Narrative Works
Issues, Investigations, & Interventions

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Volume 12, numéro 1, 2023

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111283ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1111283ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Centre for Digital Scholarship, University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1925-0622 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Gładkowska, E. & Kwiatkowska, A. (2023). Drill Hall or Ball Hall? On Pedagogical Implications of the Old Age Motif in Katherine Mansfield's Short Story "Her First Ball". *Narrative Works*, *12*(1), 102–118. https://doi.org/10.7202/1111283ar

Résumé de l'article

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This article uses the short story, "Her First Ball," by Katherine Mansfield to demonstrate how fiction could be an effective tool in the process of deconstructing and transforming the master narrative of old age among secondary students of English as secondary language (ESL). The story not only offers some language points to focus on and some reading skills to develop, but it also provokes some pertinent questions about the image and meaning of old age. Aging themes in "Her First Ball" could serve as an excellent starting point for discussion among adolescent learners about old age. Moreover, such an open-ended approach to Mansfield's story could potentially lead to a deepened awareness of the social impact of the semantics of old age as well as the transformation of students' conceptualization of becoming mature and growing old. In addition, this article is devoted to rebuke such a purely didactic approach by presenting the literary text as a tool for complex pedagogical practices.

Keywords:
Age studies, Katherine Mansfield, pedagogy, ESL classes, liminality

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In one example of the research devoted to the study of old age, Michael Mangan (2014, p. 30) refers to the primary concerns of this discipline in the following words: "And the big questions to which contemporary gerontology continually returns are the questions of meaning: what does it mean to be old? To the old person? To others?" Thus, Mangan points out the semantics of old age rather than its objective determinants (if there are any). By focusing on the meaning of old age he implies that the way aging is perceived is the matter of culturally and socially constructed transmissions. Mangan also pays attention to people experiencing aging as well as the recipients of the cultural messages about this process, generally naming them "others." It seems that any further investigations of the reception of aging requires more precise identification of who exactly these "others" are.

The aim of the present essay is to make this general gerontological concern more explicit by narrowing it down to teenagers' perception of old age. The reality of Polish secondary school education does not offer a lot of opportunities to discuss students' attitudes towards aging. The overloaded curriculum rarely allows for more than a concise presentation of attitudes about old age and/or death present in a given literary epoch during Polish classes. The survey conducted by Izabela Kochan among secondary school students revealed that the majority of respondents (50.9%) claimed that the motif of old people is rarely tackled in Polish lessons (2015, p. 152). Furthermore, 84.7% of surveyed students declared the need to discuss topics related to old age (Kochan, 2015, p. 152). In view of these findings (and being well aware that educational changes do not happen overnight), it is necessary to find some alternative ways to introduce possibilities to creatively examine the images of aging as well as to provide secondary students with ways to actively shape their own attitude towards and connotations of this stage of life. The lack of tools to contemplate old age available to students seems analogous to the absence of the thanatological discourses in education. The analyses of pedagogical textbooks from Poland, Italy, and Ukraine demonstrate the conspicuous deficiency in terms of the topic of death (Binnebesel, et al., 2023, p. 216). Bearing in mind Bogusław Śliwerski's reflections on the role of the pedagogical process as a practice which creates conditions for developing social competences and fostering personal growth (2012, p. 19) the lack of thanatopedagogical procedures gives an impression of ubiquitous deficiency. The omission of an in-depth discussion of old age related topics might be an extended expression of the fear of death. Thus, old age and death are not only linked by a cause and effect relationship but also are often perceived with similar anxiety. Biennebesel, et al. (2023, pp. 216-217) imply that by the exclusion of

thanatopedagogical elements in education marginalizes the only certainty in human life and does not take into account the everyday social challenges of an individual as confronting the thoughts of death. By virtue of analogy, similar observations could be made about aging.

