"Ideal Wives"?:
Domestic Objects and the Façade of Femininity in Katherine Mansfield's Short Stories

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Abstract

Sofa, carpet, dressing table, dining table, to name more—Katherine Mansfield always sets up a rich variety of domestic objects to create images of modern wives and families in her stories. Although domestic objects are nothing more than ordinary and everyday life objects, for Mansfield, they not only generate a unique atmosphere of dramatic settings, but also give vivid forms to conflicts between family members, in particular the husband and the wife. The significance of domestic objects, for husbands and wives, quite differs. Putting Victorian domesticity which conventionally models the woman as "the angel in the house" into a great contrast, Mansfield delicately scrutinizes the implicit social and psychological tensions between husbands and wives through specific items or objects. Concentrating on Mansfield's three short stories, including *Bliss* (1918), *Mr. Reginald Peacock's Day* (1920), and *Marriage à la Mode* (1921), this paper suggests that domestic objects, in which a construction of femininity is embodied from male perspectives, represent the very facts and depths of the husband's frustration and loneliness in response to the wife's growing self-realization and self-awareness of her own freedom and agency.

Keywords: woman, object, domesticity, femininity, Katherine Mansfield

I. Introduction

Katherine Mansfield is a writer who writes about the theme of modern family life. Her writings on husbands and wives shed much light on the vicissitudes of marriage and familial intimacy. Mansfield belongs to those writers who deal with modern *households* in their works since she delves into the male-female relationship through a delicate deployment of household interiors. Massive, dark and over-ornamented pieces of furniture have dominated middle-class domiciles since the Victorian era (Draznin 30). Apart from the Victorian decorative principle of "superfluity" that almost "turns the home into a museum" (Logan 30), modern middle-class homes tend to display and accommodate fewer pieces. Although this simplification of interiors seems to underscore home life with both tranquillity and privacy ever since, the modern interior and its contents, saturated with social codes and ideologies, still show traces of family members' desires, conflicts and distaste. Mansfield's deliberate writing about a variety of household items prompts us to reflect on how such objects are involved in the making of an ideal wife and her assumed femininity: how are domestic objects related to such, so-called, ideal domesticity? How is the concept of the "ideal wife" presented through different items or objects? How much do domestic objects really matter to a wife? Addressing the above questions, this paper aims to explore the profound significance and influence of domestic objects or furnishings, in relation to the construction of domesticity and femininity described in three Mansfield's stories about marriage.

II. Ideal Domesticity

The Victorian age saw an overriding importance given to domesticity, where the home was defined as a place of comfort, seclusion and refuge standing "apart from the sordid aspects of commercial life" (Flanders 5). Such Victorian accounts of domesticity were derived from the gender distinction between public and private spaces: that is, a conventional dichotomy of male/public and female/private. An "ideal divide" that separated the spheres of men and women was deeply drawn between the public masculine work world, and the private feminine domestic realm, of home and family responsibilities (Pollock 68). The house's spatial significance was thus rendered as "feminine": men make their living in the public realm, while women tend the hearth (Tosh 1).

This division of labour and space brought about men and women's differing perspectives on domesticity. As men were mostly considered as breadwinners who provided for their families, they usually engaged in long-hours of labour under a variety of working conditions. For the husband, the home then became quite a private environment, somewhere other than the workplace where he could "take reality into

account" (Benjamin 167). The home was regarded as a living space that was distinct from the work-place. It served as a necessary refuge for leaving any preoccupation with business outside. As Walter Benjamin remarks, the domestic interior represents "the universe," where man "assembled the distant in space and in time" (Benjamin 167, 168). For a bourgeois man, domesticity denotes "not just a pattern of residence or a web of obligations, but a profound attachment: a state of mind as well as a physical orientation" (Tosh 4). His physical fatigue and mental tension would be soothed in this private setting. A home is then, metaphorically, a universe as well as a castle for the husband as protector, provider and dominator of this private world.

