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Blurring Polyphonic Voices in Katherine Mansfield's Short Story "The Singing Lesson"

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Abstract

This article pays tribute to Ferdinand de Saussure's contribution to the study of literature. De Saussure's idea that the linguistic sign is a combination between sound images and concepts, and that their relationship is arbitrary (De Saussure, 1916) is my starting point to explore Katherine Mansfield's particular way to combine both music and meaning in order to reveal different, and often opposed, levels of consciousness in the characters of her short story "The Singing Lesson". The study is based on a structuralist analysis (Genette, 1972, 1983) of sound and meaning in Mansfield's short story as it highlights transgressive narrative structures leading to blurring polyphonic voices and discloses the provoking and dual relationship between music and meaning in "The singing Lesson".

Keywords: Contrapuntal music, Narrative mood, Polyphony, Structuralism

Ferdinand de Saussure's major work on structural linguistics and his discovery about the nature of the linguistic sign[1] paved the way to a wide range of multidisciplinary studies in the humanities including, anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and literary criticism. De Saussure's idea that the linguistic sign is a combination of sound images and concepts, and that their relationship is arbitrary (Saussure, pp. 65-8) is my starting point to a structuralist exploration of Mansfield's deployment of both music and language in order to reveal different, and often opposed, levels of consciousness in the characters of her short story "The Singing Lesson".

Katherine Mansfield was a professional musician before becoming a professional writer. She used to play cello in the Students' Orchestra at the Royal Academy in London. Later on, when she began her career as a writer, Mansfield composed her best stories in terms of rhythm and sonority. This particular style allows sound and meaning to converge in ways that are sometimes fluid and harmonious, and sometimes provoking and blurring. Mansfield was conscious of the oppressive character of rigid prosody, that is why she choose to write in terms of lyrical prose, reaching a high musical quality of language while being freed from the letters of fixed rhyme and metre that characterises poetry. In her *Journal*, she explains how she manages, in her writing process, to find out the right 'note' so that everything 'sounds all right':

> Whenever I have a conversation about art which is more or less interesting I begin to wish to God I could destroy all that I have written and start again: it all seems like so many 'false starts'. Musically speaking, it is not – has not been – in the middle of the note – you know what I mean? When, on a cold morning perhaps, you've been playing and it has sounded all right – until suddenly you realize you are warm – you have just begun to play ... *Journal*, July 1918, p 143.

The scope of this paper is to highlight transgressive narrative structures leading to blurring polyphonic voices and disclose the provoking and sometimes 'recalcitrant' (Wright, 1989) relationship between sound and meaning in Mansfield's short story "The Singing Lesson".

Polyphony is analysed from two different perspectives. First, from the sense attributed to sound and music which describes the simultaneous play of two or more melodic lines[2]; and

[1] Saussure, Ferdinand de. (1916). *Course in General Linguistics*. Roy Harris, ed. & transl. USA, Open court Publishing Company: 1983.

[2] Polyphony, in music, strictly speaking, any music in which two or more tones sound simultaneously (the term derives from the Greek word for "many sounds"); thus, even a single interval made up of two simultaneous tones or a chord of three simultaneous tones is rudimentarily polyphonic. Usually, however, polyphony is associated with counterpoint, the combination of distinct melodic lines. In polyphonic music, two or more simultaneous melodic lines are perceived as independent even though they are related. In Western music polyphony typically includes a contrapuntal separation of melody and bass. A texture is more purely polyphonic, and thus more contrapuntal, when the musical lines are rhythmically differentiated. [*Encyclopedia Britannica*, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/469009/polyphony, accessed 23/06/2013]

second, from the Bakhtinian notion based on the dialogical text that incorporates a rich plurality of voices, styles, and points of view (Bakhtin, pp. 5-46)[3].

Analysing polyphony from a musical standpoint leads us to explore the grammatical structure of the Mansfieldian text. Lexical, syntactic and phonetic clues are closely analysed in order to show how Mansfield's prose enables her to reach the freedom of the musician in a way that attains a vertical and a horizontal dimension comparable to that of contrapuntal music (cf. note 2 below). In "The Singing Lesson", Mansfield manages to use punctuation and figures of speech such as repetition and alliteration in a way that conveys a tonality of crescendos and decrescendos within the story, thus creating the impression of listening to a musical partition along with reading a piece of literature.

