

## Humour and Knowledge in Katherine Mansfield's "The Daughters of the Late Colonel"

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Humour and Pathos in Literature and the Arts (I)

**Abstract:** The present study intends to look at the ways in which humour enacts modes of knowledge and self-expression in Katherine Mansfield's short story "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" (1921). The story revolves around two spinsterly sisters who have spent most of their lives tending to their tyrannical father and now find themselves at a loss when they are finally free of him. The narrative is both sympathetic and merciless towards the sisters' fumbling attempts at independence, but the women are often in on the joke; humour is both a "black dressing-gown" which envelops the sisters and renders them objects of ridicule, but it is also a way out, offering a subversive counterpoint to the voice of the Father, as the sisters imagine the patriarch in very comical and undignified positions, while perceiving themselves as outsiders, "creeping off...like black cats". Though the short story has often been read in terms of hopelessness and despair by Rhoda B. Nathan and Gerri Kimber, this paper wishes to show how humour modulates and moderates this hopelessness, allowing for the two single women to assert their personality within the stifling society of their time. The ridiculous, in this case, does not need to be a death sentence, but rather a form of knowledge and resistance: the spinsters are aware of the absurdity of their condition and the futility of their place in the modern world and choose comedy over tragedy.

**Keywords:** *humour; modernism; Katherine Mansfield; feminism; existentialism; spinsterhood.*



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One hundred years after her death (1923), Katherine Mansfield still elicits conflicting responses from critics at large. Depending on whom you ask, she is either at the centre or at the margins of early twentieth-century British modernism. To Rhoda Nathan, Mansfield's personal life and "bohemian" style made her a modern woman, but not a modernist in fiction (138). Her stories lacked what she calls "modernist angst" because they did not "mistrust" the politics and culture of her society (138-9), nor did they concern themselves with "the anxiety, guilt, and anomie associated with modernism" (139). S. J. Kaplan, on the other hand, claims that Mansfield was one of the first modernist writers to innovate the short story with an emphasis on stream of consciousness techniques and "the psychological 'moment'" (3). Likewise, a critic like Peter Childs posits that she is "the most important modernist author who only wrote short stories" (95), while Kaplan again argues that she has been, to some extent, erased from the history of the movement, due in part to the way her image was altered in posterity by her editor husband, John Middleton Murray (3).

In some ways, Mansfield finds herself at both extremes: valued and forgotten, an insider and outsider, a joiner and a bohemian, a young woman who was born in New Zealand, at the periphery of empire, but who managed to infiltrate elite cliques like the Bloomsbury group in London, then the centre of empire. Despite her respectable, wealthy family and good upbringing, Katherine felt confined and misunderstood by her native New Zealand (Nathan 5). Meanwhile, in England, her colourful and unconventional life and sexual past made contemporaries like Virginia Woolf feel uncomfortable in her presence (Midorikawa, Sweeney 193). Even the fact that she mainly wrote only short stories might have garnished her as a "literary lightweight" who hadn't yet reached the destination of novelist (Nathan 136). In the realm of short prose, she was either accused of being too sentimental and confessional, or of being inauthentic and artificial. Malcolm Cowley, writing for the *TLS*, considered that some of her short stories were limited in range and theme:

One situation recurs constantly in her work. There is a woman: neurotic, arty, hateful, and a good, stupid man whom she constantly torments . . . Another situation, which she repeats rather less frequently, is that of the destruction of a woman's individuality by some stronger member of her family . . . She has three backgrounds only: continental hotels, New Zealand upper-class society, and a certain artistic set in London. (qtd. in Meyers 227)

David Daiches described her short stories as organised in such a way as to bring "the deepest truth out of the idea" (qtd. in Kimber 50), while Frank O'Connor believed that her stories did not have authenticity and heart: "Where heart should be we usually find sentimentality, the quality that seems to go with

a brassy exterior, and nowhere more than with that of an "emancipated" woman" (92).