However, situations for women were quite different. It was commonly believed that Victorian women, who had been sheltered from outside crime and chaos, might exude a loving influence as daughter, wife and mother. A woman is emphasized for her biological and maternal functions, which are further interlocked into where these took place: a woman raised children and stayed at home. In brief, reproduction is naturally bound up with the interiorization of women's bodies. The women's presence at home contributes to ideal domesticity. Thus women were encouraged to take on the role of wife and mother, and be "the angel of the house", indispensible to the household as well as to the concept of ideal domesticity. The ideal qualities of womanhood: support, deference and self-sacrifice, should be praised and practiced as female virtues in the home. As a matter of fact, for these men and women living under the same roof, the actual meaning of home differs: men were in the home for comfort, women were in the home for the comfort of men. The men's dominating role and the women's dominated role are paradoxically juxtaposed in the "ideal household" characteristics, as well as domesticity.

This feature of ideal domesticity has exerted its influence on interior objects as the only rule for a woman was to be domestic, with the house being her very own place. Therefore inside the house, all domestic objects seemed inseparable from the wife. Such objects were ubiquitous in her everyday life. The primary relationship between wives and these items refers to the women's duties arranging, cleaning and decorating such objects. To neglect these decorating duties in the parlour or other rooms was definitely "a sign of domestic distress or incompetence" (Logan 35). If men were responsible for providing, then women were responsible for decorating the house. In this way, the home was turned into the wife's workplace, where her achievements must be on display and could be judged. Within such environments, male expectations regarding the arrangement of furnishings were developed as much as their wives', since women could be evaluated according to their ability to assemble and organize significant numbers of interior items.

Furthermore, the relationship between wives and objects designates a radical

sense of women's roles as objects in the domestic space. In order to satisfy their husbands' various demands, wives were required to act as embellished objects themselves, just like those decorating the house. On the one hand, the women's resemblance to domestic objects fosters the masculine idea of ideal domesticity; and on the other, domestic objects seemed to place women in their social position under the conventional spatial distinctions of public and private. The ideology behind such a spatial distinction was likely to entrap them into becoming silent household objects. As women were largely confined to the house, they were relegated to the category of a domestic object, the most essential ornament in this ideal household.

Domestic objects then became the focal point of the battleground for the husband and the wife. In the first place, as has been noted, domestic objects worked to create, in conjunction with furnishings, comfortable and convenient interior spaces; they were "functional" in the sense of achieving a better physical environment inside the home (Baudrillard 19). Yet more than their functional roles, they had ideological connotations since they would gradually "participate in a decorative, semiotic economy" (Logan 26). This semiotic economy of domestic objects is established, for the most part, to the husband's advantages or interests. Domestic objects were no longer simple objects for quotidian use, but a means of presenting ideal domesticity, to be praised and upheld by masculine ideologies. As Jean Baudrillard contends, the structure of domestic objects has been patriarchal, complete with tradition and authority that binds all of the family members together (16). Such domestic objects constitute a specific space which reveals little significance to any decorative requirements but presents "a *personification* of human relationships" (Baudrillard 16, my italics). Ideological struggles between men and women (that is, the dominant and the dominated) could be traced through the same piece of furniture: expectations and escape, companion and conflict, pleasure and anxiety. The ideal household thus offers a faithful image of familial and social structures of interiority, while the objects inside serve as "the symbolic configuration" of ideal domesticity (Baudrillard 16).

Following on this vein of Victorian ideal domesticity, we come to the very tangible context of modern households. Women's roles are connected to objects, and even as objects themselves, they denote an underlying anxiety and perplexity in such modern households as those observed by Mansfield. The principle of ideal domesticity is presupposed and upheld yet hardly considered as a consolidation (as it was never so in the Victorian age) that unites husband and wife. Mansfield delineates these conflicts implicit in distinctive domestic objects from the façade of so-called ideal domesticity in the three short stories—*Bliss*, *Mr. Reginald Peacock's Day*, and *Marriage à la Mode*.

III. Domestic Objects between Husband and Wife

It has already been acknowledged that the presupposition of ideal domesticity does not necessarily constitute a happy marriage between a husband and wife since the home's interior has different connotations for each of them. Simultaneously, ideologies of the ideal wife prevail among different household items or objects. The matter, form and structure of these objects in the home setting are there to instruct women, as to how ideal wives should behave in the various presentations of femininity. Through the different examples from the three stories, it can be seen how such a variety of objects explore distinctive emotions and relationships taking place in this "ideal" interior space.

