

Essay F

An essay on “Spring pictures” by Katherine Mansfield

We may say that springtime is always the utter bliss and it's always worth savoring this season. The situation is not always like that, though. Sometimes the beauty of nature can be overshadowed by our personal problems or the unpleasant surroundings. In the story called “Spring pictures” by the famous New Zealand writer Katherine Mansfield the first impression created by this time of the year is unfavourable (the narrator perceives “creaking barrow”, “sickly smell” and “faded cauliflower” instead of the fresh air, twitter of birds and beautiful flowers).

In the first part of the story everything tries to deceive the true feelings and emotions, so that even a “tattered frill of soiled lace” is trying to “charm and entice you”. The metaphor (“ogling beauties”) emphasizes this feeling of falsehood. Even the things that are usually considered to be enjoyable are unpleasant – no one wants to listen to live music, because it is produced by unskillful musicians and a singer with a “harsh voice” who pretend to be the world's best artists.

Some details are placed in order to evoke the feeling of disgust towards that world of the “old hag” selling faded flowers and that “fat old woman” fallen asleep “with her nose in the lettuce roots” (it might be a stylistic device called hyperbola, since it is highly doubtful that any human being could be sleeping in such an inconvenient posture). The reader is absorbed in this world of dirty market, feels the author's contempt for the cheap and trumpery goods sold there: the narrator enumerates various things on sale – all kinds of toys, all sorts of flowers, ‘comic’ postcards which were scrutinized by the old man “with a balloon of the belly”. This metaphor is connected with the toys described before, so that the man himself now resembles a plaything, because he does not look natural, he is just one of those items on sale. Such a detailed enumeration which implies that the old man is something being on display is ironic. It somewhat mocks the materialistic outlook on life. The orchestra and the singers who are dressed in expensive clothes (one singer is “dressed in cream cashmere and one in blue”) can also illustrate the materialistic outlook on life – the showman who hired those people doesn't care either for the quality of the music they produce or for the attitude of the possible audience towards them. The showman thinks that if the musicians are dressed appropriately for their profession, the public will not notice their being poor artists.

And here appears the theme of deception and vanity. The showman belongs to this world of the poor women from the market and is dressed partly in shabby clothes (the author uses descriptive adjectives “**burst** carpet slippers”, “the **broken** rim of the hat”). Nevertheless, that “lean man” does not want to live in that broken, wretched world, he tries to escape by sticking a magnificent “feather through the broken rim of his hat” and putting on “white kid gloves”. Having done that, the showman feels self-assured – his voice becomes “rich and ample” (the author uses synonyms in order to underline the fact that for that “lean man” it is a matter of vital importance to seem rich and successful). The verb of movement (“to swagger”) also confirms the presence of self-confidence in the person who is, in reality, just a “lean man” dressed in incompatible items of both cheap and expensive clothing. That man is only pretending: he has a “gilded stick” (not a gold one), but the performances made by his orchestra are dull and the public knows them very well, remembering many not-so-pleasant details referring to anything but music (bunion on the pianist's big toe, the violinist's bitten nails). A humorous tint is added to the text by means of the oxymoron (“these things are as **old** as the **new** songs”). All these details create both an ironic and tragic effect. Also in the first part of the story the reader may notice some words referring to the weather (“warm rainy air”, “voice thunders”, “dribble”). All these words are associated with a grey rainy day which makes the person feel bored or even scared and desperate.

In this part of the story we see the market with the narrator's eyes and we might notice that this person feels uneasy and is probably frightened, for she is alone and around her there are only ugly and lonely saleswomen (one of whom even resembles a hag). Everything is so detailed but at the same time it is perceived as a flow of unconnected episodes evoking various feelings and emotions. The adjective “dusky” represents the overwhelming darkness which is fighting with the bright blurs of “roses”, “lilies”, “violets” which are not fresh, “bunched together” and placed in the “creaking barrow”, so that it is hard for those bright flowers to beat the evil. This sequence of detached events and places which are almost some sort of reminiscences (toys, flowers, music, hag, darkness, harsh voice) may resemble a dream that the narrator has in

which the darkness is still strong, but for now it is defeated by the soft brightness of the flowers that inspire hope in the main heroine.

