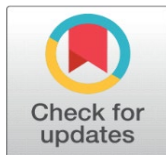
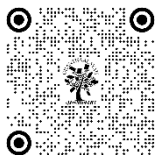


EN PLEIN AIR: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SUNLIGHT IN MANSFIELD AND MONET

Utsha Roy ¹  

¹ University of Exeter, United Kingdom



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Corresponding Author

Utsha Roy, utsharoy1997@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks to compare the use of sunlight by Impressionist writer Katherine Mansfield and painter Claude Monet. Throughout the course of the paper, sunlight, or nature, by extension, has been seen as an agent of change or at least discontinuation. However, this use of nature, by both artists, is colored and conditioned by their emotions and therefore, also distinguishes them from their peers. Both artists use sunlight to break conventions and are prompted to do so by their personal experiences.

Keywords: Emotions, Nature, Sunlight

1. INTRODUCTION

Critics have always found resemblances between literature and painting and the two forms of art have often been termed as “Sister Arts”. The English phrase “sister arts” was first used, in 1695, by John Dryden in his preface to du Fresnoy’s *De Art Graphica*, where he said, “consideration of this matter it will be found, that the art of painting has a wonderful affinity with that of poetry, and there is betwixt them a certain common Imagination”. This research aims to show the continuing association of the “sister arts” in the 20th century and is part of a series of four different essays where the researcher has tried to discuss the similarity in the techniques used by Impressionist painters and writer Katherine Mansfield and the result achieved by them. It is obviously impossible to include all the works of art and literature produced during the period and thus, this researcher has limited herself

to considering only a few Impressionist painters. Qualitative research methods, such as comparison and close reading of literary texts and particular paintings have been used by the researcher to compare the various percepts of Impressionism utilized by the painters and Katherine Mansfield to narrate their stories.

This particular chapter compares the text of a few select stories, Mansfield's personal life as depicted by her biographer Anthony Alpers with techniques of Monet's composition of paintings and his personal life to see how sunlight or nature by extension affected them and their works of art. Kristy Martin's observations on the practice of 'Heliotherapy' have allowed the researcher to put her observations in perspective and gauge the impact that rest cure had on the people of the period.

In the foreword to her book, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, Nussbaum defines emotions as evaluative appraisals, which ascribe high importance to things and people who lie outside the agent's sphere of control. Implying that "emotions involve focus on an object and beliefs about that object . . . made from the point of view of the agent's own most important goals and projects" (2). Attachment to a particular object and the emotions evolved from it has its foundations laid down much earlier in life, and memories of these "shadow later perceptions of the object" (3). Drawing from preserved emotions, the Impressionists (painters and writers) chose props to populate their works with. Therefore, natural sites like- banks of the Seine, open grasslands of colonized New Zealand, bridges of Argenteuil, streets of Paris, and others, find themselves vividly rendered time and again in their works. This paper will explore the representation and assimilation of natural elements, especially sunlight, in the works of Katherine Mansfield and the Impressionist painter Claude Monet.

Drawing inspiration from the natural milieu was not novel to the Impressionists; the Romantics, especially Wordsworth, had propounded his theory of composition based on the ability to process emotions generated by natural surroundings when recollected in tranquility (4). However, in the presentation of emotions, the Impressionists as a school differed from others; their's were not 'collected', processed emotions, toned down to suit the taste of the generation. Instead, influenced by the fervor of 'Realism' sweeping across the continent, they concentrated on presenting works as initially conceived by their senses. To do so, they drew in associations from the past, often unconsciously, making their art an evaluative appraisal of their own selves.

Katherine Mansfield's theory of composition aimed "to intensify the so-called small things . . . so that truly everything is significant", dealt primarily with the mundane, everyday phenomena of life [Alpers \(1980\) 81](#). She poured her emotions onto the page in their unadulterated form. It is left upon the reader to string visual clues together and weave a story out of them. Mansfield employed this method throughout her career, where visual or auditory clues about her own emotions and sentiments were conveyed to the readers in the garb of luscious imagery of the environment that the characters are part of. Having grown up in the open fields of colonized, semi-pastoral New Zealand, Kathleen (as she was then known) shared a kinship with the local flora and fauna. Like "About Pat" (published as part of her Scrapbook), her earliest writings register her recollections of their old Irish gardener, their family garden, her father's beloved apple tree, and other fun anecdotes. 'The garden' became one of the most common motifs in her stories, appearing very prominently in her first collection of stories, *in a German Pension and other Stories*, where all the stories were, at least partly, set in the pension garden. Her most famous stories, "The Garden Party", "The Doll's House", "Prelude", and others, eventually present scenes set in a garden. Academic scholarship has given

'the garden' in Mansfield's works its fair share of importance; however, another natural element that played an essential part in many of Mansfield's stories has garnered little attention from critics- sunlight. Sunlight had special significance in her life as part of the curing regime prescribed to her and appeared as a metaphor for transformation in many of her stories.

