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AFFECTIVE (MIS)ENCOUNTERS IN "THE DOLL'S HOUSE" (A DISCUSSION OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD'S SHORT STORY)[1]

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Abstract
Katherine Mansfield's "The doll's house" (2000) constitutes the object of the present discussion, which aims at tracing the relations among the characters, focusing on their affective actions–both those linked to negative affects (coldness, arrogance, violence, cruelty) and those related to positive affects (gentleness, sharing, understanding, tolerance, sensibility). My hypothesis is that the most substantial meanings of the short story derive from (mis)affective encounters–on the one hand, exclusion, prejudice, humiliation and cruelty; on the other, complicity, respect, acceptance and inclusion. My analysis will be supported with literary theoretical principles and with social theory discussions on the "affective turn", so as to argue that this narrative dramatizes new possibilities of perception and action.
Keywords: Modern Short Story; Katherine Mansfield; Affect; Children

"The doll's house" is one of several short stories by Katherine Mansfield having children as main characters. This narrative is part of the so-called cycle of "Kezia's stories", which also includes the following: "Prelude", "At the bay" and "The young girl"[2]. The recurrence of the character Kezia in these short stories justifies her relevance for the expression of conflicts enacted from the point of view of children's subjectivity.

Here our main concern is to discuss "The doll's house", focusing on the characters' relationships, as exercised and constructed in terms of *affective actions*–both those related to negative feelings (coldness, indifference, arrogance, violence, cruelty) and those related to positive feelings (gentleness, sharing, understanding, tolerance, respect, sensibility). I assume that the most substantial meanings of the short story result from affective (mis)encounters–on the one hand, exclusion, humiliation, shame, cruelty; on the other, inclusion, complicity, warmth, and the possibility of hope.

Another aspect that supports my initial hypothesis has to do with the children's universe, represented by the characters (children) and by the object–the doll's house–already announced in the story's title and somehow producing an expectation of its relevance as a playful object, an important toy in the imaginary world of little girls. In fact, all the tension in the short story results from the function the doll's house possesses to demarcate (and to displace) spaces–both integrating and excluding. The presence of children and their sensibility remind us of the poem "We are seven" (1965), by William Wordsworth, in which a child proves to be more sensible and sensitive than an adult.

Paraphrasing the lyrical speaker in William Wordsworth's poem "We are seven":

_____ A simple Child,
That lightly draws its breath,
And feels its life in every limb,
What should it know of death?

We could wonder what "simple children" know of affect and affective responses, and how we, adults, can take advantage of their (lack of) knowledge and tentative understanding of emotions and affects. If children are supposed to be ignorant, since they are in the very process of apprehending the mechanisms of life, of the world and of human relationships (aren't we, after all, almost always in the same position?), they constitute precious informants as to the elastic materializations of affect and their effects. As in the poem by Wordsworth, children might teach us an "affective counter-pedagogy" (Highmore 136).

The story told is quite simple: it is about a present (the toy) the Burnell children are given by Mrs. Hay, a family friend who has recently stayed at their house, and about the effect the toy eventually causes on the children. The *affective chain* in the narrative is actually triggered by Mrs. Hay's gesture in offering them the gift. The doll's house is described as perfect, and this perfection provokes such an effect of surprise, admiration, pleasure and contentment on the children (besides Kezia, Isabel and Lottie, the three sisters) that the object stays for exhibition in the Burnells' yard for several days so that the children's school colleagues (except Lil and our Else) can appreciate it as well.

The exclusion of Lil and our Else[3]–"the daughters of a spry, hard-working little washerwoman, who went about from house to house by the day", whose husband is supposedly a prisoner (Mansfield 26)–from the group of children who are invited to know the doll's house is

part of a larger exclusion: at school, both of them are always isolated on their own, separated from the others. They suffer discrimination not only from the students (who endorse their families' values and mimic their arrogant attitudes), but also from the teachers. The issue of exclusion is so visible and relevant that it seems to justify the short story, as if it had been written specifically to talk about the exclusion and prejudice that social class distinctions provoke and also to denounce how cruel both adults and children can be.

On the other hand, another justification for the existence of the short story (though both reasons are related, this one seems to be the more relevant) is the belief in the possibility of rupture with pre-established and imposed rules, mainly through sensibility and affect. In this sense, if I could summarize the short story to a condensed meaning, I would say that "The doll's house" is the story of Kezia and our Else, of their complicity. Paraphrasing the lyrical self in Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 (1985)[4], I would say that the story metaphorically constructs a communion, "a marriage of true minds", for which there are no impediments, since they touch and connect subtly but deeply. Let us gradually detail how the story of these two children's affective bond becomes constructed.