In the second part we realize that the main hero is female. Moreover, she is obviously the narrator in the 1st part telling the story from the first person perspective. She is a lonely woman who is waiting for a very important letter – probably a response from somebody dear to her heart. The theme of waiting is further developed by introducing the watch that the woman keeps under her pillow. That makes us realize that waiting engages her completely.

This part of the story begins with an exclamatory sentence proclaiming that nothing is lost yet (“Hope!”). This exclamation is repeated throughout the text of this part. The narrator even behaves like a happy person (the epithet “**gaily** swinging”). The theme of hope recurs when she asks the concierge whether there is a letter for her. Unfortunately, there is nothing. She feels collapsed, she realizes that everything is over. It is symbolic that this part finishes with the sentence (“In vain”) which is the contextual antonym for “Hope!”.

The reader may notice that the author creates the feeling of uncertainty and indecision with the questions placed in the first paragraph of the second part (“Is this my room? Are those my clothes folded over an armchair?”). These questions produce a very frightening impression as if the main heroine is going crazy and her perception of reality is distorted, as if she is not herself, her soul has left her body as if she has died. But the ticking of her watch brings her back to reality by reminding her of something she was expecting. The theme of uncertainty is further developed by means of the change of the relationship between the narrator and the main hero. In the first part and at the beginning of the second part it is the 1st person narrative, the reader sees the world with the main heroine’s eyes (that is why the outer world is so hostile), but in the last paragraph of the 2nd part and in the 3rd part of the story we see everything from the perspective of another person, someone who is a stranger now watching the previous narrator.

The main heroine tried to persuade herself to deceive everyone and “play just once that charming little thing”. But she can’t force herself to do that – the author used a number of synonyms in order to reinforce the impression of her suffering caused by lying to herself (“Coax her—court her—implore her”). Also the falsehood mixed with hope is noticed through the exclamations “Play faster—faster—Hope!”). She needs to act quickly because soon she will burst into tears and start feeling desperate, wretched.

The theme of loneliness is created by the description of “the empty bed” (the simile – “unsheltered field”). The verbs representing sounds also add something to the horror and general suspense the narrator experience (“trembling waves”, “thrumming”, “throbs”, “jangles”).

The metaphor “faded”, which is repeated in the 2nd part of the story and used to describe the main heroine, is very symbolic – the woman may be perceived as a flower sold on that market – beautiful, natural, but located in the wrong place, having to pretend and to dress in “a tattered frill of soiled lace”. Everything may also resemble a fairy-tale in which a hag bewitched a beautiful young lady and turned her into a flower. But unlike the fairy-tale, this story doesn’t have a happy ending – the enchanted beauty, who is still lonely and waiting for the person who would save her, loses hope, and as a result the flower fades.

In the third part of the story the reader notices that the nature is in harmony, full of life, but the woman is unhappy. Not everything is calm in nature, though (“heavy curls”, “ripping”). In the image of nature we may notice reminiscences of the market (“the sky is the colour of **lilac** and the river of **violet** leaves” – these are both the names of shades of colour and of different flowers, some of which are sold by “the hag”).

The theme of waiting is still present (exclamation “No, too soon, too soon!”). The narrator is preparing herself for a desperate step, but still needs a pause in order to dare to carry out her plan. But nature doesn’t even notice her drama (“it is a beautiful evening”; “There are big bright trees along the path full of trembling light”). Her desperate movement and the phrase “And then she is gone” imply that the heroine committed suicide, but we can see that she was just a “blur against the tree, white, grey and black, melting into the stones and the shadows”, a blur against the “squares of gold light show in the houses” which all claimed that the life was going on. But after stating that the main heroine with all her hopes, her fears has gone, the narration stops. Her being just a blur against a tree resembles the sound of a broken string that vibrates for the very last time, which means that everything is over and there will not be music and beauty anymore.