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The Glamor of Poetry: A Comparative Study of Zhang Ailing's and Katherine Mansfield's Short Stories

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the poetic features of Zhang Ailing's and Katherine Mansfield's short stories. Through the use of sharp, fresh images, poetic language and atmosphere, they create a literary world full of poetic charm. Both Mansfield and Zhang employ the symbolist technique of imagery, and have the remarkable capacity to describe the natural images, such as the sea of Mansfield and the moon of Zhang, in ways that are simultaneously lyrical and symbolic. The paper argues that their language had the elegance and conciseness of poetry, and fully shows their capacity for poetic description, though in different ways. They minimize the importance of plot and internalize the conflict, noteworthy for detailed description and atmosphere of the story. If we use different colors to represent the impressions of their works, Mansfield's is melancholy gaseous blue while Zhang's is desolate steel gray. By exploring the similarity and difference between the two writers concerning the three aspects of their artistic features, this paper points out that Zhang and Mansfield have different cultural backgrounds but similar traumatic experiences and these life experiences become important content and motivation for their literary creation.

中文摘要

本文针对张爱玲和凯瑟琳·曼斯菲尔德短篇小说的诗性特征进行比较分析。通过使用灵敏、新鲜的意象、诗意的语言和情绪、氛围的表现,她们创建一个充满诗意魅力的文学世界。曼斯菲尔德和张爱玲在她们的故事中使用充满寓意的意象,具有描述自然意象的非凡能力,如曼斯菲尔德小说中的大海和张爱玲小说中的月亮,这些意象都同时具有抒情性和象征性。本文认为张爱玲和曼斯菲尔德以不同的方式显示了诗意的描述能力、语言的优雅和简洁。她们淡化情节,注重细节描写和氛围塑造。本文认为,如果使用不同的颜色来代表她们各自的作品,曼斯菲尔德的是忧郁的柏林蓝而张爱玲的则是苍凉的钢灰色。本文通过探讨两位作家在艺术特色上三个方面的相似与差异,指出两位作家有着不同的文化背景但是相似的创伤经历,而这种生活经历成为她们的文学创作的重要内容和动机。

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Zhang Ailing (Eileen Cheung) is a female writer with unique personal charm who is very influential in the history of modern Chinese literature. She understood the essence of traditional Chinese poetry and integrated it into her writing. Just like Katherine Mansfield's work, her short stories are like deliberately wrought pieces of art, akin to elegant and concise poems. Katherine Mansfield has consistently been praised for her sharp and suggestive images and symbols, the musical analogy and the compression and understatement of her prose, and her capacity to pack complex emotion and thought into the deceptively simple and direct outlines of her stories. The paper believes that concerning the artistic features, Zhang and Mansfield have lots of similarities. Through the use of fresh images and symbols, lyrical language, and emphasis on the atmosphere and feelings, their stories create a literary world full of poetic charm, or "a delicate female aesthetic" in Elaine Showalter's words (Showalter 33). Their stories have the unity and the concise diction of implied emotions which characterize the lyric, and they convey, as lyrical poets do, the sensitivity of human situations.

Every time people read Zhang's stories and novels, they all sigh over the fate of the vivid characters constructed under her pen and repeatedly praise her unique talent. However, the fascinating destiny of the characters and the abundant material in the stories hide the beauty of classical poetry. She creates "a prose style that is sophisticated and rich in imagery" (Hoyan 159). Those amorous and evocative images and symbols, coupled with the desolate background, give the stories a kind of unintended elegance, and diffuse a light flow of poetic flavor. Zhang successfully integrated the traditional images in poetry, such as the moon, the rain, the flowers and the mirror into modern short stories and made innovations on the basis of inheritance. The images play a great role in creating atmosphere, expressing emotion and characterization.

