

The Chinese Concept of *Blank* in Katherine Mansfield's *Bliss* and *the Garden Party*

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Abstract: Katherine Mansfield is a legend in the history of the modern British literature for her implicit writing style. Most of her works concentrate on creating the inner world of the characters instead of a clear beginning or tense conflicts, so as to invite readers to explore the subtle changes of the characters' psychological world. And this thesis tries to explore the beauty of her representative works---*The Garden Party* and *Bliss* according to the Chinese artistic concept of *Blank* from three main aspects, including the content, structure and themes. Findings are *Blanks* in content are mainly used in character depiction and dialogues as a substitute for the direct and boring introduction of background information. When it is used in structure building, it plays different roles in different developmental parts. As a matter of fact, The *Blanks* in content and structure are often applied to leave more space for the inference of themes.

Keywords: Katherine Mansfield, *Bliss*, *The Garden Party*, *Blank*

1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction of Katherine Mansfield

Katherine Mansfield was a prominent New Zealand modernist short story writer who was born and brought up in colonial New Zealand. In 1917, she was diagnosed with extrapulmonary tuberculosis, leading to her death at the age of only 34. But she establishes a permanent literary reputation as "the master of Short Stories" because of her great contribution to the modern English short story. Zhao Fang commented that Mansfield developed the new plotless story which emerged in the late 1890s, and employed modernist techniques such as symbolism, impressionism, interior monologue, stream of consciousness, and so on, to "present seemingly trivial incidents from ordinary life, and to concentrate on inner moods and impressions rather than on external events." When she was still alive, she published altogether three volumes of short stories. The first is *In a German Pension* (1911), but it got little attention. Then was the *Bliss and Other Stories* in 1920, and the last is *The Garden Party and Other Stories* in 1922, which made her well-known and won a lot of fame for her. After she passed away, her husband John Middleton Murry published her

collections of stories: *The Dove's Nest* (1923) and *Something Childish* (1924). Her letters and journals were published posthumously as *Letters and Journals of Katherine Mansfield* (1927). [1].

1.2. Introduction of the *Garden Party* and *Bliss*

Among all her literary works, *The Garden Party* and *Bliss* are two of the most famous short stories. In *The Garden Party*, the protagonist Laura Sheridan was born in a upper-class family and was educated by the bourgeoisie values, therefore she's a little arrogant and luxurious. When she is appointed to arrange the garden party and meets the workmen, she tries to be elegant, respectful and business-like just like her mother, but she fails and even stammers like a little girl. She thinks the workmen are very nice. However, when the party is going to start, she got the news that a young man living in the cottage was dead just outside the front gate, so she plans to stop the band and the party because of her sympathy. But her sister and mother object and believe she's very absurd. Then Laura is persuaded to continue the party. After the party, her father and brother come back home and share the horrible news with them again. At this moment, Mrs. Sheridan feels uneasy and asks Laura to bring a basket of food left in the party to their poor neighbor. Finally, Laura

goes to see the dead man and his widow. When she rushes out of that house, she feels sad and cries. [2].

The protagonist of *Bliss* is a 30-year-old woman named Bertha Young, who always feels very happy and acts like a child. She has deep and unutterable bliss in her heart. On that day, she holds a party at home and invites her good friends who she thinks are nice and perfect. However, at the end of the party when her friends are leaving, she finds the affair between her mysterious friend Miss Fulton and her enthusiastic husband Harry. She is confused and runs over to the long windows to see the pear tree that she shared with Miss Fulton not long ago. [3].

Early in the 1920s, Mansfield's short stories has spread to China and been translated by the well-known Chinese poet Xu Zhimo. Then she was quite popular among the Chinese readers. It is always the themes like feminism, modernism, stylistics, or narrative style that attract the critics and the inequity of the capitalist society that are studied by the Chinese scholars. [4] However, few Chinese researchers have found that the Chinese classical concept of *Blank* does also play an important role in her stories.

2. Blanks in the Garden Party and Bliss

There are four parts in this thesis to discuss the employment of *Blank* in *The Garden Party* and *Bliss*: Introduction of *Blank*, *Blank* in structure, content and themes.

2.1. Introduction of *Blank*

Originally, *Blank* in China means the empty or unfilled part of a page, a painting, a poem or other artistic works. In order to reach a special artistic effect, artists tend to make some *Blanks* in their works, which makes *Blank* become a way of artistic expression gradually. [5] For literary works, there are aesthetic significance in *Blank* and the *Blank* here is not an absolute but a relative one with profound meanings. It can create various kinds of uncertainty that trigger readers' desire to fill in the *Blank* so that readers are motivated to recreate something new and infinite understandings appear. By contrast, if a story tells everything in detail to the readers and leaves no space for meditation and imagination, it is certain to be unattractive. Besides, it is also because of the employment of *Blank* that the Chinese paintings, gardens, calligraphy, classical music etc. appeal so much to the foreigners, for *Blank* can endow the stories with a poetic beauty.