First of all, two interior objects are examined in *Bliss*[1]: the carpet and the couch. The carpet was introduced by the Dutch into Europe from the Orient, and popularized by the British for use as a floor covering (Rybczynski 116). A new carpet has just been fitted in the dining room: "There were tangerines and apples stained with strawberry pink. Some yellow pears, smooth as silk; some white grapes covered with a silver bloom and a big cluster of purple ones. These last she had bought to tone in with the new dining-room carpet" (*Bliss* 146). Traditionally, the benefits of a carpeted floor or room would have been obvious in two ways: it makes the house warmer and serener, both functionally and symbolically. In addition to the fireplace, the carpet was another way to keep the whole house at a more comfortable temperature. The carpet warmed the room, especially as heating was still primitive. Also, carpeted rooms were much quieter when something fell (Rybczynski 116).

Another object, the couch, is one of the drawing room or parlour's central elements. The system of seating: chair, couch and sofa, had long been a part of the decor. After the 1880s, bourgeois taste led to the making of a cosy corner in many modest homes. An arrangement of such furniture is quite typical: "[Bertha] went into the drawing-room and lighted the fire; then, picking up the cushions, one by one, that Mary had disposed so carefully, she threw them back on to the chairs and the couches" (*Bliss* 148). As the chairs and couches are often chosen by designers to fit into parlour corners, they are relegated to a type of "architectural furniture," that usually stands against the wall (Rybczynski 84). In this sense, chairs and couches reflect a base of steadiness and immovability, symbolizing an unchangeable household support.

These two objects have been considered traditional furniture models in the development of interior design, expressive of middle-class stability and abundance. Living an adequately materialistic life, the middle-class family can afford such basic

[1] Katherine Mansfield, "Bliss" (1918), in *Katherine Mansfield's Selected Stories,* ed. by Vincent O'Sullivan (New York: Norton, 2006), pp. 145-55. Further references to this story are taken from this edition and placed directly after any quotation.

furniture as the carpet and couch in order to present the picture of an ideal household. In a deeper sense, these focal objects in the parlour or drawing room, being rather steadfast, play a pivotal part in the familial centripetal forces and secure social positions for family members. Bertha is depicted as a happy wife and loving mother in this household because she is convinced that "she had everything":

> They didn't have to worry about money. They had this absolutely satisfactory house and garden. [. . .] And then there were books, and there was music, and she had found a wonderful little dressmaker, and they were going abroad in the summer, and their new cook made the most superb omelettes . . . (*Bliss* 148-9)

The living conditions are, materialistically, ample and pleasant. Everything is perfectly settled: enough money is earned, domestic work is done by servants, and life is lived without worries. Later, all of these descriptions are unified with those of the carpet and couch. A picture of an ideal household thus comes into view.

Ironically, this atmosphere of perfection, order and profusion excludes Bertha's existence. Bertha seems to take charge of the whole house, including the maids and nanny. However, despite having her own opinions, she could not object to their actions. While alarmed with the incident involving the big dog and her baby, she could not even say a word to the nanny. On the contrary, compared to the maids who are busy with domestic affairs, Bertha's idleness does not appear to be beneficial at all. Bertha seems to project the image of a flawless wife, whose powerlessness and impotence are expected and appreciated within the construct of a wealthy household, where she acts as an adorning object in the house; she is merely another ornament to be found in the interior design. Thus, through these organized, yet somewhat compelling, domestic surroundings, strong demands are made on her for a kind of *objective* or *ornamental* femininity. The furniture in this perfect house conveys a message: an ideal wife should be an *incapable* wife.

The dining table and the piano illustrate a different example of the ideal wife in the second story, *Mr. Reginald Peacock's Day.*[2] The dining table, usually the largest item placed in the middle of the room, has naturally been the centre of display. The dining room is one of the most public rooms in the house, displaying the status of the family, and often marked as a "masculine" space (Logan 31). It is this very function of "display" that generates tension between Mr. Peacock and his wife, Elsa. As "Reginald walked into the dining-room and sat down before a pile of letters, a copy of

[2] Katherine Mansfield, "Mr. Reginald Peacock's Day," in *Bliss and Other Stories* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), pp. 194-207.