The evident absence of old-age related matters in educational discourses could also be perceived as an element of anxious cultural framing of old age or even an ideological issue. Margaret Morganroth Gullette (2004, p. 132) coined the phrase of "master narrative of decline," which is later employed by Mangan (2013, p. 35) when explaining the following ideological conditioning:

> At the level of ideology, however, our experience of aging is also determined by the ways in which our culture constructs the very concepts of old age: by the kinds of spoken and unspoken assumptions and messages that circulate about what old age "is," and, most importantly, by the ways in which we internalize such messages. There are crucial links between the social construction of age, aging, the life-course in general and the subject's sense of the self, and our culture contains a "master narrative of decline" which makes "positive aging" increasingly difficult.

Thus, if we cannot control the "unspoken assumptions," the topic of growing old should be put forward to an open discussion that would include reconsidering some internalized messages by secondary school students about this aspect of life. As already mentioned, the present avoidance of the themes connected to old age calls for some creative ways of dealing with this void. The possibility emerges during classes of English as Second Language (ESL) and the selection of appropriate, relatable, challenging literary texts. Although the overall orientation of didactic process of ESL classes in secondary schools is unfortunately directed towards tests solving skills necessary to pass the exit exams (e.g. the Matura exam in Poland), a competently conducted lesson based on a carefully selected short story could provide both, the opportunity for students to practice reading and speaking skills as well as the re-examination (and possibly a reformulation) of their image of old age.

In particular, exercising speaking skills in discussion and creative, personal re-telling of the story could serve as a form of mounting resistance to "master narrative of decline" so frequently present in the dominant discourses. As narrative analysts often claim, we are "storied selves" (Mishler, 1999; Cortazzi, 2001; Riessman, 2003). Thus, by telling stories we can not only organize and clarify our experience but also transform our attitudes to and visions of vital aspects of our existence, including old age (Daiute and Lightfoot, 2004, p. xi). By transforming the vision of old age from the story of decline into the story of progress, we offer

young people a counter narrative which provides a more empowering perspective. Furthermore, according to Gullette (2013, p. 35), it is also the matter of equalizing the chances of children:

> "Progress," or its synonym "growth," is the semiofficial prospective life narrative for fortunate children. Progress is a story all children ought to be able to hear. […] Ultimately […] progress narrative promises children not a charmed life but a resilient self. The story helps produce that self.

As for Katherine Mansfield (1988 – 1923), her short stories were never meant to be educational in terms of applying them to a traditionally understood didactic process. Neither do they explicitly advocate Gullette's progress narrative. However, they can be easily adapted to the needs of a ELS class context in which the issues related to old age could be critically re-examined. As a result, this re-examination could allow students to construct progress narratives themselves via analytical reading of the stories.

KATHERINE MANSFIELD'S "HER FIRST BALL"

Although Mansfield, a modernist writer from New Zealand, died at a young age, her texts often circulate around the themes of oldness. The dichotomy between the old and the young constitutes the central axis of several of Mansfield's short stories. Such a contrast could be detected in "Little Governess" (1915) where innocent naivety is opposed to cynical experience (Kwiatkowska, 2018) or in "Miss Brill" (1920) where oldness connotes isolation and loneliness, while youth stands for boldness and inclusion (Rydstrand, 2017).

Let us now turn to the discussion of "Her First Ball" (1921), which is yet another expository, brisk illustration of the age-related theme and death (Utell, 2003). The short story, which initially appeared in *The Sphere*, a British weekly newspaper, was included a year later in the last collection of Mansfield's stories that was published in her lifetime, i.e. The Garden Party and Other Stories (Martin, 2022, p. 1). In a true modernist fashion, "Her First Ball" gives an account of an inner landscape of Leila, a teenage girl, in a situation which turns out to be an initiation into the adult world, namely attending a socially important gathering, for the first time. The reader follows Leila's stream of thoughts in her retelling of the stages of the ball interspersed with the reminiscences of her previous experience associated with people she meets, and with the sounds she hears at the ball.