The study of polyphony in the Bakhtinian sense of the word is based on Gérard Genette's structuralist theory of narrative with a particular emphasis on mood and voice (Genette 1972). When a text is written, technical choices must be made in view of producing a particular result in the story's verbal representation. In this way, the narrative employs distancing and other effects to create a particular narrative mood that governs "the regulation of narrative information" provided to the reader (Genette 1983, p. 41). Like music, narrative mood has predominant patterns. It is related to voice and is dependent on the 'distance' and 'perspective' of the narrator (Genette 1972, p. 162). Dual narrative perspective is analysed through Mansfield's use of free indirect discourse (Genette, 1972, pp. 174-75). As a linguistic device of bivocality, free indirect discourse enhances the presence of polyphony in the text as it implies shifts in perspective between the characters' subjective vision and the report of the narrator's diction (Bray 39). 20th century criticism of literary narrative had already focused on free indirect discourse as generating different levels of ambiguities within narratives (Cohn, 1978; Fludernik, 1993). The present paper shows how Katherine Mansfield further plays with ambiguities as she adds a polyphonic musical dimension to the multiplicity of the characters and narrators' voices in her short story.

"The Singing Lesson" is the story of a music teacher, Miss Meadows, who goes to teach her singing lesson in a very bad mood because of the letter she received from her fiancé, announcing his decision to put an end to their relationship.

When we first read the opening paragraph of the story, a plurality of sounds is 'heard':

Extract (1):

> (...) from the hollow class-rooms came a quick drumming of voices; a bell rang; a voice like a bird cried "Muriel." And then there came from the staircase a tremendous knock-knock-knocking. Someone had dropped her dumbbells. (201)

There is a concentration of nouns 'drumming', 'voices', 'bell', 'bird', 'drumbell'; verbs 'rang', 'cried' and adjectives 'hollow', 'tremendous', belonging or alluding to the register of sound. The use of five consecutive stressed syllables "a voice like a bird cried

[3] Bakhtin, Mikhael. *Problems of Dostoevsky Poetics* (1930). Emerson, Caryl, ed. and Transl.*Theory and History of Literature*, vol.8. University of Minesota Press; 1984.

"Muriel"" adds a melodic tone to the text. The presence of the onomatopoeia 'knock-knock-knocking' associates the action of the dropping drumbbell with the sound it makes.

On her way to her class, Miss Meadows is stopped by the Science Mistress, whose joyful melodic intonation sharply contrasts with Miss Meadows' gloomy attitude:

Extract (2):

> The Science Mistress stopped Miss Meadows.
>
> "Good mor-ning," she cried, in her sweet, affected drawl. "Isn't it cold? It might be win-ter."
>
> Miss Meadows, hugging the knife, stared in hatred at the Science Mistress. Everything about her was sweet, pale, like honey. You would not have been surprised to see a bee caught in the tangles of that yellow hair.
>
> "It is rather sharp," said Miss Meadows, grimly. The other smiled her sugary smile.
>
> "You look fro-zen," said she. Her blue eyes opened wide; there came a mocking light in them. (Had she noticed anything?)
>
> "Oh, not quite as bad as that," said Miss Meadows, and she gave the Science Mistress, in exchange for her smile, a quick grimace and passed on. . . . (202-3)

Mansfield uses a series of alliterations through the repetition of the same sound in order to obtain a harmonious melodic effect 'The **sc**ience **Mis**tress **s**topped **Miss Mea**dows', 'said **Mi**ss **Mea**dows, gr**i**mly', 'w**i**de (...) l**i**ght', 'grima**c**e (...) pa**ss**ed'. Mansfield uses the meaning of sounds to convey opposed and contradictory moods in her characters. To do so, she structures words with an unconventional punctuation and style. The use of dashes dividing the stressed syllables in the words 'mor-ning', 'win-ter' and 'fro-zen' adds an exaggerated joyful melodic tone to the Science Mistress' voice that sharply contrasts with Miss Meadows' grim temper. The repetition of the same word 'smile' but with a different grammatical function (a verb, then a noun) adds rhythm and balance to the sentence "The other **smiled** her sugary **smile**" and reveals Miss Meadows' reluctant attitude towards the science Mistress.

When Miss Meadows first enters her class, she asks the girls to sing 'A Lament'. Little by little, the protagonist manages to convey a feeling of sadness to her pupils until they become completely annihilated by deep sorrow.