Katherine Mansfield (born in New Zealand) is widely known in the context of English literature for her contribution to the development of the short story as a literary genre. To give an example of this importance, after her death, Virginia Woolf registered in her diary: "Mansfield produced the only literature I envied" (in Gilbert and Gubar 1514). Similarly to Joyce and Woolf, whose narratives constitute significant examples of formal rigor and construction, Mansfield is an artist, according to Jeffrey Meyers, "whose strength lies in subtle detail, precise phrasing, delicate observation, and concentrated emotion" (vii). Another representative characteristic

of her production concerns the epiphanic moments experienced by characters (consequently, by readers) through which they live a sudden strong emotion which is responsible for the communication of an experience, the unexpected revelation of a perception. As we all know, we owe to Joyce the displacement of the original religious context of epiphany (that told of "the manifestation of God's presence in the world") to a secular, ordinary experience while the character (and the reader) observe(s) a common object (Abrams 54-55). The epiphany allows one to perceive and experience the sensorial.

The epiphany, in this specific short story, becomes enlarged by the fact that it is associated with an object–a little lamp–which can connote semantic and symbolic nuances of illumination and knowledge. As I will try to demonstrate, the lamp constitutes a significant object to address different possibilities of looking and seeing–as such, a different possibility of perception and action.

In their Introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth state that "affect (…) is the name we give (…) to vital forces insisting beyond emotion–that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (…) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability" (1). The epiphany Mansfield creates in "The doll's house" articulates with such potentialities, in a double movement: on the diegetic level, in the connection promoted among the characters; and on the extra-diegetic level, since the children's experience (both negative and positive) substantially affects the reader.

In general, what calls the children's attention in the characterization of the house are the details responsible for endowing it with an air of realism, as for instance, the chimneys, the windows, a tiny porch, and a division of compartments that includes the drawing-

room, the dining-room, the kitchen and two bedrooms: "'Oh-oh!' The Burnell children sounded as though they were in despair. It was too marvelous; it was too much for them. They had never seen anything like it in their lives" (Mansfield 25). Besides, all the rooms are papered, and the house also has pictures, chairs, carpets, tables and beds covered with "real bedclothes" (Mansfield 25). The first part of the narrative offers a minutely detailed description of the house.

However, Kezia's observation (contemplation) of the house provides a displaced perception. As the narrator says: "But what Kezia liked more than anything, what she liked frightfully, was the lamp. It stood in the middle of the dining-room table, an exquisite little amber lamp with a white globe. It was even filled all ready for lighting, though, of course, you couldn't light it. But there was something inside it that looked like oil and moved when you shook it" (Mansfield 25). Following Kezia's perspective–since Kezia constitutes the story's narrative filter–the narrator further emphasizes the lamp: "But the lamp was perfect. It seemed to smile at Kezia to say, 'I live here'. The lamp was real" (25). The lamp is so decisive for the house's liveliness that Kezia complains with Isabel, her elder sister, every time she describes the house without valuing the lamp. Even when she includes a reference to the lamp, Kezia is not satisfied with her description: "'The lamp's best of all,' cried Kezia. She thought Isabel wasn't making half enough of the little lamp. But nobody paid any attention (…)" (Mansfield 27-8). In fact, as the narrative develops, we get to know that our Else is the only one who shares with Kezia the value given to the lamp; as such, the lamp is responsible for fostering an affective link between Kezia and our Else. The value (or lack thereof) attributed to the lamp constitutes a relevant difference in terms of values and affective responses from the children. Except for Kezia and the Kelveys (who are not initially invited to see the

doll's house), the other children merely admire the house as a commodity, as an icon of social status. The doll's house serves as a means to humiliate Lil and our Else, who are excluded from the visit.

Before examining the gradual and silent connection between Kezia and our Else, through the house and the lamp, it is important to consider two significant negative details about the house's description: the first has to do with its smell of paint–"quite enough to make anyone seriously ill" (Mansfield 24); the second concerns the description of the dolls that "inhabit" the house: the father, the mother and the children who sleep in the house's upper part. The parents are described as "stiff", being thus destitute of the spontaneity and sense of realism characterizing the other objects that compose the house. As to the children-dolls, "they were really too big for the doll's house. They didn't look as though they belonged" (Mansfield 25), being characterized, as such, as if displaced.

Such apparently descriptive details actually anticipate relevant information about the ambiguous meanings of the doll's house; they constitute indexes that undermine its initial perfection allowing a metaphorical parallelism between the symbolic meanings of the doll's house (simulacrum of a real house) and the actual children's house and their relationships with their parents and families. The suggestion of dissonance and unbalance between the doll's house and their inhabitants (the dolls, who do not belong) will find a parallel in the oppressive and superficial relationships of the children with their real houses/families. Ironically, the doll's house will not promote any playful or entertaining activity among the children–it will only serve as pretext for the exhibition, segregation and exercise of further cruelty. However, helplessness and violence can also be fought with disobedience and transgression, and it does not matter whether the subjects involved are children.