The confusing rhythm of the narrated story seems to mirror the protagonist's perception of the event and, at the same time, to suggest a distorted awareness of passing of time. On the one hand, waltzes and polkas contribute to the overall chaos and confusion of Leila who lacks guidance and experience to enjoy and navigate this official and stressful situation. On the other hand, the brisk transition of dances, partners, and other people she encounters, together with the non-linear narration mode, result in illusionary impression that Leila spends more time at the ball than she really does. Such a time distortion is created from the begging of the story with the opening line: "Exactly when the ball began Leila would have found it hard to say" (Mansfield, 1984/1921, p. 426). Thus, even the first sentence makes it impossible to estimate the duration of the event and points to Leila's lack of clear recollection of time markers. This impression is enhanced by the final lines of the story: "And when her next partner bumped her into the fat man and he said 'Pardon,' she smiled at him more radiantly than ever. She didn't even recognise him again" (Mansfield, 1984/1921, p. 431). The radical change of Leila's perception of the fat man, from the feeling of insecurity in his company to a socially established confidence, suggests that more time must have elapsed between the first and the last encounter with him than it is implied by the one dance mentioned in the text. Therefore, the way the time seems to be compressed in the story indicates that the ball could be interpreted as a metaphorical, epigrammatic portrayal of the longer process of growing up.

There are other elements in "Her First Ball" which also allude to the transformative nature of the event. For one thing, Leila's great excitement signals that the ball will bring some unusual outcomes. She is unable to hide her enthusiasm and her anticipation of the ball is so great that even ordinary objects, like the elements of apparel, acquire almost a sacred status:

> Oh dear, how hard it was to be indifferent like the others! She tried not to smile too much, she tried not to care. But every single thing was so new and exciting …. Meg's tuberoses, Jose's long loop of amber, Laura's little dark head pushing above her white fur like a flower through snow. She would remember forever. It even gave her a pang to see her cousin Laurie throw away the wisps of tissue paper he pulled from the fastenings of his new gloves. She would like to have kept those wisps as a keepsake, as a remembrance. (Mansfield, 1984/1921, p. 426)

Her acute attention to details is emphasised by the usage of close-up. The reader is forced to limit their perception to such random items as "tuberoses," a "long loop of amber," merely the head of Laura "pushing above her white fur like a flower through snow" or the discarded "wisps of tissue paper." But the cited passage also attests to Leila's isolation: her cousins, Laura, Meg, and Jose, do not participate in the feeling of excitement. On the contrary, they distance themselves from Laura, a cousin from the countryside, when they say, "Have you really never been to a ball before, Leila? But, my child, how too weird – " (Mansfield, 1984/1921, p. 426). Leila's cousins' disbelief seem unnatural, especially when they refer to her with patronizing term "my child" suggesting that they are even more experienced than they really are. Though thrilled at the prospect of her first ball, Leila's excitement stemming from her novice position is mixed with apprehension and the feeling of loneliness.

Furthermore, some elements of the spatial aspect of the story links the ball to the liminal dimension of threshold experience:

> Leila put two fingers on Laura's pink velvet cloak, and they were somehow lifted past big golden lanterns, carried along the passage, and pushed into the little room marked "Ladies." Here the crowd was so great there was hardly space to take off their things; the noise was deafening. Two benches on either side were stacked high with wraps. Two old women in white aprons ran up and down tossing fresh armfuls. And everybody was pressing forward trying to get at the little dressing-table and mirror at the far end. A great quivering jet of gas lighted the ladies' room. It couldn't wait; it was dancing already. When the door opened again and there came a burst of tuning from the drill hall, it leapt almost to the ceiling. (Mansfield, 1984/1921, p. 427)