As a traditional image in classical poetry, the moon is the most widely used image in Zhang Ailing's stories. In Chinese traditional literature, the moon is simple, hazy, harmonious and tranquil, and it is the expression and spiritual sustenance of warmth, lovesickness and loneliness (Chen 242). However, the moon here often implies a desolate life of the characters, and the fusion of feelings into the scenes has a moving power. In "The First Pot of Incense," the moon shines on Ge Weilong, and "her body has been wholly saturated in the moonlight, as if it is brightly lit" (Zhang, *Love* 40). After the cruel declaration made by her beloved young man, Qiao Qiqiao, that he did not care about her, never had any intention of marrying her, and would not even give her love, Ge Weilong felt her fervent heart turned cold, as if submerged in the cold moonlight. And a cool head comes with a cold heart. She realized the truth of life ahead of her and the nature of people around her. Her sense of loneliness and the desolation of life strike her like an epiphany. Similarly, in "The Gold Lock," the moon helps to reveal the psychology of the characters. The mother, Cao Qiqiao, lets her son, Changbai, accompany her the whole night smoking opium and leaves his wife alone, and the moon outside the window is "behind dark clouds," and "one moment it is black, and the next it is white, so it is like a dramatic ferocious face" (Zhang, *Love* 247). "Little by little, the moon comes out of the clouds and gives out a stream of bright light beneath the dark clouds, like the eyes under the mask" (Zhang, *Love* 247). The moon here seems like a ferocious scary face, and it implies the extremely distorted psychology of Qiqiao in her desolate life.

Different from Zhang's image of the moon, the sea and the bay are the most noticeable scenes in Mansfield's short stories. As Christine Baker points out, "Although Mansfield shared Chekhov's love of simplicity in writing, and particularly in natural description, her imagery tends to the poetic, and her descriptions are highly picturesque" (Mansfield, *Bliss* VII). Mansfield carries the technique of poetry into the short story with the rhythms of image and sound. At the beginning of the 5th part of "Prelude," we are deeply touched by the vivid images of the sharp and chill dawn, "red clouds," "a faint green sky," the breeze "dropping dew and dropping petals," "the somber bush," tiny stars which "dissolved like bubbles," and the creek "running over the brown stones" and "spilling into a swamp of yellow water flowers and cresses," and we seem to feel the coldness of the morning, see the beauty of the clouds and sky, hear the singing of the creek and smell the fragrance of the flowers (Mansfield, *Collected* 15). However, the image of sea and bay is the most prominent image in Mansfield's stories. And the seemingly ordinary image always appears at critical moments and is the embodiment of the theme of her stories as well as the representation of the characters' psychology. It performs important functions in revealing theme, characterization and creating atmosphere in her stories. "At the Bay" is a good example, for the sea serves many purposes throughout the story, and as Saralyn R. Daly suggests, "The sea has dominated the entire story" (91). In the first part of the story, the serenity and hazy beauty of the bay in the early morning sea-mist is presented before the reader like a lyric. Here, Mansfield draws on the film industry's shooting and editing techniques, using the stretching of the horizon, the transformation of the angle of view, and the experience of the senses, to make a picturesque and poetic effect of the scene—"A heavy dew had fallen. The grass was blue. Big drops hung on the bushes and just did not fall; the silvery, fluffy toi-toi was limp on its long stalks, and all the marigolds and the pinks in the bungalow gardens were bowed to the earth with wetness. Drenched were the cold fuchsias, round pearls of dew lay on the flat nasturtium leaves. It looked as though the sea had beaten up softly in the darkness, as though one immense wave had come ripping, ripping – how far?" (Mansfield, *Collected* 165) Mansfield breaks the tradition of narration and comment in previous novels and presents people and things with implicit, elliptical and elegant language and a quiet tone: "A poetic intensity and concretion is sustained throughout, the sound of words and the prose rhythms conveying and enriching meaning" (Hanson and Gurr 77).

If in the first paragraph Mansfield appeals to the visual senses to depict the static beauty of the bay in early morning, then from the second paragraph she begins to present the dynamic beauty. The author seems to become an ear, which is keen to capture the sound of the sea, the streams and other sounds in nature, so that the readers can fully feel the tenderness of the bay from the hearing. In the second part of the story, Stanley and Jonathan swim in the sea, and in contrast with the workaholic Stanley, Jonathan's ideal is freedom, as we can see from the following words – "At the moment an immense wave lifted Jonathan, rode past him, and broke along the beach with a joyful sound. What a beauty! And now there came another. That was the way to live – carelessly, recklessly, spending oneself" (Mansfield, *Collected* 168). The sea and waves represent the freedom and enjoyment of life. Similarly, the sea in "How Pearl Button was Kidnapped" symbolizes freedom and nature, and also the free and happy life of Maori people. And in this short story, two Maori women easily kidnapped a middle-class child – Pearl Button, but the child felt extremely happy with them. The

abduction can be actually understood as the Māori's saving Pearl Button from a dull life. The unrestrained Maori people live freely and happily at the beautiful seaside, living in the embrace of nature. They dig shells on the beach with Pearl Button and play with a sense of joy. The sea and the nature are important parts of their spiritual world, and their living space is whole beautiful nature. This kind of life is what Pear Button has never imagined before.

