

Blurring Anthropos in Mansfield's *The Garden Party*

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INTRODUCTION¹

This essay utilizes posthumanist theory to explore the role of animals in *The Garden Party* by Katherine Mansfield. Using insights from Rosi Braidotti, I first examine Mansfield's approach to traditional hierarchical structures of being. I argue that distinctions between humans and animals within these structures become blurred as characteristics commonly reserved for the former are attributed to the latter and vice versa. This, alongside a rudimentary "theory of becoming" seen in Mansfield's own reflection on animals, seemingly encourages a position of species egalitarianism centered by Zoe.² Nevertheless, I simultaneously call this alleged consideration into question by identifying a broader anthropocentric framework that shapes animal and human characterizations. Though animals may be used to blur traditional hierarchies, notions of "becoming" in these stories are never fully committed to imperceptibility or true zoe-centeredness; animals thus act as a tool used for articulating human expression, not unique experiences on a human-nonhuman continuum.

BLURRING HIERARCHICAL DISTINCTIONS

In *The Garden Party*, animals are frequently depicted with characteristics commonly reserved for humans (thought, emotion, and reason) that blur traditional distinctions between species. Most visible in "At the Bay," the story's nonhuman "actors"³ – Wag, Snooker, and Florrie – take up prominent roles in each of their sections. In the opening scene, Wag is introduced while herding sheep and, as Peter Matthews suggests, becomes the leading actor.⁴ It is Wag who directs the

¹ All references to Katherine Mansfield, *The Garden Party and Other Stories*, (1922; resi., Great Britain: Penguin Books, 2007) are included with in-text citations.

² See Rossi Braidotti, "Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism," in *Anthropocene Feminism*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 21-48.

³ The term "actors" is not to be conflated with narratological discourses on the distinction between fabula and story layers. I derive it from Melinda Harvey's use of "co-actor" in her article "Katherine Mansfield's Menagerie," quoted in "Katherine Mansfield's Animal Aesthetic" by Derek Ryan.

⁴ Peter Matthews, "Myth and Unity in Mansfield's 'At the Bay,'" *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 23, no. 2 (2005): 52

scene's development by guiding the sheep and emitting "proudness" for the shepherd (6-7). In essence, Wag keeps his animal form, but seemingly takes up a more traditional "human" role than the shepherd himself. Being both "animal" and "human," Wag disrupts traditional distinctions between each species.

A similar blurring of hierarchy occurs in "Miss Brill" as her fur becomes a character with its own voice and sense of identity. First introduced as Miss Brill's "dear little thing" with eyes that could have "life [rubbed] back into [them]" (110), the fur slowly gains a sense of agency as the story progresses. By the end, the fur has gained the ability to speak, breathe, and cry out of sadness when put back into the box (114). Depicting the fur with such an active sense of life makes its animation intentionally uncomfortable – it emphatically is *not* just an article of clothing. Just as with Wag, the fur becomes an important actor who disrupts traditional distinctions between animals and humans.

Just as animals are ascribed with human characteristics, so are humans symbolically ascribed with animal ones. By playing with nomenclature, a number of human characters in these stories take up names and identities commonly associated with species different from their own. Returning to "At the Bay," Jonathan Trout serves as a clear example of this, as his name signifies meaning outside of his traditional, human form (trout referring to a species of fish).⁵ Playing with names in this way is more than just creative, and it is no accident that he is first introduced in the water (7). By being invited to associate fish with Jonathan Trout, he symbolically takes on a unique image. This occurs in other stories, such as with Miss Brill,⁶ Miss Meadows from "The Singing Lesson," or even Reggie's association with "Mr. Dove" in "Mr. and Mrs. Dove."

A more drastic blurring of humanist hierarchy occurs in "At the Bay" when the children play in the Burnell's washhouse and "become" animals. Notably, it is the "proud rooster" that calls Lottie silly, and "the bull" and "the sheep" who listen carefully for noises (26-29). This practice of "becoming" animals can be read as something transformative rather than mimetic or metaphorical. Mansfield directly discusses the transformative force behind "becoming animal" with her friend Dorothy Brett, saying, "When I write about ducks I swear that I am a white duck with a round eye, floating in a pond fringed with yellow blobs and taking an occasional dart at the

⁵ Interestingly, Jonathan Trout's children are named Pip and Rag, two names that also refer to the natural world. "Pip" refers to the seed of a stone fruit and "Rag" – in its archaic form – refers to "a group of colts."

⁶ Brill a type of fish located in different bodies of water, including those surrounding New Zealand.

other duck with the round eye, which floats upside down beneath me. In fact this whole process of becoming the duck . . . is so thrilling that I can hardly breathe, only to think about it.”⁷ By “becoming” the duck, sheep, bull, and rooster, Mansfield seemingly promotes a perception of life beyond Anthropos.

AN ANTHROPOCENTRIC MODEL

Though Mansfield’s depictions of animals and humans blur a traditional hierarchy of being, whether they are truly zoe-centered is questionable. As Elke D’hoker notes, “animals are used [in Mansfield] – sometimes in anthropomorphic fashion – to highlight human questions, experiences or desires. This underlines once more the challenges inherent in the posthumanist project of moving beyond the human.”⁸ Blurring the division between animals and humans may expand definitions of life beyond the human (*bios*), but, nevertheless, often serves human expression and thought. As seen in “Mrs. Brill,” though the fur is depicted with an active sense of life, when read alongside Miss Brill’s experiences, it corresponds with her sadness – as she becomes less in touch with society and others, the fur personifies her isolation. The same can be seen in “Mr. and Mrs. Dove” when the two doves become paradigmatic for Reggie’s potential relationship with Anne, and “At the Bay” when insects become embodiments of Jonathan’s anxieties about life.

From this perspective, animals become a tool for human self-articulation rather than a means for decentering Anthropos. When characters are unable to articulate an image in strictly “human” terms, “animal” characteristics can be employed (a metaphorical rather than ontologically-challenging technique). A story that exemplifies this clearly is “The Stranger.” Mr. Hammond’s description as someone “between the sheep-dog and shepherd” does not represent a unique position on a human-nonhuman continuum. Instead, it is used to help articulate his nervous excitement on the pier as he waits for his returning wife. Similarly, in “An Ideal Family,” Mr. Neave’s legs are likened to a spiders to demonstrate his human fragility (148).

CONCLUSION

As Braidotti notes, becoming zoe-centered entails becoming imperceptible or (attempting) to disassociate from humanist patterns of thought in general. This is not an easy process, especially

⁷ Katherine Mansfield, “To Dorothy Brett,” 11 Oct. 1917, 330 quoted in Derek Ryan, “Katherine Mansfield’s Animal Aesthetics,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 64, no. 1 (2018): 29

⁸ Elke D’hoker, “Humbling the human: Posthuman explorations in contemporary short fiction,” *Short Fiction in Theory & Practice* 10, no. 2 (2020): 139

in a system of communication inherently human. While Mansfield is able to blur traditional hierarchies of being by muddling characteristics commonly associated with certain species, an anthropocentric framework is not abandoned for a human-nonhuman continuum. As seen in stories such as “At the Bay,” “Miss Brill,” “Mr. and Mrs. Dove,” and “The Stranger,” Anthropos is *blurred* but not decentered, and animals are ultimately used in service of humanist self-articulation.

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