An important fact about Katherine Mansfield's life should be considered at this point. In her biography, Claire Tomalin emphasizes that "Katherine was quick to identify with servants in her writing, and to offer them special imaginative sympathy, although she grew up in a society in which the social division between maids and masters seemed absolute" (13). Such an affective complicity exercised by her narrators concerning not only the experience of the subaltern but mainly of the socially marginalized, humiliated and excluded constitutes a crucial mark of Mansfield's literary production. In the specific short story discussed here, in which Kezia and the Kelveys (Lil and our Else) affectively understand one another, the eloquence of the experience seems to acquire a larger dimension, since the universe of poverty (and of the helplessness inherent to it), experienced by the Kelveys, is deepened by the vulnerability and insecurity typical of the children's universe.

Similarly to the doll's house, whose description transcends the level of reference to connote tensions and conflicts in terms of social relations, I can say the same in relation to Lil and our Else's characterization, dressed with pieces and remains of cloth given to Mrs. Kelvey by those for whom she worked: "Lil, for instance (…), came to school in a dress made from a green art-serge tablecloth of the Burnells', with red plush sleeves from the Logans' curtains" (Mansfield 27). As to "her little sister, our Else, [she] wore a long white dress, rather like a nightgown, and a pair of little boy's boots" (27). This description echoes part of the house's description, both in terms of similarity (repeated vocabulary) and in terms of contrast: the house, though a doll's house, a make-believe house, a toy, seems to be true, full of life; Lil and our Else, though human, seem to be ugly dolls, scarecrows. In terms of psychological description, besides our Else's dependence on Lil, onto whose piece of skirt she always

holds, she never speaks and rarely smiles (27). But our Else's silence also suggests her introspection and sensibility, decisive factors for the communion taking place between her and Kezia in the final part of the short story.

Before reaching this point, I would still like to consider the implicit criticism addressed to the family and the school as relevant and solid social institutions. Near the end of the narrative, coinciding with the accomplishment of all children's visits, Kezia asks her mother for permission to invite the Kelveys to see the doll's house:

> "'Mother (…), can't I ask the Kelveys just once?'
> 'Certainly not, Kezia.'
> 'But why not?'
> 'Run away, Kezia; you know quite well why not.'"
> (Mansfield 28)

The knowledge Kezia's mother attributes to her is a result of social rules that regulate the conviviality and distance among people. Kezia understands them as an imposition, as an absurd imposition that makes no sense at all; because of that, she does not hesitate disobeying the mother, inviting Lil and our Else to see the doll's house. In reality, we can consider the cruel treatment received by Lil and our Else as a consequence of the "education" the children themselves are given at home–a kind of "education" that endorses social class distinctions and the prejudiced values that segregate people according to their social and economic origins. Even at home, within the family context, Isabel, the elder sister, has her power and authority legitimated by her mother. Being older, she is the one who decides not only who should see the doll's house, but the order of visits. The mis-education practiced by the family is ironically corroborated by the school, *the*

place where differences should be welcome with respect, tolerance and critical vision; after all, the school is a place for teaching and learning (but teaching and learning *what*?). In the school considered here, even the teachers discriminate the Kelveys, having "a special voice for them, and a special smile for the other children when Lil Kelvey came up to her desk with a bunch of dreadfully common-looking flowers" (26).

That is why, when the meeting among the three children finally takes place, the initial surprise and refusal of the Kelveys are thus justified: "your ma told our ma you wasn't to speak to us" (30). To which Kezia replies: "It doesn't matter. You can come and see our doll's house all the same. Come on. Nobody's looking" (30).

Kezia knew her attitude constituted a transgression, a transposition of imposed limits. The absence of the other's (adult's) look–a vigilant and prohibiting look–means freedom, temporary freedom–for them. Kezia's attitude reveals her disagreement with her mother, with her sister Isabel, and with all the other children at school; her attitude materializes her subversive response. If family and school are social institutions that indoctrinate, Kezia, Lil and our Else are able to escape in a freedom–a tiny little freedom–of their own.

"The doll's house" is also instigating in terms of the relationship constructed between affect, the body and aesthetics. In his discussion on the articulation of such topics, Ben Highmore affirms that "affect gives you away (…), it is your own polygraph machine" (118). He further asks, thus offering an example: "Could you possibly 'feel' that you were in love if you couldn't also feel your beating heart climbing into your throat or your palms sweat? Would I really be moved by a tragedy if I didn't experience rivulets of tears trickling down my cheeks?" (120). No matter how differently people can react to

emotion and affect, the fact is that our body is a locus of sensorial perception and physiological reaction and affective register.