Triggered by the reminiscence of her childhood, Mansfield discovered the wonderful fragments and moments of New Zealand's seaside life from the colorful memories, and presented a melancholy poetic picture of the sea in front of readers with the symbolist technique of imagery. Mansfield acknowledged that she had developed some of her extraordinary ability to describe nature, to make accounts simultaneously naturalistic and symbolic, from Lawrence. In the seventh part of "At the Bay," Mansfield uses her delicate strokes to describe the sunbaked sea and bay at noon. Different from the quiet and hazy bay in early morning at the beginning of the story, at this time: "The tide was out; the beach was deserted; lazily flopped the warm sea. The sun beat down, beat down hot and fiery on the fine sand, baking the grey and blue and black and white-veined pebbles. It sucked the little drops of water that lay in the hollow of the curved shells; it bleached the pink convolvulus that threaded through and through the sand-hills" (Mansfield, *Collected* 180). The "lazily flopped" sea, the baked pebbles and the "bleached" plants in the hot sun paved the way for Kezia's grandmother to remember and miss her dead son. In another short story, "Six Years Later" there is also a mother suffering from the loss of children, and the image of the ocean plays an important role in the atmosphere of the story. The story, based on a sea trip of Mansfield's mother and father six years after their son died in the war in France, depicts the image of a mother who is sad and miserable because the scene on the sea brings back the memories of losing her son. Here the sea is no longer beautiful and gentle, for the mist on the sea is "cold and raw," so the mother hates to be on deck (378). The sea is "grey" and is "veiled with slanting rain" (Mansfield, *Collected* 380). And the gulls flying in the cold wind and rain look even more pitiful; they look "cold and lonely" (Mansfield, *Collected* 380). Seeing the seagulls, the mother's heart is full of sadness – "How lonely they are when we pass through here . . . There will be nothing but the waves and those birds and rain falling" (Mansfield, *Collected* 380). After six years, the pain of bereavement remains, and the cold sea here undoubtedly adds and exaggerates the mother's inner melancholy and sorrow, and plays a good role in creating the sad atmosphere. Mansfield has the persuasive power to make the reader see the subtle image in apparently trivial detail, as Christine Baker observes, and "crystallizing the emotionally charged moment, her short stories correspond to the lyrical poem in their subjective aspect and condensed form" (Mansfield, *Bliss* IX).

Despite the different use of the moon and the sea images by Zhang and Mansfield, there is one commonly employed image, the mirror image by the two writers, which is highly impressive and suggestive. Faced with the repression in which the feminine work was situated, Zhang and Mansfield tried to "find innovative and covert ways to dramatize the inner life," and this "led to a fiction that was intense, compact, symbolic, and profound" (Showalter 27–28). Mirrors have a long history in human life, so their cultural connotation is quite rich, but mostly from an ancient belief that people or objects have a magical connection with their mirror image, for mirrors can grasp the soul and vitality of people. In some cultures, all mirrors in a person's room are covered after his death,

which is related to the above idea; if the mirror is not covered, people fear that the soul of the dead will be left in the house and cannot enter the afterlife. Some demonic incarnations (such as snake monsters) are afraid to see their own mirror image, because if they see their own images in the mirror they will die. Therefore, the mirror can also be used as a talisman to ward off evil. In other cultures, such as Chinese culture, bright mirrors symbolize good marriage, while broken mirrors symbolize separation or divorce between the lovers or husband and wife. The mirror is a very common image in classical Chinese poetry. For example, Du Mu, a famous poet in the Tang Dynasty wrote in his poem, "Broken Mirror" – "The beautiful woman dropped the mirror and it shattered into pieces, and who knows when she will see you again and reunite." The fragility of a mirror here implies the separation between husband and wife, which causes the continuous longing for reunion. In Zhang's stories, mirror images have similar symbolic meanings, such as in "How Much Hate." After the confrontation with her lover, Mr. Xia's wife, Yu Jiayin finally chose to give up Mr. Xia, a married man and leave him: "She's decided at last. Her reflection in the dark glass window was like pearls and jade at the bottom of the water, into which vows were cast in ancient times" (Zhang, *Red* 247). It means that all the words of love she and Mr. Xia said before will disappear, and her heart sinks lower and lower just like the dark night outside the glass window.