Entering the first rooms of the building where the ball takes place could be understood as the transition of a girl into a woman. Such an interpretation seems especially plausible if we take into consideration the word "Ladies" inscribed on the doorplate into the cloakroom. The corridor leading to the cloakroom is referred to as "a passage" which might constitute a play with the connotations with transition and, quite literally, with a rite of passage. As the verbs suggest (the girls were "carried along" and "pushed"), the transition is not voluntary; the collective manner in which they are led into the cloakroom brings to mind the conventional course of life forced by the community. The girls enter womanhood in a rushed, unconscious

way and the following phase of their lives holds little space for them. Hence, "the little room" could possibly stand for the limited social space designated for women. Nevertheless, adulthood seems to be impatiently awaited, which is symbolized with the personified description of light: "It couldn't wait; it was dancing already." The cloakroom itself is a place of changing clothes where one sheds some parts of their attire. In other words, one transforms into the state in which they want to present themselves to others. After spending some short time in this transitory room, the girls are exposed to their destined space – the drill hall which is accompanied with exalted sounds ("burst of tunning" which "leapt almost to the ceiling"). The sudden loudness additionally marks the importance of the fact of passing certain spatial and social boundaries. Leila becomes aware that her first ball initiates some changes:

> For it was thrilling. Her first ball! She was only at the beginning of everything. It seemed to her that she had never known what the night was like before. Up till now it had been dark, silent, beautiful very often – oh yes – but mournful somehow. Solemn. And now it would never be like this again – it had opened dazzling bright. (Mansfield, 1984/1921, pp. 429-430)

Leila demonstrates here a kind of naïve attitude illustrated by her binary thinking. She perceives the reality through the contrast between darkness and brightness. The past is dark, silent, and serious, but the future appears to be bright and, by default, loud and playful. Nevertheless, her euphoria soon ceases. Once she hears the comments made by the old, fat man during their dance, her mood suddenly alters from excitement to sadness.

Leila's initial hopes are juxtaposed not only with what she clearly experiences at the ball but also with the underlying spatial metaphor of maturity and old age represented by a drill house. The ball is organised in a drill house which was quite a common practice in England after the Great War. A lot of social gatherings were organised there (Carmichael, 2015, p. 1). Nevertheless, since in Mansfield's narratives nothing is left to chance, the choice of this particular location seems pertinent for the interpretation of the story. In *Drill Halls. Introductions of Historic Assets*, Katie Carmichael (2015, p. 1) traces the origin of these buildings:

> Drill halls came into existence following the formation of large numbers of rifle and artillery volunteer units in 1859-60, representing a concerted effort by the authorities to create a

> reserve of men with military training, arranged along the lines of the regular Army.

Interestingly, the echo of this original military function of drill halls can be detected in "Her First Ball." Once the ball in the story is interpreted as an initiation into maturity, then the predictability and routine of adulthood and old age are implicitly compared to the quality of soldiers' existence. Dancers are like soldiers who first practice in the safety of a drill hall to use their pre-taught skills in an automatic manner later in a battlefield. Moreover, the training the soldiers undergo in a drill house results in particular psychological effects. Through the repetitive practice of prescribed movements, the soldiers are prepared to react mechanically, without postponement caused by unnecessary ruminations: "Psychologically, it develops a sense of teamwork, discipline, and self-control; it promotes automatic performance of duties under disturbing circumstances and instinctive response to the control and stimulus of leaders." ("Drill," online). Consequently, the ball taking place in an old drill house can be viewed as the first, preparatory phase before truly entering adulthood. In other words, the ball is a type of rehearsal which acquaints the novices with the dangers and traps of actual adulthood. Following, some aspects of the practices conducted during the ball remind of the military drill proper and disclose its psychological effects. To the fore come the dancing steps and figures as well as the social rules and conventions known to the participants beforehand and performed during the ball rigorously, yet in accordance with the pre-arranged programme and carefully selected music. At first, Leila is somewhat confused as she is not sure how to behave and thus follows others:

> She wanted to ask some one, "Am I meant to have one too?" but she had just time to read: "Waltz 3. 'Two, two in a Canoe.' Polka 4. Making the Feathers Fly,'" when Meg cried, "Ready Leila?" and they pressed their way through the crush in the passage towards the big double doors of the drill house. (Mansfield, 1984/1921, p. 427)