Back in 1909, after an impulsive marriage to Mr. Bowden and then eventual elopement with former lover Garnet, Mrs Beauchamp (mother) took Kathleen to the Bavarian spa resort of Bad Worishofen, well known in the 1880s for the 'Wasserkur' performed by Pfarrer Sebastian Kneipp. Anthony Alpers, in his biography, describes the cure as 'nature therapy' consisting mainly of "hosings with icy water including arm baths, thigh baths, leg baths, paddling sessions, barefoot walks, vegetarian diet . . ." (96).

Unable to be with Garnet in spite of carrying his child, Mansfield felt lonely and cut off from civilization. She enumerates the experience of 'Barfussgehen' (walking barefoot) in her journal as "this coldness, -physical, mental-heart coldness, hand coldness, soul coldness." Alpers (1980) 97. It is evident from the adjectives used that neither the place nor the activity was not to her liking- the coldness of the atmosphere, those icy cold baths seemed to penetrate her body and settle in her soul. It also hints at the establishment of a premature connection between the weather and Mansfield's emotion and health. It seems quite likely that coldness of the weather and the 'Wasserkur', had a direct impact on her physical health and her emotions. Something similar happens to Rosemary Fell in "Cup of Tea", where having emerged from the antique shop, "the bitter cold taste in the air" chills her, making the surroundings seem bleak in spite of the protagonist's fulfilling life Mansfield (1923) 27. Just like the authoress who once took a walk through the cold forests of Bavaria, she stumbles into "moments, horrible moments in life, when one emerges from shelter and looks out, and it's awful" Mansfield (1923) 27.

'Wasserkur', however, was not Mansfield's only experience with 'nature therapy'. In the winter of 1918, as World War I was nearing a conclusion, Katherine took ill with "pleurisy" and was advised by Dr Angier to "escape the English winter, himself suggesting the South of France" Alpers (1980) 264. According to Kirsty Martin, this was a popular prescription of Heliotherapy at the beginning of the 20th century. The growth in popularity of therapeutic use of sunlight made Dr Angier profess "it was imperative to get the sun", for there was still a possibility of being "cured, were she willing to put that first" Alpers (1980) 264. Martin, in her essay, explains that the emergence of knowledge of Vitamin D and its benefits along with the rise in the perception of the environment affecting health played into the popularity of the 'sun cure' (4). Paul Fussell forwards the idea that therapeutic sunbathing had a positive emotional appeal, and it certainly seems so from Mansfield's experiences in France, at least initially Fussell (1980) 137-41.

Writing to Murry from Menton, she describes 'Heliotherapy' as a "very wonderful treatment, I believe in it" Mansfield (1951) 88. She borrows metaphors from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, trying to enumerate her feelings, "If I live here any longer, I shall become a bush of Daphne, or you'll find no one to welcome you but a jasmine . . . it is divine here - no less" Mansfield (1951)106. Mansfield has transmutation on her mind, first mythologizing herself and then giving the sun the agency to act like a conjurer performing a trick whereby she shall be transmuted body and soul. This idea of transformation by light is present in many of her stories- Bertha's joy in "Bliss" is described as having "swallowed a bright piece of the afternoon Sun", and the sun in "At the Bay" seems to have the entire hamlet under

enchantment. The cat strolls out and stretches in a patch of light, while the human residents find it “infinitely loving and joyful” [Mansfield \(1984\) 441-470](#).

In her sickness, she felt closer and more connected to nature than she had earlier been. In a letter written to Murry on 20 February 1918, during her first stint of Heliotherapy in Bandol, she wrote:

“Since this little attack I’ve had, a queer thing has happened. I feel that my love and longing for the external world-I mean the world of nature-has suddenly increased a million times. When I think of the little flowers that grow in grass, and little streams and places where we can lie and look up at clouds-Oh, I simply ache for them-for them with you” [Mansfield \(1951\) 175](#).