At the same time, the symbolic role of the mirror is mentioned by many critics and scholars. According to Heinrich Schwartz and other scholars, in medieval Europe, the mirror is the symbol of the perfect Virgin Mary and the incarnation of Christ; however, the interpretation of the image in the Narcissus myth is of a negative significance, for it is used to symbolize vanity, and it is the culprit that leads to confusion between fantasy and reality and even the destruction of handsome young people. Therefore, the mirror symbolizes purity and wisdom, and on the other hand it also represents vanity (Vinge 189–190). Freud, the famous psychoanalyst who combines the mirror image with self-cognition, believes that self-cognition, through its own reflection in the outside world, which reacts with human psychology, by virtue of its own reflectiveness in the water or in other reflection objects such as mirrors, can establish self-image, distinguish self from others, and then produce narcissistic or self-discarded attitudes toward the self. The attitudes toward the self can be different, but all come from self-certification, and are the next development of self-certification. So what really functions is the self-image that people get from the reflection. After Freud, the famous French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage had a lasting legacy. He posits that very young children, between the ages of six and eighteen months, quickly acquire the ability to identify their own images in reflective surfaces. In this period, from the superficial sense the babies see themselves in the mirror, while from the metaphorical sense, they see the image of their mothers. In Lacan's view, the meaning of mirroring lies in human subject authentication. In the mirror stage, an identity mechanism is set on the subject, and this identity mechanism will therefore affect each of his or her visual perception activities. The original impulse to self-identity is directed beyond the mirror stage to withstand the outside world, and mirrors seem to be seen as barriers to the visible world. The process of identity is an ongoing process in which one seeks a complete sense of self through a symbolic system and constructs one's own identity based on a mirror of reality or another. Therefore, Lacan organically combines self-identity with culture, language and environment.

Therefore, with the function of reflectivity, the mirror image in Zhang's and Mansfield's stories is a unique way to portray characters and projects the relationship between people. Through the reflection in the mirror, the characters acquire self-knowledge, and their psychology and disposition are also fully revealed. In "The First Pot of Incense," Ge Weilong is eager to prove that Qiao Qiqiao also loves her, so "She tried to search for his eyes behind the sunglasses, but what she could see was her own reflection on the sunglasses, small and pale" (Zhang, *Love* 37). The sunglasses act as the mirror here, and Ge Weilong feels her insignificance and powerlessness from the mirror image. Her initial anxiety and fear are all due to the helplessness she feels when facing reality, and she is unable to be independent on her own. Here the mirror becomes the reflection of true feelings in the heart. In Mansfield's "The Garden-Party," when Sheridan's big garden rang with cheers and laughter, there came the news that a young carter was killed in a horrible accident, leaving his wife and five little children in grief. Despite her mother's criticism and opposition, Laura boldly proposed to cancel the party to show respect for the dead. However, when she saw herself – "this charming girl in the mirror" in "her black hat trimmed with golden daisies" which her mother had given her, Laura's complaints and objections to her mother immediately disappeared – "Is Mother right? she thought. And now she hoped her mother was right. Am I being extravagant? Perhaps it was extravagant. Just for a moment she had another glimpse of that poor woman and those little children, and the body being carried into the house. But it all seemed blurred, unreal, like a picture in the newspaper. I'll remember it again after the party's over, she decided. And somehow that seemed quite the best plan . . ." (Mansfield, *Collected* 205–206). Although Laura and her family aren't the same, she is after all the product of her class. The hat which her mother gave her represents the heritage of their class' deep-rooted values and morality which have undoubtedly left their mark in her subconsciousness. Through the mirror image, Laura saw her real self, and in the face of it, the prejudice and selfishness of her class easily defeat her instinctive sympathy. Therefore, Mansfield and Zhang believe that abstract states of mind or feeling should be conveyed through concrete and poetic images, the "common things" of life, as Clare Hanson suggests, and it marks the work of a great many women writers who are thought of as minor or trivial because of it (301).