the *Times*, and a little covered dish", he finds that breakfast is served only to him: "There were two thin slices of bacon and one egg" (*Mr. Reginald Peacock's Day* 198). Reginald cannot help but complain that a servant is necessary so that Elsa won't have to do the kitchen work: "'If you don't want to cook the breakfast,' said he, 'why don't you keep a servant? You know we can afford one, and you know how I loathe to see my wife doing the work'" (198). Obviously, his suggestion is not derived from any sympathetic consideration for his wife, but from his chauvinistic pride: he dislikes seeing his wife occupied with housework. Yet the breakfast on the dining table continues to remind him of Elsa's diligent work, which certainly humiliates him. For one thing, he considers a servant necessary, to make their life easy, as it should be thanks to his prosperity; for another, his dining table should be a symbol of domestic wealth, and a display of their respectable status, rather than being utilitarian, for everyday eating.

Moreover, the piano, as the ideology-instituted object, is designated mainly to the drawing room. In Victorian society, playing the piano was a necessary accomplishment for upper and middle-class girls (Parakilas 98). As a domestic instrument of the bourgeoisie, the piano increasingly proved to signify a valuable form of middle-class respectability. Upper and middle-class daughters learned to play the instrument in order to illustrate their grace and family's gentility (Lustig 84). Yet the family piano as a domestic object, actually a heavy and immobile piece of furniture, is situated at the centre of a domestic realm to which women were bound (Parakilas 100-1). It is also true of the modern family. Women, as "musical angels", extend the social codes and ideologies from visual to audio: respectability should be seen as well as heard. The piano is surely the symbol of a home's decency.

In the story, Reginald, the husband, believes that only the piano shapes him into a real artist. As a singing teacher, he often uses the piano: "'They fade so soon–they fade so soon,' played Reginald on the piano" (*Mr. Reginald Peacock's Day* 203). It is a tool which presents him as a talented singer, and his life full of romantic sensitivity and emotional delicacy. The piano is also the foundation of his vanity, although he claims otherwise: "Not that he was vain–he couldn't stand vain men" (197). This notion suggests his hypocritical attitude towards himself. By contrast, Elsa does not play the piano. She engages in cooking, cleaning and keeping company with their child. Hence, these two objects, the dining table and the piano, form an interesting contrast of actions: the husband tries to keep his wife away from working in the dining room, encouraging her to become intimate with the piano, but to his disappointment, she does the opposite.

The symbolic significance of the dining table and the piano is inseparable from Reginald's vanity as related to an upper-class household. Since these two objects are

often a form of public communication between family members, or even between hosts and guests, they impose social expectations on the wives. They are implicitly derived from the husband or the public in front of non-family members. Apparently, these two objects express Reginald's hope for a pleasant and attractive household atmosphere: leisure, graciousness and escape from the trivialities of everyday life. Through these two items, he demands from Elsa the same kind of *displayed* or *respectable* femininity as that of his upper-class lady students. Therefore, an *artificial* wife is considered an ideal wife who thinks gentility keeps them apart in their ordinary life together, and she is perhaps, just like him.

In the last story, *Marriage à la Mode*,[3] the domestic objects can be categorized into those of the past and the present. William, the husband, is quite obsessed with the old pieces of furniture from their former "poky little house" (243). In his eyes, domestic objects from their old house are sweet though dated; more importantly, they are signs and evidence of those good old days:

> Every morning when he came back from chambers it was to find the babies with Isabel in the back drawing-room. They were having rides on the leopard skin thrown over the sofa back, or they were playing shops with Isabel's desk for a counter, or Pad was sitting on the hearthrug rowing away for dear life with a little brass fire-shovel, while Johnny shot at pirates with the tongs. (*Marriage à la Mode* 243)

The hearth, mentioned in the passage, is another major object often installed in dining and drawing rooms. Also described as the mantel or fireplace, the hearth displays the family's decorating tastes since it was never an efficient form of heating (Flanders 108). It was expensive, time-consuming as well as dirty. For the Victorians, the hearth had a practical and symbolic centrality in the home and was a spot where both functional and ornamental objects were concentrated. The mantelpiece and its garniture provided a visual confirmation of the familial atmosphere.