This obsession with sunlight and other elements of nature was much like the Impressionist preoccupation of working in association with nature. They popularised the ‘plein-air’ painting method, where completing the entire painting away from the studio in the natural environment became an everyday summertime activity. Coincidentally, the sites these painters chose were the same as those chosen by the sunbathers of the time- south of France.

As part of the “development of the realist aesthetics, work produced out of doors was often associated with ‘sincerity’ and ‘truth’ . . . where the painter was able to experiment and to develop his response to nature without the intervention of received ideas and recourse to the art of the past” [Bomford \(1991\) 22](#). The will of rendering the impact of changing light throughout the day on the canvas changed techniques of rendering light and shade in paintings forever. As close observation of nature brought about newer brushwork and colouring techniques that could capture fugitive effects of outdoor light, weather and atmosphere, painting moved away from the traditional conventions of chiaroscuro and other methods of linear painting. It arrived at a system of defining form and space through contrasts and nuances of colour. Fascinated by the effect of sunlight, Cezanne wrote to Pissarro from Provence, “the sunlight here is so intense that it seems to me that objects are silhouetted not only in black and white but also in blue, red, brown and violet” [Bomford \(1991\) 25](#). All the Impressionist painters tried painting outdoors, but none were as dedicated in their perusal of light as Claude Monet.

Having famously proclaimed to not having a studio, Monet braved every adversity of the seasons in his quest of capturing the minute variations in light and atmosphere. Maupassant having once followed him in his searching for impressions described it as:

“He is no longer a painter, in truth, but a hunter . . . the painter, before his subject, lay in wait for the sun and shadows, capturing in a few brushes strokes the ray that fell or the cloud that passed.

I have seen him thus seize a glitter of the shower of light on the cliff and fix it in a flood of yellow tones that, that strangely rendered the surprising and the fugitive effect of that unseizable and dazzling brilliance” [Kallen \(2005\) 25](#).

His desire to ‘capture the light’ made him buy a boat where he painted capturing the effect of light on the Seine, and much like Mansfield claimed: “I have always loved sky and water, leaves and flowers . . .” [Kallen \(2005\) 4](#). The likeness, however, does not end there. Monet, too, had grown up in a small seaside town (Le Havre) like Mansfield, and the impressions of the sea and the sun were etched in his memory, colouring his perception of landscapes. Like Mansfield, Monet’s “concept of nature would be tied to the flux and flow of water and weather at places” [Rubin \(1999\) 116](#). If the ocean and the beaches of New Zealand, along with the sun were recurring

motifs in Mansfield's stories, the Seine and the rising or setting sun were constant fixtures in Monet's landscapes.

The ability to visualize a scene from different angles, to organize the same elements repeatedly into arrangements that would hold the interest of the reader/viewer was common to both the artists. While Monet often painted the same scene over and over again (the water-lilies series, the haystack series, or the Poplar series) to catch the light at different points during the day, Katherine wrote stories peopled by the same characters in changing environments to show the diverse effects that the natural environment had on people. Characters, like Linda, progress through stories, and a change in their environment changes their perception. In "Prelude", the thorny leaves of the Aloe remind her of her childhood and a realization of a fading sense of identity, while in "At the Bay", sitting beneath the Manuka tree, she appears a much-demurred creature who has lost her ability of self-assertion. The children have sapped her strength, the man she loves drives her to exasperation, and she has had to make peace with all of it. Likewise, Monet's haystack, painted from different angles register the changes of light, proportion, and composition of the foreground creating a different sensation in the viewer each time, all rendered by a change in the natural environment.

Nevertheless, for all the commitment on the artist's (writer or painter) part to Plein-air naturalism, his/her consciousness does modify the representation of nature through their works corresponding with Nussbaum's idea of emotions colouring one's perception. Castagnary and several other critics, "have agreed that even Plein-air naturalism is a dialogue between self and nature" and not the passive rendering of nature as seen by the artist's naked eye [Rubin \(1999\) 121](#). Thus, to understand the impact of nature, especially sunlight, in the works of these two artists, it is crucial to define patterns underlying their consciousness and to do so, this paper will be looking into Mansfield's "Marriage a la Mode" and Monet's "Cliff Walk at Pourville" in greater detail.