Such varied and conflicting views on her personality and work might, in fact, make her more of a modernist than less, given that Modernism was a movement which suffered from ambiguities and difficulties of definition with many "implicit exclusions" and question marks regarding its parameters (Childs 12). One key aspect in modernist fiction is the focus on the internal world, a "self-conscious reflexivity" (Childs 18) that centres the subjectivity of the individual, struggling with a modern reality which is no longer stable (18). As opposed to the Victorian worldview, the modernist outlook is far more sceptical and questioning of society and the individual's place in it (18). This pervasive scepticism, Nathan argues, is absent from Mansfield's stories, even though other technical aspects of modernist writing may feature in her prose (138). But is this true? And how should a writer express the concerns and anxieties of their age?

Mansfield's approach might have struck some critics mentioned above as sentimental, artificial or "brassy" because Mansfield is often poking fun at her characters, using certain mawkish elements for a particular effect. If we return to Malcolm Cowley's description of her work, we might see it in a different light: "One situation recurs constantly in her work. There is a woman: neurotic, arty, hateful, and a good, stupid man whom she constantly torments" (qtd. in Meyers 227). Can we not see humour in this particular situation? In fact, couldn't this scenario be devised with a humorous purpose, among others, in mind? Gerri Kimber argues that this aspect of Mansfield's work has often been neglected or "glossed over", along with her wit and "incisive phrasing" that capture duplicitous states of consciousness (63). Figures like Leonard Woolf and Bertrand Russell found her to be one of the funniest persons of their acquaintance (Kimber 63, 67) and Katherine Anne Porter was an early critic who noted the humour in her work: "She possessed, for it is in her work, a real gaiety and a natural sense of comedy; there were many sides to her that made her able to perceive and convey in her stories a sense of human beings living on many planes at once, with all the elements justly ordered and in right proportion. This is a great gift" (qtd. in Kimber 63).

Indeed, Mansfield often revelled in parody and ridicule, portraying the foibles of the intellectual circles she frequented, like in the story "Bliss" (1918), where a character modelled after Aldous Huxley rhapsodizes about the beauty of a hilariously bad line of poetry: "Why Must it Always be Tomato Soup?" (Mansfield 128). She was also adept at exploring class tensions through humour, such as in this scene from "The Garden Party" (1922), where one of the workers advises the young protagonist on the placement of a marquee:

'I don't fancy it,' said he. 'Not conspicuous enough. You see, with a thing like a marquee' - and he turned to Laura in his easy way - 'you want to put it somewhere where it'll give you a bang slap in the eye, if you follow me.'

Laura's upbringing made her wonder for a moment whether it was quite respectful of a workman to talk to her of bangs slap in the eye. But she did quite follow him. (Mansfield 208)

Mansfield's humour also delved into gender tensions, where the power imbalance between men and women was depicted in a slightly absurd, tongue-in-cheek fashion, with a view to showing both the danger and the absurdity of the disparity. Take, for instance, "The Little Governess" (1915), a story about a young, naive woman, travelling alone, who is taken advantage of by an older man. After the older man forces kisses on her, the young woman sits crying on the tram, holding her mouth, a gesture which is interpreted by a fellow passenger in an absurdly humorous fashion: "'She has been to the dentist,' shrilled a fat old woman, too stupid to be uncharitable" (Mansfield 149). The comical moment both relieves the tension and enhances the grotesqueness of the situation. At the beginning of the story, an older woman advises the young girl not to trust strangers: "...it's safer to suspect people of evil intentions rather than good ones... It sounds rather hard, but we've got to be women of the world, haven't we?" (Mansfield 130). The irony of that last question is both bitter and shrewd. Mansfield, whose life was coloured by various encounters with men, understood the paradoxes of being a "woman of the world" at the turn of the century.

As a young woman, she enjoyed chipping away at men's authority, creating "sly parodies of some of the popular figures of the day, including C.K. Chesterton, H. G. Wells, and Arnold Bennett", using her "accurate ear and wicked wit" (Nathan 132). Interestingly, Wells and Bennett would also be mildly caricatured in Woolf's famous critical essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1922), since these Edwardian men were the gatekeepers of English letters at the time. Poking fun at their style and attitude is inherently modernist, not simply because Woolf and Mansfield were taking a different aesthetic approach to theirs, but because they were women, mocking the establishment.