Extract (3):

> Good Heavens, what could be more tragic than that lament ! Every note was a sigh, a sob, a groan of awful mournfulness. Miss Meadows lifted her arms in the wide gown and began conducting with both hands. "… I feel more and more strongly that our marriage would be a mistake …" She beat. And the voiced cried: *Fleetly ! Ah,*

> *Fleetly*. What could have possessed him to write such a letter ! What could have led up to it ! It came out of nothing. His last letter had been all about a fumed-oak bookcase he had bought for our books, and a "natty little hall-stand" he had seen, "a very neat affair with a carved owl on a bracket, holding three hat-brushes in its claws". How she had smiled at that ! So like a man to think one needed three hat-brushes ! *From the listening Ear*, sang the voices.
>
> "Once again," said Miss Meadows. "But this time in parts. Still without expression." *Fast! Ah, too Fast.* With the gloom of the contraltos added, one could scarcely help shuddering. *Fade the Roses of Pleasure.* (…)
>
> *Music's Gay Measure*, wailed the voices. The willow trees, outside the high, narrow windows, waved in the wind. They had lost half their leaves. The tiny ones that clung wriggled like fishes caught on a line. ". . . I am not a marrying man. . . ." The voices were silent; the piano waited. (205)

The story is told by an extradiegetic narrator, who presents the scene from without and from within (Genette, 1972, p. 248). There is an interplay between external and internal focalization that juxtaposes the narrator's objective depiction with Miss Meadows' subjective experience and feelings (Genette, 1972, pp. 189-90). A simultaneous play of voices suddenly takes place when Miss Meadows starts conducting her singing lesson. Three parallel actions take place at the same time, blurring the reader who listens simultaneously to four different voices. First, the narrator's voice who describes Miss Meadows gestures and appearance using a free indirect discourse in the third person singular "Miss Meadows lifted her arms in the wide gown and began conducting with both hands", then Miss Meadows' and her fiancé's dual voice with a direct speech sentence that displays what takes place in Miss Meadows mind as she remembers what her fiancé told her, using a sentence between brackets and the first person singular to make him speak " ... I feel more and more strongly that our marriage would be a mistake…", and finally the voice of the girls put in italics to show that they are singing "*Fleetly! Ah, Fleetly*".

The voluntary omission of any declarative introduction before Miss Meadows' fiancé's direct speech works as a device to make Miss Meadows' actions and thoughts act simultaneously "Miss Meadows lifted her arms in the wide gown and began conducting with both hands. ". . . I feel more and more strongly that our marriage would be a mistake"" (extract 3).

'Immediate speech' and 'reported speech' are "formally distinguished from one another only by the presence or absence of a declarative introduction" (Genette :1972, p. 174). There are, in "The Singing Lesson", many examples similar to the one above, that show the synchronic play of different unconventionally used categories of speech along with the 'recalcitrant' polyphonic voice emanating from them that purposely add ambiguous dimensions to the Mansfieldian text. "Récalcitrance does not automatically accompany convention; it depends on the accumulation of details whose significance is not immediately evident" (Wright, p. 123).

FID enhances polyphony as it implies a shift in perspective between Miss Meadows subjective vision, and the report of the narrator's diction. It is employed in the story to display bivocality:

(…) How she had smiled at that! So like a man to think one needed three hat-brushes ! *From the Listening Ear*, sang the voices.

An extraneous element in italics is further added to the dual narrative perspective '*From the Listening Ear*' acting as a synchronic display for the chorus' singing voices. Miss Meadows' internal thoughts are confused with the girls' singing voices thus showing the simultaneous and parallel activity of thinking and singing.

Then, still in extract (3), Miss Meadows' direct speech shifts from her own internal perspective to the external perspective of the extra-diegetic narrator:

"Once again", said Miss Meadows. "But this time in parts. Still without expression".

Once more, a musical effect is achieved in "The Singing Lesson" by the end of extract (3) with an ascending movement of the narrative from speech to silence:

Music's Gay Measure, wailed the voices. The willow trees, outside the high, narrow windows, waved in the wind. They had lost half their leaves. The tiny ones that clung wriggled like fishes caught on a line. ". . . I am not a marrying man. . . ." The voices were silent; the piano waited.

We first listen to the girls singing "*Music's Gay Measure*, wailed the voices", the verb 'wail' describes the mournful sound of laments, then there is a description that uses the alliterative repetition of sounds in "The **w**illow trees, outside the high, narro**w** **w**indo**w**s, **w**aved in the **w**ind", adding further sound cadence to the narrative, then a direct speech without introductory sentence that reveals Miss Meadows' silent inner thoughts, and finally, two very short clauses, separated by a semi colon, perfectly balanced with two stressed syllables in each and both beginning with the same definite article "The voices were silent; the piano waited". The shortness of these two clauses, and the presence of the semi colon marking a pause, denotes the sudden silence and stillness that sharply contrasts with the plurality of sounds and singing activity experienced in the sentences before.