There is no time to ask questions, nor to read the full programme. Leila's conscious and deliberate participation in the dances is not expected as, analogously to army drilling, the dancers just need to mechanically reproduce the steps. Similarly to a military training, ballroom dancing also demands following a certain pattern of movement, and while in the army, it is the voice of an officer who commands the soldiers' movements, at the ball it is the music played by an orchestra that dictates

the performance. Moreover, the arrangement of the ball participants before the dances commence resembles the grouping of soldiers, where one team is to play against the other:

> All the girls stood grouped together at one side of the doors, the men at the other, and the chaperones in dark dresses, smiling rather foolishly, walked with little careful steps over the polished floor towards the stage. (Mansfield, 1984/1921, p. 428)

The girls seem to constitute a team opposed to the team of men. The chaperones' hesitant walk brings to mind fearful stepping on the mock-battlefield. The arrangements of participants, absence of music, the carful steps – all these create the feeling of tension.

The movements in "Her First Ball" do not seem voluntary and autonomous. Girls, as if devoid of free will, are chosen by boys or men and even when they do not dance, they seem to be commanded by someone else. In one instance, it is not explained what constitutes the external force which moves them as they are "somehow lifted," or "carried along" (Mansfield, 1984/1921, p. 427). In another, it is as if music directs their setting: "a great wave of music that came flying over the gleaming floor, breaking the groups up into couples, scattering them, sending them spinning" (Mansfield, 1984/1921, p. 428). Likewise, when Leila recollects how she learnt to dance at a boarding school, she does not cherish the memories of dancing classes as their setting also reminds her of taming. The classes took place in "corrugated iron mission hall" and the teacher, Miss Eccles was "poking the girls' feet with her long white wand" (Mansfield, 1984/1921, p. 428). In other words, she reminds Leila of a commander drilling the recruits.

THE MOTIF OF OLD AGE

The image of old age is not only rendered via the military metaphor but also through a particular presentation of adults. The older characters, like the chaperons, the old man, Miss Eccles, are plainly described negatively. The first time an adult is introduced in the story, only the characteristics stereotypically connected with old age are mentioned: "Then quite an old man – fat, with a big bald patch on his head – took her programme … " (Mansfield, 1984/1921, p. 428). What is more, throughout the story the man is consistently referred to as "the old man" or "the fat man" as if his age and his obesity were the most important. The next time Leila sees the man, he provokes even more negative observations:

> And when they came back to the hall there was the fat man waiting for her by the door. It gave her quite a shock again to see how old he was; he ought to have been on the stage with the stage with fathers and mothers. And when Leila compared him with her other partners he looked shabby. His waistcoat was creased, there was a button off his glove, his coat looked as if it was dusty with French chalk. (Mansfield, 1984/1921, p. 430)

The depiction of the old man accentuates his complete lack of attractiveness – either physical or characterological. When noticing his bald patch Leila "… felt quite sorry for him" (Mansfield 1921, p. 4). Such a perception is characteristic of a young person who sees old age in terms of physical deterioration. As it was already noted by Barbara F. Lefcowitz and Allan B. Lefcowitz, a similar picturing of aging is often employed in literature to demonstrate how the old are perceived within a story (1976, p. 454). The researchers give the example of Balzac's figure of Goriot whose "… decline is never merely exploited as an end to itself, but as part of a dramatic context where we can view other characters' responses to the signs of decline" (Lefcowitz and Lefcowitz, p.454).