Concerning the language style, as writers with exquisite and delicate sensibilities, Zhang Ailing and Mansfield's poetic prose, or "feminized language" (Showalter 27) in Elaine Showalter's words, is perfectly integrated with the narrative of their stories. However, both of them have their own unique features to spice their style with poetic flavor. Zhang is good at mastering the subtlety of the world and the psychology of her characters, and her ingenuity is shown in the exquisite use of "bixing" and synesthesia. Bixing is a traditional rhetorical figure of speech in classical Chinese poetry, and Zhu Xi, a famous scholar in the Song Dynasty, accurately explained the basic features of "bixing": "bi" is to posit a likeness or similarity between one thing and the other; "xing" is to start something else in order to bring about the words to be sung. Different from metaphor, "bixing" has no metaphor object, but only the noumenon or the primary subject, and usually it can't be fully expressed in just one sentence. In her stories, Zhang Ailing used the smart and witty "bixing" in many places, which makes the desolate feeling of her stories tangible, fascinating and unforgettable. Su Tong, the famous contemporary Chinese writer believes that it is the most powerful thing in Zhang

Ailing's stories and novels, and he always thinks that such works are absolute Chinese, more casual than poetry, more rigorous than vernacular, and become novels in the process of approaching novels" (Su 223). In "The Red Rose and the White Rose," there are the following words: "If you marry a red rose, over time, the red becomes the mosquito blood on the wall, while the white is still the moonlight before the bed; If you marry a white rose, the white becomes a grain of rice stuck to your dress while the red is a cinnabar mole on the breast" (Zhang, *Red* 51). Here, though there's no metaphor objects, the readers know clearly what the author is talking about by starting with the roses. However, no matter whether it's the red rose or the white one, the married one (the wife) is disliked and detested by the husband, and the lover or mistress is always enchanting. This euphemistic, subtle and creative expression of the relationship between men and women lingers in the depth of readers' hearts like a beautiful but melancholy poem.

Synesthesia is another rhetorical device that is palpable in Zhang's stories. This technique has often been used in traditional Chinese poetry since ancient times, such as the famous line from Song Qi's "Spring in Jade Pavillion" – "On pink apricot branches spring is noisy and wild." The visual image of spring is not enough, so the auditory sense of the word "noisy" adds to the vividness of the picture. Zhang has an accurate knowledge of sensual pleasures which can be seen from the use of synesthesia. In "The First Pot of Incense," Ge Weilong was very excited when she saw so many beautiful clothes in the cupboard for the first time. So even in her dream she was trying on the clothes: "... one piece after another; the wool, fluffy, is like provocative jazz; thick velvet, is like the melancholy theme song of a classical opera; soft and smooth satin, is like 'the Blue Danube' which runs all over the body, cool and shady" (Zhang, *Love* 17). Ge Weilong was enjoying a dreamy state of intoxication for more than one sense – the touch, the sight, the sound somehow get interlinked, and thus one sense triggers another sense. Synesthesia makes Zhang's language more vivid, and adds more layers of meaning to the story for the readers' pleasure. By blending different senses, Zhang makes her language more artistic and appealing. As Hoyan believes, Zhang's use of poetic diction and splendid imagery serves as a striking contrast to the insipid style of most of her contemporaries (Hoyan iii).

In contrast, the poetic flavor of Mansfield's language is manifested in her use of impressionism and interior monologue. Her writing is often described as "a kind of verbal equivalent of an impressionist painting" and she is "commonly praised for her acuteness of ear, her visual memory, her exquisite rendering of impressions of the natural world" (Hanson and Gurr 24). In her creation, Mansfield captures the details and fleeting impressions of life with her keen observation and dwells on the character's memories, associations, and inner emotional reactions. Through her portrayal of instant impressions, she reveals the fragments of daily life, showing the flow and change of life itself, and the uniqueness of each moment of change:

She was still, listening. All the doors in the house seemed to be open. The house was alive with soft, quick steps and running voices. The green baize door that led to the kitchen regions swung open and shut with a muffled thud. And now there came a long, chuckling absurd sound. It was the heavy piano being moved on its stiff castors. But the air! If you stopped to notice, was the air always like this? Little faint winds were playing chase, in at the tops of the windows, out at the door. And there were two tiny

spots of sun, one on the inkpot, one on a silver photograph frame, playing too. Darling little spots. Especially the one on the inkpot lid. It was quite warm. A warm little silver star. She could have kissed it. (Mansfield, *Collected* 200)

The above passage from “The Garden-Party” is full of visual, auditory and tactile impressions. They are stored in the author’s heart, stimulated by the impulse of creation and constantly emerging to the surface of consciousness. These inner impressions are the ingenious combination of color and shape, vision and association, abstraction and concreteness, static and dynamic. Through her re-integration, a picture of life with eternal meaning is presented in a poetic way before us, though the life is what we are familiar with. Mansfield conveys the feelings and moods of the characters through an elaborate description of details and instant impressions, showing the true meaning of life with trivial things (Charters 915).