When Lil and our Else are invited by Kezia to see the doll's house, their bodies speak in significant and telling ways: "Lil turned red" (Mansfield 30); Lil gasped" (30); "our Else was looking at her with big imploring eyes; she was frowning; she wanted to go" (30). These moments precede their decision to accept or not Kezia's invitation. When they finally accept Kezia's offer and are before the doll's house, "Lil breathed loudly, almost snorted; our Else was still as stone" (30). These fragments show how *affected* they are by the house; it is as if they are hypnotized by its contemplation. When Kezia opens the doll's house for them to see inside, just at the moment when she says: "'There's the drawing-room and the dining-room, and that's the –'" (30), they are fiercely interrupted and reprimanded by Kezia's aunt, who "shooed [Lil and our Else] off as if they were chickens" (30). The narrator further says: "They did not need telling twice. Burning with shame, shrinking together, Lil huddling along like her mother, our Else dazed, somehow they crossed the big courtyard and squeezed through the white gate" (31). The actions of blushing, gasping, breathing loudly, looking with imploring eyes, burning with shame all indicate the dimension of affect experienced by the children. All this gradation of bodily reactions culminates with our Else smiling "her rare smile" (31) and saying "I seen the little lamp" (31).

The gradual process of affective bonding among these children can be summarized as follows: 1. When Kezia opposes the Kelveys' exclusion to see the doll's house and asks her mother to show it to them; 2. When Kezia emphasizes the significance of the little lamp and only our Else pays attention (from a distance, without her knowing) to it; 3. When Kezia, despite the prohibition, invites the Kelveys to see the doll's house; 4. When Kezia shows them the house

and, though for a short time, our Else is implicitly able to appreciate the tiny lamp; 5. When, finally, our Else smiles her rare smile and verbalizes her vision of the little lamp.

Though running the risk of repetition, the summary of this itinerary seems necessary when we think of the reciprocal affective gesture between Kezia and the Kelveys–mainly our Else–and its effect also on the reader. Still according to Gregg and Seigworth, "affect is in many ways synonymous with *force* or *forces of encounter*" (2; authors' italics). As a power or a potential, affect constitutes the body's capacity to affect and be affected (Gregg and Seigworth, 2). In the present short story, this occurs both negatively and positively. Let us remember the rituals of humiliation and hostility the Kelveys suffer at school. Being unable to react, the Kelveys respond either with silence or with a shameful and awkward look. When they are reprimanded by aunt Beryl, once more they are humiliated, treated as animals (they are referred to throughout the narrative as chickens, stray cats and little rats). However, the last words in the short story emphasize the effects of the encounter both in terms of physical and emotional signs: "Lil's cheeks were still burning" (Mansfield 31). Sitting down to rest on a big red drainpipe, they contemplate the countryside and recollect their vision of the doll's house. It is at this moment that our Else smiles her rare smile and finally speaks to say "'I seen the little lamp'" (31). The narrator ends the short story with "Then both were silent once more" (31).

As such, three elements accentuate the *affective chain*, represented in the affected body: the smile; the speech; the silence. Silence coincides with the end of the short story, whose eloquence now resonates in the reader. The coincident perception of the two children (though belonging to such dissonant worlds) ends up reflecting on the reader. Hence, the reader is the one endowed with

the most substantial epiphany and affective response, materialized in another *affective action*, symbol of a firefly-hope[5] that insists on resisting. Borrowing from Jacques Rancière's articulation between aesthetics and politics, when he affirms that "artistic practices are 'ways of doing' that interfere in the general distribution of ways of doing and in their relations with ways of being and forms of visibility" (17; my translation), I can conclude that "The doll's house" not only activates different forms of feeling, through displaced configurations of sensibility, but contributes to enact new forms of political subjectivity (Rancière 11). That is why I risk re-organizing the short story's *affective chain* as: the silence; the smile; the speech.

Note

1. This article constitutes an enlarged version of the text "(Des)encontros afetivos em uma casa de bonecas", presented at ABRALIC, Universidade Estadual da Paraíba (2013). I would like to thank Professor Michael Harold Smith (UFPB) for his affective contribution in the revision of this text.
2. These short stories can be found in Katherine Manfield's *Stories* (Introd. by Jeffrey Meyers). New York: Vintage, 1991.
3. The possessive adjective "our", always appearing before "Else", is incorporated to her name and demonstrates her fragility, vulnerability and dependence on her sister, onto whose clothes she holds while walking. It also reveals the narrator's (and the reader's) affective complicity in relation to her.
4. I quote the first lines of this sonnet: "Let me not to the marriage of true minds/Admit impediments. Love is not love/Which alters when it alteration finds". In: Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. The Alexander text. London and Glasgow: Collins, 1985.
5. I consciously play with the idea of the fireflies' survival, as elaborated by Georges Didi-Huberman in *Sobrevivência dos vaga-lumes* (trad. Márcia Arbex). Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 2011.

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