The difference between William and Isabel is shown through objects from their past and present homes. Those old objects, which William misses and cherishes, are in Isabel's words, "dreadfully sentimental" and "appalling bad" (*Marriage à la Mode* 241). As Isabel states, William has prejudices towards the new house. Although the old house is actually too small for their lifestyle, William feels great pressure from the new house, which he thinks is the major reason for Isabel's casual behaviour and gradual indifference towards the children. The new house gives William a feeling of

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[3] Katherine Mansfield, "Marriage a la Mode" (1921), in *Katherine Mansfield's Selected Stories,* ed. by Vincent O'Sullivan (New York: Norton, 2006), pp. 241-49.

alienation: “He stood in the middle of the room and he felt a stranger” (243). A room in their new house is yellow and even one of the hangers-on acknowledges that there is “far too much yellow” tinting their supper (247). The colour yellow, usually one of the modern or avant-garde shades, irritates William and makes him feel uncomfortable.

As for the other new objects, he observes them objectively with cold eyes:

> He followed her into the sitting-room. It was a long room, coloured yellow. On the wall opposite William some one had painted a young man, over life-size, with very wobbly legs, offering a wide-eyed daisy to a young woman who had one very short arm and one very long, thin one. (*Marriage à la Mode* 246)

The new painting is, to William’s eye, an ironic, absurd item. It is no longer a picture of family, but a modern painting that suits the new house.[4] Furthermore, Isabel’s dressing-table “strewn with little black and green boxes” is “another bad sign” (243). A number of makeup boxes on her dressing table indicate that Isabel’s new friends will be visiting their house or she will go out *again*. The new objects destroy William’s feeling of security because they exude an aura of too much *newness*. This sense of newness transforms the traditional domestic space possessed by family members into an open space shared by the wife’s company of friends.

The old and new household objects from the two individual houses cause conflicts between the husband and wife. The husband believes that the old house will maintain family order and keep the wife as a good wife. However, Isabel grows as a new wife surrounded by new objects in the new house. Clearly, William wants a traditional wife without the new life, including new ideas and new friends. Eventually, he refuses to acquaint himself with his wife’s friends, and indulges in the nostalgia from the past. Thus by contrasting old and new objects, a kind of *old-fashioned* or *conservative* femininity is demanded from Isabel, since for William, an ideal wife must be a *démodé* wife.

We see that each of the stories demands a different kind of femininity: for Bertha an ornamental femininity, for Elsa a displayed femininity, and for Isabel a conservative femininity. These demands are generally concealed within different household objects which have been invested with masculine ideology regarding how an ideal wife should behave in the home. Specifically, domestic objects are the embodiment of ideal femininity as visualized by the husbands. The “ideal wife” in

[4] In Victorian traditional interior design, the family portrait or the master’s portrait would be usually a focus decorated in the drawing-room. Here the modern painting (of abstract styles) replaced traditional portraits, implying the emergence of a modern household. See Baudrillard, p. 23.

these stories, must be somewhat “out of the ordinary”, an incapable, artificial and démodé wife.

IV. Domestic Objects of Her Own

These aforementioned household objects which are permeated with masculine expectations, seem to emphasize the wives’ conventional roles in the home. For husbands, domestic objects are just one of the ideological means to secure their wives’ spatial and moral positions. In this light, wives are either confined by, or considered as, those ideological objects. The husbands take it for granted that these objects are employed to regulate their wives into parts of the interior decorative furnishings. Yet these modern wives can neither be simplified, nor reduced, as one of these objects. They have their own specific perceptions, philosophy and thoughts about the objects as well as their place in the household. Despite symbolic meanings relegated to household items, whether explicit or implicit, these wives are living with them in their own way. In short, these objects make for the differences between them, and their husbands.

Take Bertha for instance. Although the carpet and the couch create a stable and permanent impression in the house, Bertha does not concern herself with such a grand atmosphere. Instead, she thinks of them merely as a decorative background for more lovely and movable objects. When the maid, Mary, brought in the fruit and a glass bowl on a tray, Bertha began her artistic decorating with a blue dish which is “very lovely, with a strange sheen on it as though it had been dipped in milk” (*Bliss*145). Not only this dish, but also the fruit, becomes her focus. Purple is the main colour because of the purple carpet: “These last she had bought to tone in with the new dining-room carpet. Yes, that did sound rather far-fetched and absurd, but it was really why she had bought them. She had thought in the shop: ‘I must have some purple ones to bring the carpet up to the table’” (146). The colour purple, usually likened to a fantastic significance of the “far-fetched and absurd” as well as the “curious” appearance of fruit on the tray, gives us a glimpse of Bertha’s vivid imagination and colour sense: without fail something will happen and send out “sparks into every particle” (145).

