

On Symbolism in Katherine Mansfield's A Cup of Tea

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Abstract

As an outstanding female short story writer in the history of modern English literature, Katherine Mansfield has created many excellent short stories, whose style is beautiful and occupies an important position in the history of literature. The short story *A Cup of Tea* is one of her later works. Previous scholars mostly studied this short story from the aspects of plot design, female image design, class consciousness, satirical art and stylistics. Although symbolism is closely related to the studies of these parts, few scholars specifically study this work from the perspective of symbolism. The research perspective of this essay mainly falls on symbolism. Then, from this perspective, the essay starts an overall interpretation of Katherine Mansfield's *A Cup of Tea*, and finally makes a specific analysis of the specific symbolic elements in the short story. The purpose of this essay is to provide readers with new reading perspectives, ideas and new reading experiences. At the same time, the essay also hopes that this study can provide some substantial help to those scholars who are interested in symbolism in Katherine Mansfield's novels.

Keywords

A Cup of Tea; Symbolism; Katherine Mansfield.

1. Introduction

The word "symbolism" comes from the Greek word "symbolon," which basically means to represent or imply an idea or emotion in some form. It is different from our common metaphor. Metaphors refer to the comparison of similarities between other things, but symbols generally describe not the thing itself, but a broader and deeper meaning besides itself. At the end of the 19th century, some French intellectuals were disgusted with the behavior of the French upper class, which often held family gatherings and carried out various tirades in the house, but they could not directly express it, so they decided to create an ideal world in their own creative works to express their dissatisfaction. Thus, symbolic literature was born.

So symbols actually express something more abstract and profound. As early as the mid-19th century, Baudelaire and Allan Poe began to dabble in symbolism. Baudelaire regarded pre-symbolism as his main writing technique. When his book *The Flowers of Evil* was published in the 19th century, it caused a great sensation in the literary world, and he became the father of pre-symbolism. Chen observes that "Symbolism originated in France in the mid-19th century, and it spread to the whole world in the mid-19th century. This is literature of worldwide influence" (2005). After Baudelaire, more and more French poets joined the ranks of symbolist literature, such as Rimbaud, Verlaine, Lafael, Chenier and so on. By the end of the 19th century, symbolism had achieved unprecedented prosperity in France and gradually became the dominant literary trend of thought. Later, it even became popular in other parts of the world. Not only Ireland, Britain, Germany, Russia and other countries have been affected by this movement, but also Japan, China and other Asian countries have been affected.

French symbolism inherited the aesthetic heritage of Kant, Coleridge, Poe and Baudelaire. This aesthetic heritage, with its emphasis on poetic autonomy, independence from society and inner subjectivity, greatly increases the burden of language, which is expected to convey unique and extraordinary ideas while maintaining clarity. (Laurence 18)

Although symbolism has its roots in French poetry, it has also been extensively used in fiction, drama, painting and music. Hunag Jinkai points out that "Perhaps this was the first time in history that a literary movement spread to the entire world. This symbolism was born out of the lofty aspirations of European artists in the 19th century and evolved into a pervasive combination of literature and beauty in the 20th century"(713). This creative technique is conducive to the author to express those ideas which he wants to express directly but also want to cover up. On another level, symbolic writing techniques can also make the works extremely artistic and mysterious. The author expresses his thoughts, feelings and ideas by recreating scenes or objects, which can enhance the atmosphere of the work and easily give the reader a feeling of wanting more.

The short story *A Cup of Tea* was written at the beginning of the 20th century, which was the heyday of symbolic literature development.

Symbolism literature is a new height of literary creation. This new form of literary innovation, to a great extent, enhances the cultural connotation of literary works and thus continuously promotes literary works to reach a new height. In the 1920s, symbolic literature ushered in the second new upsurge, which made symbolic literature go further in the development of British and American literature. (Li 109)

Therefore, it is more meaningful to study this short story in such a literary background from the perspective of symbolism.

2. Public Symbolic Elements in *A Cup of Tea*

Mansfield uses a lot of symbolic writing techniques in her short story *A Cup of Tea*, and the public symbolic element, as a symbolic element with a well-known meaning, is usually easier to be understood by readers. In this short story, the existence of public symbolic elements greatly improves the reading experience of readers and satisfies their reading fantasy. Here are some typical public symbolic elements in *A Cup of Tea*.