Humour, therefore, and particularly black humour, was Mansfield's strategy for portraying the anxieties and quandaries of her age, black humour being a trademark of modernism itself (Childs 6). "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" (1921) is considered to be one of Mansfield's sharpest and funniest stories (Nathan 96), though there are many ways to look at the humour of the story and what or who is being made fun of. One way to read the story of the two middle-aged spinsters who have been dominated all their life by a tyrannical father, and now find themselves without purpose after his death is to perceive them as objects of ridicule, as Nathan does: "The two sisters are a Laurel and

Hardy duo – the one plump and ineffectual, the other desiccated and prim - both ludicrous in their regressed infantilism vis-a-vis their domineering parent" (96). Nathan underlines the fact that these two adult women act like children, even after their father's death, because of the "psychological wound of their father's harshness" (96), their lives being "mired in petty detail" (96) which they cannot seem to escape. Nathan acknowledges that there are many targets of humour in the story, such as the dead patriarch and the various household domestics and acquaintances, and though she draws a distinction between them and the sisters, claiming that what saves Josephine and Constantia from being grotesque caricatures is the "genuine pathos of their situation" (96), she still points out that "there is nothing heroic or tragic about the deceased or those he left behind" (95). We may pity the two women, but they are ultimately "ludicrous".

A very different reading offered by Gerri Kimber posits that, in fact, the two sisters are tragic, only that their tragedy is quite "ordinary", given the fact that it was common for unmarried women to suffer under patriarchal control (49). Kimber also notes the pathos of the sister's circumstances: "yet rather than ridiculing the pathos of the spinster sisters' lives, the comedy intensifies it - they become real for us, we feel for them, we look kindly upon them" (66). While I consider there is room for both interpretations, I would like to offer a slightly different reading that hinges less on ridicule and tragedy, and more on self-knowledge and existential paradox in the modern world that Josephine and Constantia inhabit.

In his seminal essay "Laughter" (1900), Henri Bergson posits that the human being is both "an animal which laughs" and "an animal which is laughed at" (62) and while there has been plenty of discussion on how the sisters are being laughed at, there has not been enough about their own laughter and how they engage with their situation through humour. The opening scene of the story finds the sisters lying in bed, tired but restless after a week of funeral preparations, contemplating, of all things, their father's top-hat and the possibility of giving it to a porter. Then, Josephine imagines a wonderfully absurd scenario:

'But,' cried Josephine, flouncing on her pillow and staring across the dark at Constantia, 'father's head!' And suddenly, for one awful moment, she nearly giggled. Not, of course, that she felt in the least like giggling. It must have been habit. Years ago, when they had stayed awake at night talking, their beds had simply heaved. And now the porter's head, disappearing, popped out, like a candle, under father's hat... The giggle mounted, mounted; she clenched her hands; she fought it down; she frowned fiercely at the dark and said "Remember" terribly sternly. (Mansfield 229-30)

The memory of the formidable patriarch is very much altered and diminished by the image of the detachable head, which is almost cartoonish in its irreverence. The 'head' of the family has literally and metaphorically 'lost his head', and with it, the dignity of his position. Now, a porter might as well take

his place. More than that, this passage tells us about the sisters' penchant for laughter, a "habit" which started when they were young, when their beds "heaved" with mirth. Josephine's immediate attempt to censor herself ("Remember") shows that the influence of the father is still felt, though slowly ebbing away, and that she has done this before: she is used to repressing disloyal feelings towards the patriarch.

In the next scene, Constantia proposes that they dye their dressing gowns black, in order to be more sincere in their mourning: "I was thinking - it doesn't seem quite sincere, in a way, to wear black out of doors and when we're fully dressed, and then when we're at home -" (Mansfield 230). To which Josephine replies, "But nobody sees us" (230). While we laugh at Constantia's far-fetched idea, the issue of sincerity is relevant and hints at the sisters' struggle to genuinely mourn their father. Josephine's rejoinder can be read as a comment on their invisibility as unmarried women, but also as a reminder that in their home, they do not have to keep up certain appearances. "Nobody sees us" can have an interestingly subversive echo, too, when we consider the image that Josephine conjures of the two of them, dyed in black: "Black! Two black dressing-gowns and two pairs of black woolly slippers, creeping off to the bathroom like black cats" (230). The likeness to black cats "creeping off" suggests something illicit and improper about the sisters and their behaviour. As Bergson points out, "laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity with other laughers, real or imaginary" (64); thus, perhaps what is vaguely threatening about the sisters is their ability to form a bond in laughter at the expense of authority figures. This is all the more disturbing because the sisters are older women who are expected to have moved past the "giggling" stage of girlhood. They are supposed to have serious minds and sober behaviours. But if the sisters do not exhibit this behaviour, does this reflect poorly on them? Is their inability to grow up a fault they must remedy?