Moreover, the cushions on the sofa illustrate Bertha’s innovative decorating abilities. Even though the maid had already placed the cushions properly, Bertha picked them up again and

> threw them back on to the chairs and the couches. That made all the difference; the room came alive at once. As she was about to throw the last one she surprised herself by suddenly hugging it to her, passionately,

passionately. But it did not put out the fire in her bosom. (*Bliss* 148)

How the cushions are arranged on the couch may underline the home's order and symmetry, yet in her eyes, the cushion placements can be another way of revealing a sense of life, or implicitly, a sense of *her life*. What she sought was not any logical order to the objects, but an alive, different and perhaps "passionate" way of arranging them.

As has been noted, Bertha's collocation is not driven by her husband's orders. If decorations were demanded, she could devote herself to the ultimate decorating principle: order. It could have satisfied her husband. Yet at a deeper level, Bertha has her own style and tastes for the house. Through her decorating behaviour, it is seen that she still has some unfulfilled desires. Thus Bertha surely reveals a certain decorating style (rather than being decorated) that makes the home both enjoyable and beautiful. She has the ability and sense to use other objects to make the house a better place. Her self-confidence is growing and reflected in her arrangement of different objects that tend to relegate her to being a tame, malleable woman. This enjoyment of domestic objects compares with walking on the street: "What can you do if you are thirty and, turning the corner of your own street, you are overcome, suddenly by a feeling of bliss–absolute bliss!" (*Bliss* 145) For Bertha, objects can be another source of bliss. Thinking about what she wants for the household, she develops a self-awareness; she is not at all an incapable wife with ornamental femininity simply willing to be dominated.

In *Mr. Reginald Peacock's Day*, the dining table and the piano demonstrate a contrast between husband and wife: Reginald loves to exhibit an artificiality regarding these objects, whereas Elsa concentrates on their actual function in the household. Reginald's vanity demands having his breakfast served on the dining table every day, which indicates that he is still a man who remains "a pathetic, youthful creature, half child, half wild untamed bird, totally incompetent to cope with bills and creditors and all the sordid details of existence" (195). Elsa understands her husband so well that she dogmatically refuses his suggestion, and continues with her daily schedule: "But I prefer to do the work myself; it makes life so much more peaceful . . ." (198-9). However, Reginald cannot accept her decision, and claims that Elsa does the work because she loves to humiliate him (199). Elsa is dealing with everyday life trivialities and working at her will. Her attitudes are simple and firm: to live an ordinary and pleasant life. She is also a wife who takes action to confront any conflict between husband and wife. Mr. Peacock's reactions show us that he needs his wife more than she needs him.

The piano is the other object reinforcing Reginald's vanity, shallowness and

selfishness, and attests to his own artistic superiority. He has to escape from life, from the 'tiresome Elsa' through his piano. What he expresses is that "the sight of himself gave him a thrill of purely artistic satisfaction" (*Mr. Reginald Peacock's Day* 197). For him, life is "tied and bound", and his wife is the main source of this bondage (200). This will strangle him: "It seemed that she took a malicious delight in making life more difficult for him than–Heaven knows–it was, by denying him his rights as an artist, by trying to drag him down to her level" (195-6) and for him, "It was […] incredible that she wasn't interested in the slightest in his triumphs and his artistic career" (206).

In this regard, Elsa's philosophy with regards to domestic objects is remarkably pragmatic and practical. She views these objects as supporting elements of an ordinary life. Unlike Reginald, she works hard to keep everything in order. The dining table is a matter of importance for her, in order to take care of her husband and son. The piano, to a larger extent, is a way to earn a living, or more specifically, to pay for Adrian's kindergarten and all kinds of food, rather than an instrument for artistic expression. Although the dining table and piano seem to demand a display of femininity from her, her eyes are not obscured by the same vanities as Reginald's. His inability to persuade his wife to take a servant demonstrates his impotence when dealing with everyday life. In contrast to Reginald's superficial vanity, she has a simple yet unyielding attitude towards their way of life. Elsa is, improbably, an artificial, romantic wife as Reginald thought. Such an attitude reveals a support system that makes the household significant and filled with peace and serenity.