Raymond Williams emphasizes that "Cultural works are more than a combination of knowledge and imagination; they essentially represent a way of life" (403). Public symbol has universal significance, which is closely related to our social life and culture. In this short story, the author mentions "tea" four times altogether, whether it is the "tea party" mentioned at the beginning of the short story, or "the cup of tea" and "teapot" mentioned in the middle of the story. In fact, "tea" is a very common symbolic element in British culture, and it usually means "power". Lady Anna Maria created the world-famous afternoon tea in England and developed it into a new form of social communication that became a national fashion ritual in the 1840s "(Ma 2008). Although the tea table is an unremarkable place, it is one of the important places for women to exercise their privileges. When tea was introduced to England, it not only became one of the most popular drinks in England, but also became the inspiration for many writers' works. In the works of many writers, most of the protagonists are people of social status. In their daily life, drinking tea is not only a living habit, but also a means of social interaction, and holding tea parties is a symbol of their status. Those who can attend tea parties are generally upper-class people, for whom tea culture symbolizes aristocratic culture. Rosemary, the heroine of *A Cup of Tea*, is no exception.

At the beginning of the story, Mansfield writes that Rosemary was particularly fond of holding tea parties at her home and inviting important people and artists to attend. "Tea party" here symbolizes that the heroine wants to exercise her tea-table rights through this behavior. At the same time, the author uses "monster" and "terrible" to describe the people invited by the heroine, which actually reflects Rosemary's ignorance of what real art is, and thus it can be seen that the tea party she holds is not very good.

In the middle of the short story, when Rosemary realizes she can't afford the small enamel box, she stares pale at the round teapot above the shopkeeper's head. That teapot looks like a fat old hen. It symbolizes that Rosemary really wants to exercise her power at that moment, but she doesn't have enough money. She totally depended on her husband for her life, which also showed from the side that women at that time were not independent enough. When Rosemary came out of the antique shop, she was in a very low mood. All she wanted was to hurry home and have a cup of tea. Nothing would make her happier than to go home and have a cup of tea. So you can see here that Rosemary is obsessed with power. Just as she was about to go home, she met Miss Smith, who asked Rosemary for a cup of tea. This made Rosemary suddenly excited, because she finally had a chance to express herself and exercise her rights.

In the short story *A Cup of Tea*, the public symbolic element of 'tea' almost runs through the whole story. It not only symbolizes power, money and status, but also symbolizes the gradual awakening of female consciousness in the male-dominated society at that time. Rosemary, the heroine of the story, is in the embryonic stage of female consciousness awakening. She wanted to have her own rights, but she didn't have enough power. In this story, Mansfield uses symbolic technique in designing the heroine's name. Rosemary's name is composed of two words "Rose" and "Mary", which is also one of the public symbolic elements of the short story. It is well known that rose symbolizes love, and in *A Cup of Tea*, "rose" symbolizes Rosemary's desire for love and happiness. To others, Rosemary's love is beautiful and enviable, but in fact it is full of sadness. Her husband had no feelings for her, but used her as an outlet for his desires.

The word "Mary" is part of her name, and that word can be extended to another word that sounds a lot like it -- "Marry". The word "Mary" symbolizes the heroine's desire to have a romantic relationship to enrich her life. But in fact, although she has had a seemingly beautiful relationship and a rich life, she knows that these are not really true, as if the happy life has thorns in it. Mansfield also used symbolic technique in designing the name of Rosemary's child. "Peter" and "Michael" are also public symbolic elements in this short story. In the second paragraph of the short story, Mansfield describes that "Rosemary has a child. No, it's not Peter. His name is Michael. Her husband dotes on him". "Peter" is a very common name in Greece, symbolizing "stone" or "rock", and it is common throughout Christianity and the spelling of Christian names. The name "Michael" symbolizes "optimism" and "responsibility". The word means godlike in Greek. This description not only gives a person a tall and handsome feeling, but also gives a person a transcendent and free from vulgarity feeling. In fact, in this passage, Rosemary is more or less showing off her children.