Although, Mansfield was initially happy basking in the sun, it did not last long; she "developed an irrational loathing for France and after since coming away this time" and wrote a story ridiculing rest cure or 'Heliotherapy' [Alpers \(1980\) 270](#). As it became more apparent that sunbaths were having no impact on her tuberculosis, she grew impatient and in a letter to Murry wrote, "and in spite of my feelings the weather affects me physically. I fly so high that when I go down- It's a drop, Boge"¹ [Martin \(2016\)](#). Other women like Virginia Woolf and Frances Burnett, who had been prescribed Heliotherapy or the rest cure, also had similar complaints.

"Marriage a la Mode" narrates the story of the young wife Isabel, who is made to think that she is "desperately lonely, pining for new people and new music and pictures and so on" and needed rescuing by her friend- Moira Morrison [Mansfield \(1984\)](#). The rescue comes in the form of a rest cure first in the sunny boulevards of Paris and then the eventual purchase of a sunny villa on the outskirts of London. While the husband stays back in London to continue at his job, his wife completely changes under the influence of her newfound friends and changed natural setting. The difference between the old Isabel living in the inconvenient little house in London is brought out by her husband's reminiscence. The 'old Isabel' would be happy spending time with their kids in the back drawing-room, but the new Isabel would be horrified "if she knew the full extent of his sentimentality" (434).

Weather not only induces change but also marks a break in the continuity of space and time. Mansfield is at pains to convey this transformation as she addresses

¹ Boge was the nick name given to Katherine's brother by the Beauchamp family, however, after his death, Katherine started addressing Murry as Boge.

Isabel living in the suburbs as the 'new' Isabel. Moving away from central London to a location closer to the sea more suitable for sunbathing has brought about so much of an alteration in her attitude that her husband "felt a stranger" in their bedroom (433). Evidently, it is not the positive, empathetic change that Juliet undergoes in D.H Lawrence's "Sun". Isabel's is a shallow change aimed at making her desirable among the pseudo-intellectual company that she keeps at the cost of her own family. Unlike Juliet, she is not assimilated with the nature of the place; instead, she takes up living there only to be counted among the bourgeois crowd that she deems fashionable and intelligent. The idealized depiction of the country with "fields, and beasts standing for shelter under the dark trees, a wide river, with naked children splashing in the shallows . . . the sky shone pale" only forces Isabel to cultivate a façade and provides William with no respite or relaxation (433). "The dull, persistent gnawing" continues in his heart, and though he feels the strain in his relationship with his wife, he is unable to get her alone to resolve the situation. It is noteworthy, that he can formulate his thoughts and write a letter to his wife only when he is away from the suburbs and its sunbathing crowd; in the hustle-bustle of the city, away from the pastoral setting which is supposed to rejuvenate mind and relationships.

"Marriage a la Mode", unlike "The Daughters of the Late Cornell", does not explicitly use the word 'sun' frequently; however, the sun is the driving force of the story. In the 'glare' of the sunlight, we see through the vanity of the crowd surrounding Isabel, and it is in the last light of the setting sun that we witness Isabel choosing to leave her husband without acknowledging the distance between them. A daze brought on by the warmth of the sun hangs over the story that lulls Isabel to inaction, and basking in the midday sun, she can only think of "fish mayonnaise". This stupor disallows Isabel from taking any action as the 'epiphany' draws upon her in the final third of the story.

In his book, *Katherine Mansfield and the Art of the Short Story*, Gerri Kimber notes how in "The Daughters of the Late Colonel", Constantina too arrives at the epiphanic moment but derives no resolution from it. Isabel goes through the same process, as she receives William's letter and reads it aloud reclining in "long chairs under coloured parasols" so that all her companions "rolled on the turf and almost sobbed" [Mansfield \(1984\) 438](#). She is able to gauge the full extent of her folly and her negligence towards her family only when she is in her bedroom, away from the intoxicating glare of the sun. "How vile, odious, abominable, vulgar", she muttered and, in exasperation, presses her knuckles to her eyes as she grasps the full extent of her estrangement from her husband (439). The epiphanic moment presents her with two options- either to stay back in the cool shadowy bedroom and write William a letter seeking reconciliation or go out with her companions for a swim in the ocean. Inevitably she chooses the sun and the swim over her relationship with her husband; "sunlight subjugates her to its own needs" [Kimber \(2015\) 79](#). Mansfield, through the story, pokes fun at the bourgeois society and their ritual of rest cure as they fancied themselves indisposed, thus, positioning herself away from the contemporary custom. It is quite obvious, that her own experiences and frustrations with Heliotherapy induces her to use sunlight as an agent of transformation, but not of final fulfillment. The sunlight exposes Isabel's pretention, like it exposed her own fallacy which had led her to believe that sunlight would cure her. Thus, she does not use sunlight only to bring about positive changes, like D.H Lawrence does in "Juliet", rather only allows for transformation that fails to change one innately for the better, as is seen frequently in her stories. Rosemary, at the end of "A cup of Tea" fails to be a bigger person and provide a safe refuge for the beggar woman, even though she had initially been planning to do so. Linda, changes for the