2.2. *Blanks* in Content

In both *The Garden Party* and *Bliss*, there are *Blanks* in their contents, especially in the building-up of characters and dialogues between characters. Mansfield often depicts her characters by penetrating gradually into their inner world instead of showing their appearance and characteristics directly. In *The Garden Party*, Mansfield never tells the readers about Laura's social status and growing environment, but they can still infer such information that Laura lives in a rich family and is well-educated, since they can easily afford the garden party and get everything prepared. Besides, she is

quite talented in presenting the main character's inner mood by using the minor characters. [6] For example, Mr. Sheridan and Jose show their indifference to the poverty-stricken neighbor, so Laura feels quite anxious and puzzled. When she arrives at the gate of the dead man's house, she is rather nervous and awkward, "A little woman in black showed in the gloom", and in the little house, "there was a woman sitting before the fire", "Her face, puffed up, red, with swollen eyes and swollen lips, looked terrible." When Laura wants to get out, the widow's sister "brushed past Laura over to the bed" and tells her not to be afraid and "fondly she drew down the sheet." These women seem to treat death as usual because they have already had their own interpretation of death. On the contrary, Laura has no experience and it's her first time to get to know about it. With their encounter, she comes to realize the cruel reality and the superior knowledge of death. Compared with *The Garden Party*, Mansfield apparently put more emphasis on Bertha's interior monologue in *Bliss*. And the plot is unfolded little by little with the changes of Bertha's psychological world. From her monologue, it can be seen that Bertha is a housewife who is full of bliss and energy. She believes she already has everything in her life and everything is completely perfect.

When she talks with her husband on the telephone and wants to share her happiness with Harry, she found that she has nothing to say:

"Yes, perfectly. Oh, Harry!"

"Yes?"

What had she to say? She'd nothing to say. She only wanted to get in touch with him for a moment. She couldn't absurdly cry: "Hasn't it been a divine day!"

"What is it?" rapped out the little voice.

"Nothing. Entendu," said Bertha, and hung up the receiver, thinking how more than idiotic civilization was. Here is the *Blank* in the dialogue of characters. Bertha feels very happy and intends to tell Harry something, but she cannot express it verbally, and Harry is unable to understand her feelings, so she has to attribute it to the idiotic civilization. *Blank* here implies that the bliss she has is likely to be unrealistic and her marriage is not so perfect as she thinks. The similar conditions also appear in *The Garden Party*, for example, when Laura is going to her neighborhood, her mother stops her.

"Only the basket, then. And, Laura!"—her mother followed her out of the marquee—"don't on any account—"

"What mother?"

No, better not push such ideas into the child's head! "Nothing! Run along."

Laura's mother never tells Laura what she intends to say, but readers can infer from the whole text after finishing the story—Her mother prevents her from the reality! When Laura doubts whether they should stop the party for the dead man, Mrs. Sheridan gives her a beautiful hat and pops it on her head and manages to distract Laura's attention. She wants Laura to live in her disillusionment forever, therefore she avoids telling her anything bad. The *Blank* here invites the readers to ponder over Mrs. Sheridan's intention and helps

readers to probe into the theme of this story.

In summary, *Blanks* in content are mainly used in character depiction and dialogues, in order to highlight the characters' background information like social status and personalities, which further directs readers to infer the themes transmitted by the author.

2.3. *Blanks in Structure*

Blank in Mansfield's short stories can be found in the beginning and the end of the story. Unlike stories that follow the conventional sequence of exposition, complication, climax, falling action and denouement, Mansfield seldom sets a clear beginning for her stories. [7] To take *The Garden Party* as an example, it begins with the ideal weather of the perfect day, and the party is held without any prelude. As a result, the readers are encouraged to unravel the suspense. The same thing occurs in *Bliss* as well. Bertha performs a lot of childish acts disorderly and feels blissful for no reason. The description of the scenes and characters is fairly exquisite and long, and the conflict comes almost together with the end of the story. It is obviously shown In *Bliss* when Bertha finally realizes the affair between her best friend and her husband, she is at a loss. At this point, she is able to do something but she just runs over to see the pear tree and asks: "What is going to happen now?"

In *The Garden Party* again, Laura rushes out of the dead man's little house and meets Laurie when she sobbed:

"It was simply marvelous. But Laurie—"

She stopped, she looked at her brother. "Isn't life," she stammered, "isn't life—" But what life was she couldn't explain.