In the last story, the objects in the present household clearly define how Isabel's concepts differ from William's. In the old house, Isabel desperately longed for "new people and new music and picture and so on" (*Marriage à la Mode* 244). Isabel does not keep any of the old objects in the new house when they appear "absurd" and "sentimental." However, William is "dreadfully stuffy and—tragic" in regard to these new objects (243). As Isabel complains,

> You're always saying or looking or hinting that I've changed. Just because I've got to know really congenial people, and go about more, and am frightfully keen on–on everything, you behave as though I'd . . . killed our love or something. It's so awfully absurd . . . and it's so maddening, William. Even this new house and the servants you grudge me. (*Marriage à la Mode* 243)

In the new house, Isabel is fond of such things, as the painting or the dressing table, which William resents. Yet whether he likes it or not, the new objects gradually generate a brighter home space as well as a wife, "à la Mode".

In this sense, Isabel wants a life of her own, one that involves more than her husband and children. Her concept of life has been renewed, not only by new friends but also by new objects. William does not appreciate her new ideas and disparages her as a person, who is "shallow, tinkling, vain" (*Marriage à la Mode* 249) having had these new objects rescue her from "that inconvenient little house" (244). Despite William's nostalgia for the old objects and a démodé wife with conservative femininity, she still strives for a new lifestyle of her own. The new Isabel is a woman with new thoughts and concepts, which implies the possibility of liberation. A sort of catharsis is suggested through such new concepts about domestic objects. Thus, Isabel's ideas make the household modern and fashionable, even though it is unbearable and unacceptable to William.

To sum up, one way or another, these wives have very different opinions towards those objects than what their husbands expected them to have. Bertha undertakes certain activities that will beautify the household according to her own will and taste, Elsa wants to consolidate the household with her diligent manner, and Isabel wants to mould the household with her fresh ideas. They are more or less aware of the masculine expectations embodied in such objects, yet what is more important to them is giving these objects special placement and undergoing the creative experience. For them, domestic objects mean a potential extension of selfhood and and making their existence meaningful, rather than a dominating attitude that they are forced to follow. These wives are still able to take advantage of domestic objects for assuring their own place in the household despite certain ideological forces within. Becoming intimate with these objects, their activities and agency begin to blossom. The household becomes a place of change.

V. Conclusion

The relationship between husbands and wives is explored from an analysis of domestic objects. In different ways and degrees, these wives no longer belong to the category of "the angel in the house", but rebel silently through these objects. The fact is, the wife remains intimate with those objects in the domestic space, yet is not compelled to follow the husband's directions; she can preserve her own distinctive ways: by adorning actions, firm attitudes and unconventional concepts. When confronted by such changes in their wives, the three husbands could not do anything but neglect (Harry), complain (Reginald), or run away (William). Their most direct reactions to their wives are indifference, negation and disclaimers. They do not, or

even want to, concern themselves with how their wives are changing. On the one hand, those domestic objects reveal the characteristics of male expectations and female oppression, and on the other, the possibility of male depression and female liberation.

By researching domestic objects in order to figure out the most minimal and material cause of conflicts between men and women, Mansfield discovers moral interpretations of domestic objects, and attempts to probe the implicit social and psychological tensions between husbands and wives. She takes these objects as expressions of men and women, delineating the characteristics of objects as a reflection of the people. In vivid portrayals of domestic objects, Mansfield treats these objects more than an effective means of domestic ideologies—such ideologies as those imposed on wives. Mansfield expresses not only traditional conflicts between husbands and wives, concerning the wife's role, but also the internal breakthrough taking place in the wife's mind while struggling for her selfhood through specific objects. Hence these domestic objects, in which a construction of femininity is embodied from male perspectives, represent the very facts and depths of the husband's frustration and loneliness in response to the wife's growing self-realization and self-awareness of her own freedom and agency. These wives are becoming modern, whereas their husbands retain their Victorian mindset.

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