In domestic and foreign literary works, "flower" as a public symbolic element has been very common, Mansfield in the short story *A Cup of Tea* also set many "flower" elements. At the beginning of this short story, the author analyzes the heroine from an omniscient perspective, and then vividly describes the scene when the heroine buys flowers. As soon as she entered the florist's shop, she assumed an imperious air and said, "I want those flowers. Give me four of those flowers. And the bottle of roses. Yes, I'll take all the roses. No, I don't want lilacs. I hate lilacs. The flower doesn't grow well" (Mansfield 357).

When the florist girl heard Rosemary say that she hated lilacs, she immediately removed them. These few lines of description perfectly show the reader the imperious style of the heroine. Rosemary pointed around the flower shop as if she was the only queen there. In fact, Rosemary's choice of flowers indirectly reveals something about her own personality and inner

world. Rosemary bought a bottle of roses as a symbol of her expectation of romantic love, after all roses are a common symbolic element that is often associated with love. Rosemary hated lilacs because she thought they were an ugly shape. In the West, lilacs are often a symbol of simplicity. It was a quality that Rosemary lacked. Rosemary also bought some daffodils. In ancient Greek and Roman mythology, the daffodil was based on a handsome man. When he descended, he fell in love with his reflection in water, but because he couldn't embrace it, he turned himself into a daffodil. So daffodils symbolize narcissism, and Rosemary is a narcissist. And when she says she hates lilacs, she's actually demeaning them to show her dignity.

When Rosemary had finished buying the flowers, she went ahead of the florist girl. The little girl followed Rosemary with a heavy load of flowers on her back. In this situation, Rosemary did nothing to help the little girl. This detail reflects Rosemary's lack of sympathy for the people at the bottom. This also indicates that Rosemary's choice to help Miss Smith in the following plot is purposeful, she just wants to fill her emptiness in the heart.

3. Private Symbolic Elements in A Cup of Tea

The meaning expressed by private symbolic elements depends on the content of specific works. The analysis of the secret symbolic elements can not only enter the author's thoughts, but also feel the unique cultural connotation of the works. Ramon Williams believes that culture is a special description of lifestyle, which expresses the value and significance of art, learning, daily behavior and institutions. The "small porcelain box" is a private symbolic element shaped by the author with a special descriptive technique. This style of writing will make what the writer describes more vivid.

One winter afternoon, Rosemary went shopping in an antique store. She likes this antique shop very much because she can be treated like a queen here. The owner of the antique shop was only too happy to help her. He paid her a lot of compliments when she came in. This proves that Rosemary used to spend a lot of money and buy a lot of things in this antique shop. The shopkeeper continued his flattery when Rosemary came in. "Madam, I cherish my antiques. I'd rather keep them than sell them to people who don't know what they're worth" (Katherine 357). The owner said this to please Rosemary and get her to spend money on antiques. The shopkeeper's appreciation of Rosemary's taste in antiques reflected the fact that he had long known Rosemary to be a shallow person who liked to be admired. The antique the owner had left Rosemary that day was a small box. "He took a deep breath and spread out a piece of blue velvet, inside which lay a small enamel box" (Mansfield 358).

The symbolic meaning of the little porcelain box in the short story is multi-layered and multi-directional. It symbolizes female independence, female empowerment, true love, and a stable life.

On the enamel of the small enamel box was a picture of a small man standing under a tree covered with flowers with his arms around the neck of a smaller woman than himself. Her hat was no bigger than the petal of a small hydrangea. A green ribbon hung from the branch of the tree. A pink cloud floats above them, like an angel testifying to true love. (Mansfield 358)

The design on the lid of the small enamel box is dominated by warm colors, and the main character is a romantic and intimate couple. There is a guardian angel in the sky, which means that the love of two little people will be guarded by angels. Rosemary liked the box because the picture on the lid gave her a sense of peace and warmth. So she opened and closed the lid again and again. Rosemary really needed this sense of stability. But there is no true love between her and Philip. She is not independent and always ingratiates herself with Philip, because she is

unable to make herself a rich life. Later, when she heard that the box was worth 28 gold coins, she hesitated and gave up buying it, showing that she was just looking rich.

In fact, at the time when the author lived, women had no ability to live alone in the patriarchal society, and they could only be the appendages of men. The age has left an indelible mark on them. This is not only a tragedy for women, but also a tragedy for those struggling in that era.