Another example of Katherine Mansfield's blurring shifts from one speech category to another is found in the following extract:

Extract (4):

"Repeat! Repeat!" said Miss Meadows. "More expression, girls! Once more!" *Fast! Ah, too Fast*. The older girls were crimson; some of the younger ones began to cry. Big spots of rain blew against the windows, and one could hear the willows whispering, ". . . not that I do not love you. . ." "But, my darling, if you love me," thought Miss Meadows, "I don't mind how much it is. Love me as little as you like." But she knew he didn't love her. Not to have cared enough to scratch out that word "disgust," so that she couldn't read it! Soon Autumn yields unto Winter Drear. She would have to leave the school, too. She could never face the Science Mistress or the girls after it got known. She would have to disappear somewhere. *Passes away*. The voices began to die, to fade, to whisper . . . to vanish. . . .

Miss Meadows' direct speech is introduced by the narrator's introductory verb 'said' to show that Miss Meadows is really speaking ""Repeat! Repeat!" said Miss Meadows. "More expression, girls! Once more!""; then, the girls' singing lament marked in italics. The extradiegetic narrator makes a confusing shift of perspective, from Miss Meadows' unspoken thoughts uttered by the whispering willows "(…) **and one could hear the willows whispering**, ". . . not that I do not love you. . .", to her own direct speech displaying her inner speech ""But, my darling, if you love me," **thought Miss Meadows**, "I don't mind how much it is. (..)"". This confusing narrative perspective reveals Miss Meadows own confused state of mind, as she remembers her fiancé's traumatic speech while feeling that everything around her, even nature, is as sad as she is. Miss Meadows' sensory impressions and thoughts are running away, destroying the flow and integrity of the narrative. The blurring nature of the relationship between sound and meaning is related to the changing mood of the protagonist's thoughts and feelings and on the changing perspective the extradiegetic narrator tries to convey.

The end of extract (4) witnesses another decrescendo from Miss Meadows fertile, noisy ruminating speculations, through the use of direct and indirect speech, to a slow move into silence:

> She would have to disappear somewhere. *Passes away.* The voices began to die, to fade, to whisper . . . to vanish. . . .

Miss Meadows' wish to disappear coincides with a slow lowering of musicality. One stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable denotes a lowering of the girls' voices '*passes away*', then follows a series of verbs showing a decrease in tone until the three dots preceding and following the last verbs declares complete silence « to die, to fade, to whisper … to vanish … »

In *Course in General Linguistics*[4], De Saussure, states the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign and shows how language as organized thought couples with sound:

> Each linguistic term is a member, an *articulus* in which an idea is fixed in a sound and a sound becomes the sign of an idea. (…) Linguistics then works in the borderland where the elements of sound and thought combine; *their combination produces a form, not a substance.* (113)

The three extract analyzed above display how, in « The Singing Lesson », Mansfield structures and combines linguistic signs in a dual way that transforms music into meaning, and meaning into music, thus reaching various polyphonic voices that are sometimes harmonious, and sometimes blurring. Polyphony in "The Singing Lesson" operates on two

[4] "The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. Since I mean by sign the whole that results from the associating of the signifier with the signified, I can simply say: *the linguistic sign is arbitrary"* (De Saussure, p. 67)

levels. First, on a musical level when she simultaneously displays two or more melodic lines; and second, a dialogical level that incorporates a rich plurality of voices, styles, and points of view (Bakhtin, 1930; Genette, 1972, 1983)

When Miss Meadows' singing lesson is interrupted to learn about the telegram her fiancé sent her in which he asks her not to take care about the words he wrote in his letter, she goes back to her class in a totally different mood, and the musical atmosphere changes too:

Extract (5):

> **O**n the wings **of** hope, **of** l**o**ve, **of** j**o**y, Miss Mead**o**ws sped back to the music hall, **up** the aisle, **up** the steps, **o**ver to the pian**o**.
>
> "**Page thirty-two**, Mary," she said, "**page thirty-two**," and picking up the yellow chrysanthemum, she held **i**t to her l**i**ps to h**i**de her sm**il**e. Then she turned to the g**ir**ls, rapped with her baton: "**Page thirty-two**, g**ir**ls. **Page thirty-two**."
>
> *We come here To-day with Flowers o'erladen,*
> *With Baskets of Fruit and Ribbons to boot,*
> *To-oo Congratulate. . . .*
>
> "**Stop! Stop**!" cried Miss Meadows. "**This is** awful. **This is** dreadful." And she beamed at her girls. "What's the matter with you all? Think, girls, think of what you're singing. Use your imaginations. *With Flowers o'erladen. Baskets of Fruit and Ribbons to boot* And *Congratulate.*" Miss Meadows broke off. "Don't look so doleful, girls. It ought to sound warm, joyful, eager. *Congratulate.* Once more. Quickly. All together. Now then!"
>
> And this time Miss Meadows' voice sounded over all the other voices–full, deep, glowing with expression. (210-11)

