allowed to know that there is an outside world and that it is warm, but we know nothing of what it is” (Brettle 14).

The bed is almost terrifying, and its looming volume dominating the room makes commentators doubt if Van Gogh wanted to portray “inviolable rest” at all. The painting might have been intended as an embodiment of repose; however, the depiction of loneliness through the room’s emptiness, the anticipation of a companion does not make it the ideal house. Like Mansfield, Van Gogh’s house invokes no sense of safety or refuge in the viewer. They are ambiguous spaces which on the onset, seem to represent the hopes of their creators but, in reality, fulfill none of those hopes for their occupants. Both Mansfield and Van Gogh’s houses are not ideal living spaces; they seem to be a symbol of safety from afar but, on closer inspection, appear a relic of loneliness and thwarted ambition.

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