Mansfield is also a pioneer of interior monologues, and the psychological sketch is an important source from which her lyrical short story is derived. She does her utmost to present the character’s interior world, and she tries her best to capture the moment when a human’s heart has a sudden consciousness of life and oneself. The creation principle she obeyed all her life is to “melt into the character,” for she has “that sensitive feeling for characters portrayed through their own fleeting thoughts” (Gordon 11). She believes that she must be the thing itself before describing and re-creating it. In her stories, the writer never appears as a narrator, but completely melts into the heart of the characters she creates and thinks in their intonations and ways. For example, in “The Little Girl,” an innocent little girl, Kezia, wanted to give her father a birthday present, but she accidentally tore up his important writings. Her father didn’t ask her what her motive was and brutally punished her. After it, she “cuddled close to” her grandma’s soft body, and sobbed, “Why did Jesus make fathers for?” (Mansfield, *Collected* 480) At the end of the story, Kezia had a nightmare and her father slept beside her, and then “A funny feeling came over her: “Poor father! Not so big, after all – and with no one to look after him . . . ” (Mansfield, *Collected* 481). Mansfield doesn’t give a detailed description of the girl’s appearance as in the traditional novel, and the readers don’t know what she looks like, but a cute and pure little girl appears vividly in the readers’ mind because Mansfield adopts a little girl’s feelings and sights to observe and experience the surrounding world. Moreover, Mansfield, like the symbolists, exploits the “physical properties” of language, the “sound sense” to achieve “the musical analogy for prose” (Hanson and Gurr 23). After she had written “Miss Brill,” she read it aloud “numbers of times,” “just as one would play over a musical composition,” “trying to get it nearer and nearer to the expression of Miss Brill” (Hanson and Gurr 23). As David Amigoni points out, her lyrical effects are combined with short and elliptical sentences which signify the rapid movement of mind and consciousness (115).

Influenced by modernism, both Katherine Mansfield and Zhang Ailing are more concerned about the atmosphere and the expression of feelings than the dramatization of the story or the completeness of the plot, which in Andrew Bennett’s words, means “a poetics of lack,” the resistance of finality, consummation and closure (81). Many stories by them are about “moods,” such as “the South of France stories” by Mansfield suggested by Elizabeth

Bowen ([Mansfield](#), *Stories* xxii). In Mansfield's stories emotion and scene are blended to reach a poetic artistic conception. Her short story "At the Bay" draws materials from her retrospection of the early life in her homeland, New Zealand. It shows the life's rhythm and tone from day to night of a family. Before the appearance of the characters, she uses several paragraphs to present the beautiful scenes of the early morning at the bay. The "white sea-mist," the blue grass, the dew, the breeze, the singing bird, the sheep flock, the sheep-dog, the shepherd, the big gum-tree and "the leaping, glittering sea" all seem like a piece of delicate landscape painting, or pastoral poetry ([Mansfield](#), *Collected* 165). Ian A. Gordon argues that "the note of elegy" entered her work from the moment that she discovered she as a New Zealander could be an exile in England (6). Mansfield pours her emotion into the description of the bay in her homeland, and it's the blend of feeling and setting.