Although the symbolic element of "house" also appears repeatedly in other literary works at home and abroad, it is actually a kind of private symbolic element, because it appears in different circumstances to represent different symbolic meanings. Rosemary didn't buy the small enamel box because she didn't have enough money. Outside the store, she stood on the steps outside. It was raining outside, and what she saw fitted her mood very well. "It's raining. When it rains, the sky looks gray. It looks like it's going to be black. There was a chill in the air, and the street lamps, which had just been lit, looked dim"(Mansfield 358). In fact, the scene description in this part not only reflects her unhappiness that she can't get the small enamel box, but also reflects the gap between her having to face the cruel reality after satisfying her vanity in the flower shop. "The light of the house across the street was dim and hazy, depressing to look at"(Mansfield 358). In fact, in literary works, the private symbolic element of the "house" can often reveal a character's innermost activities. Cao Xueqin used symbolism when he shaped the figure of Qin Keqing. When Cao describes Qin, he does not focus on her appearance, but focuses on her house and intentionally creates vague artistic images.

Cao Xueqin reveals Qin Keqing's identity as a dancer through the description of her house, as well as through the detailed description of the objects in Qin's house. For example, Qin's bedroom has a gold plate that Zhao Feiyan used to dance on, which could also reveal Qin's identity as a dancer. To be able to dance on this golden plate was the supreme goal of the ancient musicians. (Su 207)

The sadly dimly lit house across the street, Mansfield writes here, is a side symbol of the lack of warmth and security that Rosemary felt in her home.

Therefore, in Cao's works, "house" symbolizes a person's social and family status, while in Mansfield's *A Cup of Tea*, "house" symbolizes a complete, warm, beautiful family worthy of complete attachment. "People are hurrying by under hateful umbrellas," the author continues. In this description, the word "hateful" reveals Rosemary's loss as she feels the indifference of human nature. This also breaks the previous description of "her husband loves her very much". She felt a sudden emptiness. She wanted to hold the little enamel box in her hand and feel its warmth. It can be seen that Rosemary's love of shopping and tea parties mentioned at the beginning of the short story is just a way for her to temporarily fill her own inner void.

From the above analysis, it is not difficult to see that Mansfield's use of symbolism writing technique is very ingenious. The "tea" element is like an invisible storyline in this story. On the spiritual level, it is like a kind of hard to get rid of the right, fetters the heroine, fetters the women living in the patriarchal society. As one of the public symbolic elements, "name" is well known for its symbolic meaning. This clever use of the short story shows that Mansfield puts a lot of thought into this work. The symbolic element of "rose" in this short story not only symbolizes the beautiful love, but also reveals the heroine's helplessness. Cloves also became a tool for Rosemary to assert her status.

The symbolism of the "little enamel box" is complex and captures the imagination of the reader. Even the design on its lid was carefully designed by Mansfield. The design of the symbolic element "house" breaks the convention. With this set of symbolic elements, Mansfield has created a great story. She skillfully shows readers the current situation of women's life in the male-dominated society at that time, and expresses her regret and dissatisfaction with this

social situation. Through this part of the study, it is not difficult to see the symbolic elements behind the mapping of the practical significance.

4. Conclusion

This essay mainly studies Katherine Mansfield's short story *A Cup of Tea* from the perspective of symbolism. Katherine Mansfield is the queen of short stories in New Zealand and England. Zimring says that Mansfield cultivated a sense of artistry. This artistry reveals that fantasy is not an escape from reality. Even famous Chinese writer Xu Zhimo couldn't help admiring her talent. As one of her later works, the short story *A Cup of Tea* has strong representativeness and research value. This short story is easy to read, with clever choice of words and concise sentence structure. Due to the limitation of essay's length and literature collection, this paper can only study this small topic. If further research can be carried out, this paper can more closely link the symbolic writing technique with the social background of *A Cup of Tea*. We can also compare *A Cup of Tea* with Chekhov's work, because Mansfield's work was heavily influenced by Chekhov's writing style. One drawback of this paper is that there is little English literature on the subject. Despite these limitations, this paper presents a perspective that has been less studied. It is suggested that a further study of Mansfield's work *A Cup of Tea* can be conducted from the perspective of her past marriage life and her religious belief.

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