Again, a series of alliterative repeated sounds and words fills the text with a vertical melodious dimension: "**O**n the wings **of** hope, **of** l**o**ve, **of** j**o**y, Miss Mead**o**ws sped back to the music hall, **up** the aisle, **up** the steps, **o**ver to the pian**o**".

The extra-diegetic narrator's external and internal point of view once again reveals a plurality of sounds and repetitions (in bold) that discloses Miss Meadows' change of mood after having received her fiancé's telegraphic revelation "Pay no attention to letter, must have been mad" (210).

There is also, in extract (4), a change in Miss Meadows' mode of speech as it shifts from the internal monologue orchestrated by the extradiegietic narrator and/or herself, to a long direct speech in which she is actively speaking while giving new directions to her pupils.

> "**Stop! Stop**!" cried Miss Meadows. "**This is** awful. **This is** dreadful." And she beamed at her girls. "What's the matter with you all ? **Think**, girls, **think** of what you're singing. Use your imaginations. *With Flowers o'erladen. Baskets of Fruit and Ribbons to boot* And *Congratulate.*" Miss Meadows broke off. "Don't look so

doleful, girls. It ought to sound warm, joyful, eager. *Congratulate.* Once more. Quickly. All together. Now then!"

Miss Meadows' voice that was most of the time internally 'noisy' throughout the whole story Suddenly becomes externally noisy. The narrator's use of verbs such as 'cried', 'broke off' shows Miss Meadows' sudden change. Miss Meadow's repetitions of the words 'Stop', 'This is', 'Think' are a testimony of her exciting joy.

The Protagonist's change in mood, from sadness and anger, to joy and happiness, corresponds to a change in music category and tone. After 'A Lament', she asks the girls to sing 'Congratulate'. Whereas in the beginning she repeated to the girls « Once again, (…) But this time in parts. Still without expression. » (extract 2), by the end of the story, Miss Meadows recommended « It ought to sound warm, joyful, eager. » and even witnessed a drastic change in her voice « And this time Miss Meadows' voice sounded over all the other voices–full, deep, glowing with expression » (extract 4). Miss Meadows' change in mood went hand in hand with a change in tone and musicality in « The singing Lesson ».

"Blurring Polyphonic Voices in Katherine Mansfield's 'The Singing Lesson'" pays tribute to Ferdinand De Saussure's contribution to the field of literary studies. In his preface to the 2001 edition of *The Pursuit of Signs* Jonathan Culler writes about De Saussure's prediction that linguistic would one day be part of a comprehensive science of signs[5] and states "I champion the prospect of a semiotics, a systematic science of signs, as the best framework for literary studies" (vii). Katherine Mansfield's short story displays the dual relationship between sound and meaning in "The Singing Lesson". It shows how Mansfield manages to convey meaning in a synchronic way as she simultaneously plays with various tonalities and allows her prose to reach a vertical dimension comparable to contrapuntal music. Mansfield also displays a dual relationship between the narrator and the protagonist adding a new polyphonic dimension to her text. Like the ambiguous dual relationship between the Saussurian 'signifier' and 'signified', sound and meaning in "The Signing Lesson" is confusing. The blurring nature of this relation is related to the changing mood of the protagonist's thoughts and feelings and on the changing perspective the extradiegetic narrator tries to convey. In "The Singing Lesson", Mansfield manages to make music reveal moments of being, and capture moments of true feelings, i.e., anger, sadness; then joy, happiness. Mansfield also reveals how these moments can change completely and display totally opposed moods. To do so, Mansfield uses Lexical, syntactic and phonetic clues, as well as different opposed and sudden shifts in perspective and narrative voice in order to permeate her text with a vertical dimension comparable to contrapuntal music.

[5] "Signs that are wholly arbitrary realize better than the others the ideal of the semiological process, that is why language, the most complex and universal of all systems of expression, is also the most characteristic; in this sense, linguistics can become the master-pater of all branches of semiology although language is only one particular semiological system". (De Saussure, 68)

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