worse, losing her sense of self-worth as she progresses from “The Prelude” to “At the Bay”; and Constantina, in “The Daughters of the Late Colonel” like Isabel grasps the problem plaguing her life but she has been so changed by her surroundings that she, like Isabel, lacks the strength to better her life.

Monet’s landscapes too strayed away from the customs to protest against techniques of painting favoured by the Paris salon, where figures dominated the canvas and nature was only depicted in the mode popularized by Constable or Turner. Instead, his paintings were a representation of his vision of nature and human beings affected by it. A painting like “Cliff Walk in Pourville” depicts Monet’s attempt at catching the light and at the same time rebels against the standards set by the Salon painters and even the realists. Much like in Mansfield’s story, the sunlight propels the narrative in the painting forward. The contrast between the light and the shade can be gauged by comparing the tones of colour used to depict the parts of the cliff that are steeped in shadow and the parts that are drenched in sunlight. The tones used to render the shadows are not the usual earthy tones of browns and blacks as is standard in the traditional chiaroscuro technique but have undertones of blue and green. The parts of the cliff that receives the sunlight are painted so that one-layer mixes with the underlying layer to create the illusion of movement. The movement created by the wind across the grassy bank of the cliff is visible and has been achieved by the method just discussed. Rubin, in his book, explains, “the composition is balanced between near and far, mass and void, it is animated by asymmetry and punctuated by figures- the same contrapuntal strategy that is key to the stability and natural harmony we feel in so many of his compositions” (128).



At first glance, the painting seems ordinary to the present viewer- an excellent example of a dramatic scene indicative of upper-middle-class leisure with sailing boats in the distance and two women taking a stroll on the cliff top. However, it is in their representation that the painting differs from others of the time. Renoir’s “Road at Louveciennes” is similar to Monet’s in its subject matter; but Renoir’s picture directs the viewer’s eyes to the group of bourgeois figures at the center of the painting. The narrative is that of those figures in a natural environment. In Monet’s painting, as in most of his other works, the figures have been reduced to pygmies. It

is not a narrative of the two women but of the natural scene flooded with the bright light of the sun, where two women happen to be strolling. The women have been painted with hurried, short, almost clumsy brush strokes, and they in no way stand out in the foreground; they are part of the milieu, combining with the other elements to present a whole. Robert Herbert takes special note of the techniques employed by Monet to represent the “interaction of light and form that presumably correspond to the artist’s direct inner experiences . . .” Rubin (1999) 128. To render the light, Monet began by lightly dragging a relatively dry brush across the canvas to make sure that more protruding vertical threads pick up the paint and later added a mixture of hues, sometimes contrasting and sometimes similar, over the initial coat in slightly curved strokes. This process made sure that the viewer becomes aware of the lightness rendered by the sun, which also brings about out the various tones of the natural objects nearby. Thus, the vision granted to the viewer is not one similar to traditional realist painters, rather one manufactured by Monet, enriched by his own vision.

The weather is also an agent of change in Monet’s painting as it tries to alter the perception of the contemporary viewer’s concept of art. Human figures are not the subject of the paintings; they are assimilated within the milieu, part of an ‘impression’ caught on canvas. This is basically what Mansfield also tries to convey in her story. Isabel fails to ‘glow up’ in the sun like Lawrence’s Juliet because instead of becoming an organic part of the environment, she tries to follow the bourgeoisie tradition of sunbathing to gain access to her circle of friends.

Mansfield had first-hand experience of the fallacy of the rest cure or Heliotherapy; however, she never denied the power that sunlight and by extension nature on her spirit and that of her characters, which is evident in depiction of the women characters discussed in the essay. Monet’s women figures are also rendered changed by sunlight and acted upon by elements of nature, part of the narrative of constructed by the light. They enjoy the day and are part of the scene, but they do not dominate the scene, or else, they risk becoming something like Mansfield’s Isabel- estranged and alone.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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