The mention of cats is interestingly set off by the unexpected reference to mice, a few moments later:

There came a little rustle, a scurry, a hop.

'A mouse,' said Constantia.

'It can't be a mouse because there aren't any crumbs,' said Josephine.

'But it doesn't know there aren't,' said Constantia. (Mansfield 231)

Once again, there is a humorous element in this exchange, but also an unsettling philosophical quandary. Constantia's reply seems absurd, but the mouse's lack of knowledge makes his quest for food seem absurd as well. We are invited to wonder about the many people who are in the mouse's position, including the sisters themselves. As spinsters who are no longer in the charge of a male relative, they may have gained some freedom, but their prospects are dim. Josephine and Constantia are aware of this dimness. The sisters understand that,

due to various circumstances, there are no "crumbs" left for them. Josephine ponders on the significance of their mother's early passing:

Would everything have been different if mother hadn't died? She didn't see why . . . If mother had lived, might they have married? But there had been nobody for them to marry. There had been father's Anglo-Indian friends before he quarrelled with them. But after that she and Constantia never met a single man except clergymen. How did one meet men? Or even if they'd met them, how could they have got to know men well enough to be more than strangers? (Mansfield 258)

This passage suggests that, whatever the sisters might have done, there is a good chance they would have ended up in the same place. Their mother, who successfully performed the tasks expected of her gender died due to their father's position in the colonies and is now only a faint memory in a photograph: "As soon as a person was dead their photograph died too. But, of course, this one of mother was very old. It was thirty-five years old. Josephine remembered standing on a chair and pointing out that feather boa to Constantia and telling her that it was a snake that had killed their mother in Ceylon" (Mansfield 258). If we return to the mouse episode, we can see it as a larger metaphor for the futility of women's existence under a system that obscures their prospects and their means of self-actualization, no matter what they do. But the sisters, unlike other women in their position, are aware that there are no "crumbs". Thus, they align more with the image of the outcast black cats than the ignorant mouse, which is why treating them only with pity falls into the trap of underestimating them.

Similarly, in their relationship with their father, the sisters are apt to be described merely as victims and inheritors of "a legacy of dread and impotence in his bereavement" (Nathan 95). But many of the humorous scenes in the story derive from the sisters grieving for and remembering their father in unorthodox ways. We have already tackled the scene where Josephine imagines her father's detached head in a comical fashion, but there are other moments which make us question the sisters' legacy of dread. When both women recall the patriarch on his deathbed, they cannot help but focus on an amusing and rather undignified detail:

He lay there, purple, a dark, angry purple in the face, and never even looked at them when they came in. Then, as they were standing there, wondering what to do, he had suddenly opened one eye. Oh, what a difference it would have made, what a difference to their memory of him, how much easier to tell people about it, if he had only opened both! But no—one eye only. It glared at them a moment and then . . . went out. (Mansfield 235-6)

The colonel's "dark" and "purple" face does little to make the moment more sober, but it is the father's wandering eye that elicits a chuckle. The sisters' focus on the ridiculousness of the situation diminishes the colonel's glare. It is

interesting to note that this is the sisters' joint stream of consciousness, their shared impressions pointing to complicity again. Their thoughts are irrepressibly irreverent when recalling their father's death, which hints at an emotional detachment. Though we are told Josephine broke down crying when she wrote the condolence letters, we are also given details that undercut the emotion of the scene: "Strange! She couldn't have put it on – but twenty-three times" (Mansfield 231), painting a mawkish picture of the sister weeping repeatedly over twenty-three letters. This is further undercut by Constantia asking "Have you got enough stamps?" (231), making it difficult for the reader to take the moment too seriously. Indeed, laughter and emotion are not good companions, as Bergson reminds us: "the absence of feeling . . . usually accompanies laughter . . . for laughter has no greater foe than emotion" (63). Fear is also abated by laughter, and though the sisters are afraid to look into their father's study and search through his things, knowing he "would never forgive them" (239), they do, in fact, go in "without knocking even" (240) and decide to symbolically lock his memory in a wardrobe:

And then [Constantia] did one of those amazingly bold things that she'd done about twice before in their lives: she marched over to the wardrobe, turned the key, and took it out of the lock. Took it out of the lock and held it up to Josephine, showing Josephine by her extraordinary smile that she knew what she'd done—she'd risked deliberately father being in there among his overcoats. (Mansfield 243)

By deciding not to look through his wardrobe but lock it instead, the sisters choose to protect themselves and put away their father's influence, if not for good, at least for the time being. It is a humorous moment, too, because Josephine had imagined their father was "in the top drawer with his handkerchiefs and neckties" and would be "ready to spring" on them (Mansfield 242) if they opened the door. Much like in the case of his floating head, the father's body is rendered cartoonish again and his threat cannot be taken seriously.

Thus, the sisters' feelings towards their deceased father are shown to be complicated and often irreverent. Their continued existence in the wake of his death is almost a form of defiance in itself. Kimber's assessment that "there are in fact three deaths in this story, since with the death of their father, the spinsters' lives are now apparently pointless" (49) plays into the erroneous idea that the sisters could only find meaning in relationships with men. As we saw earlier, the spinsters questioned the possibility of meeting men under current societal restrictions and the text invites us to consider the fate of their mother who was supposed to find meaning in marriage to their father, only to die a meaningless death. Moreover, the sisters recall a time in their youth when a man had tried to court them, and "had put a note on the jug of water outside their bedroom door! But by the time Connie had found it the steam had made the writing too faint to



read; they couldn't even make out to which of them it was addressed. And he had left next day. And that was all" (Mansfield 258-59). This bittersweet, comical scene emphasises the absurd and arbitrary nature of the courting market, where communication between the sexes is prone to subterfuge and misunderstandings and where women are interchangeable objects (the "jug of water" echoing Josephine/Jug's name) who end up as effigies in photographs, in the case of their mother.

Returning to Kimber's conclusion, we are pressed to ask, are the sisters' lives pointless outside the sphere of men? Have they reached a dead end? In fact, Constantia sees her new life as an uncertain opening, as coming out of a "tunnel":

There had been this other life, running out, bringing things home in bags, getting things on approval, discussing them with Jug, and taking them back to get more things on approval, and arranging father's trays and trying not to annoy father. But it all seemed to have happened in a kind of tunnel. It wasn't real. It was only when she came out of the tunnel into the moonlight or by the sea or into a thunderstorm that she really felt herself. What did it mean? What was it she was always wanting? What did it all lead to? Now? Now? (Mansfield 259)

The "other life" she and her sister lived while waiting on their father's wishes seems unreal and closed off, but "now", in this new life, the women may have the chance to be themselves. Some critics have interpreted Constantia's questions as a lack of purpose ("What did it all lead to? Now? Now?"), because the spinsters do not know what they will be or do in the future. But this, we would argue, is part of the text's modernist sensibility, insisting on the question rather than on the answer. A lack of purpose is to be celebrated, instead of criticised. The sisters are free to wonder about themselves without needing to come up with a definitive resolution. The story pokes fun at the patriarchal narrative that gives women finality. Spinsterhood is only a dead-end according to the prescribed, external narrative, but a modernist text acknowledges that the internal world of individuals is an endless pool of conflict and speculation, far more interesting, at times, than external reality. As Virginia Woolf instructs:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel . . . life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. (9)

With this in mind, Kimber's estimation that "Constantia is unable to understand her feelings, unable to make that leap into self-discovery" (70) does not paint an adequate picture of the sisters' complex internal world. We have seen that the sisters are aware of the limitations of the world they inhabit and that they

are drawn to self-exploration, but for them, this is only the beginning of the journey, not the end. The final scene of the story is the reason why many critics believe the sisters are ultimately doomed by the narrative, but we would argue that this ending may be more ambiguous than previously thought:

She wanted to say something to Josephine, something frightfully important, about—about the future and what...