Different from the melancholy atmosphere of Mansfield's stories, Zhang Ailing infuses the sense of desolation into the description of the scenery and the destiny of every little person under her pen. At the beginning of "The Gold Lock," Zhang talks about the moon thirty years ago: "Young people think that the moon thirty years ago should be the size of a copper coin, a reddish yellow wet spot, just like a drop of tear on the letter paper of Cloudlet Pavillion, old and blurred. The moon thirty years ago recalled by old people was cheerful, larger, rounder and whiter than the moon in front of them; but after thirty years of hardships, the good moonlight could not help but be a little desolate" ([Zhang](#), *Love* 217). The scene Zhang describes is not only the real objective scene in one's eyesight, but also the imaginative scene in one's heart. By the use of words like "old and blurred," "tear," "hardships," and "desolate," she achieves a bleak and decadent atmosphere. If we use different colors to represent the impressions of their works, Mansfield's is gas blue while Zhang's is steel gray. The narrators in Zhang's stories always keep a distance from the characters, cold and detached, while Mansfield's narrators are often inside the characters, considerate and sympathetic. Especially in the stories on children, Mansfield depicts the children's innocent inner world vividly, exquisitely and acutely in their perspectives, entering the minds of theirs.

To some extent, there is a note of pessimism in Mansfield's and Zhang's stories, though the former sometimes make the tragic flavor thinner by her Humanism. Saralyn R. Daly observes that Mansfield never heard of existentialism, but her most consistent observation is of the absurdity that dominates life (108). There is a sense of desperation, a sense of being doomed to death in her description ([Mansfield](#), *Letters* 97). In Zhang's decadent, desolate and even ghostly world, when the reality of a variety of changes gradually destroyed the original cherished value of life, the characters find themselves small and feel helpless in the face of their powerful fate. Her style of "indifference" or even "meanness" in the portrait of characters may make the reader think of James Joyce, who uses "a style of scrupulous meanness," in his own words ([Litz](#) 50). Mansfield's and Zhang's traumatic experience in their growth and the turbulent world, or "liminal experience" of tuberculosis or childlessness, in Angela Smith's words, decide the basic melancholy or bleak atmosphere of their stories. Mansfield's lifetime was full of frustrations: the estrangement and indifference of her mother, an unhappy first marriage, the loss of her beloved brother in World War I and the torment of disease. The sense of estrangement, of a loneliness sometimes desperate, and the intense desires for varying connections

seemed to dominate both Mansfield's emotions and her prose at least until she met John Middleton Murry in December 1911. Similarly, Zhang had an unhappy childhood since her mother left her to study abroad when she was only four years old. Later the divorce of her parents and the remarriage of her father made her live in a loveless family. Born in turbulent times, the great changes subverted the prosperity and the stability of the past, and the outbreak of World War II made her life even more unfortunate. As Hoyan suggests, Zhang's family experiences and wartime impressions contributed to the formation of her anti-romantic vision (Hoyan 7). The traumatic experience of loveless, difficult, unstable, defiant, lonely and searching years formed much of the substance of their subsequent creative writing and became important motivation for their literary creation: the difficulties and ambivalences of families and sexuality, the fragility and vulnerability of relationships, the complexities and insensitivities of the middle and upper classes, the social consequences of war. Their literary presentation is closely related with "a great desire for 'discourse'" (Hoyan 27). The anxiety for communication reveals a tendency that can be interpreted as the "urge to make up for a lack of parental attention" (Hoyan 27). Their disenchantment with protective images of parents and home, and their impressions of war echo the motif of orphanage and homelessness in their stories. Hoyan believes that Zhang's fascination with substantial detail is also related to her childhood experience, for example, in "Whispered Words," she accentuates her situation as an "orphan" by tracing her childhood years through lavish description of the physical aspects of the houses she lived in, none of which give her the feeling of a home (28). The pain in their lives also creates their nihilistic outlook on life and the melancholy or bleak atmosphere in their stories, though not desperate, for ordinary people under their pens have to continue their lives and find a relative balance between life and nothingness.

Despite the suffering and traumatic experiences, the only constant thing in Zhang's and Mansfield's lives is the love and persistence in literature creation. In terms of the content and subject matter of creation, they choose people and things in their hometowns, select materials from their own private life, and integrate their experiences into it. They have the love for everyday life and find pleasures in the most trivial things. But the most important is that the poetic temperament and individualism of the two writers make their works modernist lyrics and they realized their "vision of a transcendently truth-revealing art" (1999 188). Virginia Woolf argued in 1927 that "the future of the novel inevitably had to be poetic" and that prose would have "many of the characteristics of poetry" (qtd. in Bates 135). By means of their intelligence and diligence, Mansfield and Zhang have their language endowed with the elegance and conciseness of poetry, their prose rich in imagery, so their stories unfold the poetic rays, and the charm is radiant.

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