Laura is a young girl away from death and poverty as can infer from the above narration, so she cannot immediately tell her understanding of life, with the encounter of the widow's family though. But she has been aware that life isn't so good as she used to think. And the open ending allows the readers to suppose what Laura is going to say with their own experience of life.

Blanks is applied here when the readers are anxious for the result, but the story ends without any resolution. Consequently, the readers have to use their imagination combined with little details in the text to make out the ending. In this way, it's possible that the story will leave a rather deep impression on its readers. [8]

To conclude, *Blanks* may appear in the beginning, middle part and the end of the story. In the beginning, it is used to attract the readers by raising some questions in their mind for lack of basic background information. In the middle part where a conflict or climax often occurs, this technique plays a role in revealing the character's restless and complex interior monologue. And at the end of the story, *Blanks* appear again to leave for readers' wild imagination and inference of the author's intention.

2.4. *Blanks in Themes*

Chinese traditional philosophy lays much emphasis on

non-being. To coincide with it, the spirit of blank in literature and various fields of art emerges and gets full development. Generally speaking, it is the traditional Chinese philosophy that produces the art of *Blank*. And it believes that *being* depends on the *non-being* to exist. [9] As for the short stories, it would be difficult for the readers to understand the themes unless they make out the *Blanks* in them.

In *The Garden Party*, Laura goes to visit her poor neighbor with her hat dressed in the party. However, she finds that her clothing so antipathetic that it makes her embarrassed in the wretched low house. So, she gives a loud childish sob and then cannot wait to leave. She says to the widow's sister: "Forgive my hat." In fact, she is not only apologizing for her hat, but also for her vanity, her unawareness of poverty and sorrow, and her family's indifference for death. [10] In this sense, Mansfield reflects the inequality of society between the upper-class and working class. In addition, the basket Laura carries is not a simple basket, but symbolizes the hypocritical kindness to the poor. She presents people's moral depravity and faithfully worries about human's loss of sympathy. She hopes that the rich will learn from Laura's story and goes out of the unrealistic happiness, therefore she put a lot of emphasis on the road from the garden gates to the little cottages, which represents the link between the rich and poor. "It gleamed white and is very quiet, a dog running on it like a shadow. Laura stops for a minute until the kisses and laughter are all inside of the gate. Then the road is broad and crossed, smoky and dark..." That is, Mansfield encourages the noble men to step on this road and confront with the cruel reality.

It has the same effect as *Bliss*. Bertha always feels blissful but, in fact, almost everything appearing in the story is not perfect and even false. The pear tree under the moon seems dreamy but it has a grey cat under it; her husband seems decent and passionate but is actually greedy and indifferent to his wife and daughter; her friends seems educated but their conversation is rather vulgar and indecorous... [11] Bertha lives completely in her imaginary world and is easy to be broken if she cannot go out of the disillusionment and admit the reality.

Another theme in *Bliss* shown by *Blank* is Mansfield's blame for the social constraint on women and thus appeal for women rights:

"But all the same Bertha threw off her coat; she could not bear the tight clasp of it another moment, and the cold air fell on her arms." As a matter of fact, the coat here embodies the limitations and the cold air symbolizes reality. Once the coat is taken off, the cold air comes in. Bertha has a chance to face the truth here, but she is overwhelmed by the bliss in her bosom.

In case of Bertha's tragedy, Mansfield calls upon women's self-awareness and encourages them to create a new life. [12]

Without the *Blank* employed, the themes would not be so impressive that attracts so many researchers to study and to keep it new and fresh; without the *Blank*, the themes would hardly be highlighted and eye-catching; without the *Blank*, the themes would be unlikely to have richer and richer meanings that explored by different persons.

3. Conclusion

Up to now, there have been many researchers studying her short stories according to feminism, modernism, narrative styles, building-up of characters and so on. However, few have realized the great influence of the theory of *Blank* on her writings.

All in all, Katherine Mansfield is a master of linguistics and various artistic skills, including *Blanks*. *Blanks* in content are mainly used in character depiction and dialogues as a substitute for the direct and boring introduction of background information. When it is used in structure building, it plays different roles in different developmental parts. As a matter of fact, The *Blanks* in content and structure are often applied to leave more space for the inference of themes, because different readers may offer different ingredients into the blanks, using their wild imagination. From *The Garden Party* and *Bliss*, she shows the amazing beauty and effect of *Blank* originated by the Chinese philosophy to the readers. And this thesis may help the westerners acknowledge and study the Chinese culture and therefore promote the cross-cultural communication.

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