“Don't you think perhaps—” she began.

But Josephine interrupted her. “I was wondering if now—” she murmured. They stopped; they waited for each other.

“Go on, Con”, said Josephine.

“No, no, Jug; after you”, said Constantia.

“No, say what you were going to say. You began”, said Josephine.

“I... I'd rather hear what you were going to say first”, said Constantia.

“Don't be absurd, Con. ”

“Really, Jug. ”

“Connie! ”

“Oh, Jug!”

A pause. Then Constantia said faintly, “I can't say what I was going to say, Jug, because I've forgotten what it was... that I was going to say. ”

Josephine was silent for a moment. She stared at a big cloud where the sun had been.

Then she replied shortly, “I've forgotten too.” (Mansfield 260)

Given the humour of the scene (the back and forth between “Connie” and “Jug”), the sisters' admission that they have forgotten what they were about to say can be read as facetious: the sisters know what they were about to say, but they may be embarrassed by their longings. Constantia's hesitation, shown through ellipsis (“I've forgotten what it was ... that I was going to say”) hints at there being more under the surface that she is not ready to divulge. We may think of the black cats again, united in their silence. Jug and Connie may see their future hopes and longings as pointless, but the fact that they are aware of the pointlessness, that they dwell on it and on the situation of women in their position, makes their inward journey far more interesting. Their thoughts also project on the world around them; the feeling of purposeless in the modern age is not only conscribed to the spinsters, but to their dead father too, whose legacy of “dread and impotence” (Nathan 95) speaks of the decay of the British empire and the need to uphold a false image of strength, whereas the sisters see an advantage in weakness: “Let's be weak - be weak, Jug. It's much nicer to be weak than to be strong” (Mansfield 243). Choosing weakness over strength may not be a sign of defeat, but a way through existential pointlessness. Likewise, choosing to

“forget” what they were going to say at the end of the story could be read as the sisters going against the Father and the phallogocentric world to which they had been subservient. In the beginning of the story, Josephine represses her disloyal laughter by frowning fiercely and telling herself “Remember” terribly sternly” (Mansfield 229-230). The sisters’ wilful forgetfulness may signal a rejection of the Father’s command.

The sisters’ feminine energy is also a counterpoint to the father’s. We are told that the “sun is out ...as though it really mattered” (Mansfield 257), and “the thieving sun touched Josephine gently” (259). In both cases, we may associate the sun with the father, who has ceased to matter, but who also keeps stealing (“thieving”) their daughters’ life force. Kimber asserts that Josephine is unable “to replace the sun’s energy which has for so long dominated her life” (76), but the daughters are drawn more to the feminine energy of the moon: “[Constantia] remembered the times she had come in here, crept out of bed in her nightgown when the moon was full, and lain on the floor with her arms outstretched, as though she was crucified. Why? The big, pale moon had made her do it” (Mansfield 259). Mansfield herself comments on this important symbolism in a diary entry, after having read a book called *Cosmic Anatomy*: “It wasn’t for nothing Constantia chose the moon and water” (qtd. in Kimber 71). Therefore, the sisters do not need to replace the sun, because their internal world does not require a sun, just as, perhaps, their lives do not require a socially-approved purpose, either.

In a letter to a friend, Mansfield confessed that she was not entirely pleased with the reception the story received: “For I put my all into that story [‘The Daughters of the Late Colonel’] and hardly anyone saw what I was getting at” (qtd. in Hanson 116). While previous readings have emphasised the sisters’ tragedy in the midst of comedy, Mansfield may also want us to look at their penchant for comedy in the midst of tragedy. Jug and Connie may be a Laurel and Hardy duo, as Rhoda Nathan previously stated, but this expression of their personality can be subversive rather than pitiful. The sisters understand that the modern world is absurd and unfair, and in the face of such impasses, it is wiser to act ridiculous; it is better to laugh.

### **Disclosure statement**

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