Interestingly, the fat man comes out as a flaw in the otherwise perfect surroundings. His figure does not match polished floors and glamorous lights and is in contrast to younger dancers. Leila was shocked "to see how old he was" (Mansfield, 1984/1921, p. 430) and how shabby he looked (she noticed that his clothes were creased and dusty). Reading the fat man as different and unmatched is further confirmed by the man's predatory demeanour. Very early in their conversation, his words reveal self-confidence and experience. Unlike other (younger) dancers, he does not mention the good quality of the dancing floor – a

conventional conversation starter of Leila's previous dancers, but merely orders her to come and dance with him, as if it were a duty of Leila: "'Come along, little lady,' said the fat man. … But he said not a world about the floor. 'Your first dance, isn't it?' he murmured" (Mansfield, 1984/1921, p. 430). To which Leila naively responds: "'How did you know?'" (Mansfield, 1984/1921, p. 430). This scene clearly illustrates Leila's inexperience and inability to recognise the danger such a man poses to the young girls; she does not recognize the cynical attitude of her dancing partner and his calculations. Soon he starts to move closer and closer to her body while insinuating their physical intimacy, but Leila falsely interprets his movement as an act of care: "the fat man squeezed her closer still, as he really was sorry for that poor heart" (Mansfield, 1984, p. 430). The old man's monologue is an amalgamate of resentment towards Leila's naivety and cynical attempt at taking advantage of it, while Leila seems to interpret his world literally:

> "Kind little lady," said the fat man, and he pressed her a little closer, and hummed a bar of the waltz. "Of course," he said, "you can't hope to last anything like as long as that. No-o," said the fat man, "long before that you'll be sitting up there on the stage, looking on, in your nice black velvet. And these pretty arms will have turned into little short fat ones, and you'll beat time with such a different kind of fan – a black bony one." The fat man seemed to shudder. "And you'll smile away like the poor old dears up there, and point to your daughter, and tell the elderly lady next to you how some dreadful man tried to kiss her at the club ball. And your heart will ache, ache." […] "because no one wants to kiss you now." (Mansfield, 1984/1921, p. 430)

The old man simultaneously describes Leila's socially predictable future (she will be a mother herself one day and her looks will wane; she will be too unattractive and too old to take part in the ball – her place will be merely that of sitting on the stage and watching the young ones dancing) and her present predicament cunningly schemed by him (seemingly caring – "kind little lady" –, the man tries to get as close as he can to the girl's young body and to kiss her). Yet, at that point, Leila merely records the fact that the man is old and preaching, staying unaware of the man's lascivious intentions. That is to say, Leila is not equipped to understand how the experienced old man could easily manipulate her and that the old man is actually trying to make her interested in him out of pity. Nevertheless, she is shocked and saddened by his words:

> Was this first ball only the beginning of her last ball, after all? At that the music seems to change; it sounded sad, sad; it rose upon the great sigh. Oh, how quickly things changed! Why didn't happiness last for ever? For ever wasn't a bit too long. (Mansfield, 1984/1921, p. 430)

The passage reverberates the regret about the anticipated growing old. The music does not transmit excitement anymore but sadness and the feeling of passing time. Leila is drawn again into series of energetic dances and though it is not explicitly transmitted, it could be concluded that through the meeting with the cynicism and calculation manifested by the old man the passage from innocent childhood into bitter adulthood has taken place. The whirl of dances, as the military drill, allowed Leila to process and automatize the newly acquired knowledge. The change in Leila's reaction when she meets the old man again and does not recognize him signals that some very profound transition has happened inside her as if she was a completely different person with no recollection of the disparity between their statuses. Leila emerges as a woman who is not confused or intimidated by the old man as "she smiled at him more radiantly than ever" (Mansfield, 1984/1921, p. 431).

Such a symbolic reading of the scenes with the fat man, in which the ball stands for an initiation stage (Leila's introduction to the world of adults) and at the same time illustrates the (quick) passing of life (at the end of the story Leila appears to be older and thus more experienced), is further underscored by the description of another old person in the story, that is Leila's first dance teacher. Similarly to the old man, the woman is also described in an unfavourable manner, but this time the presentation focuses on ridiculing the person instead of pointing to her as a someone posing a real danger. Her expertise is undermined by the use of inverted commas while mentioning her "'select' classes" and her provenience is mocked by adding that she came from London in the very same sentence which describes the shabby room where she conducted her dancing classes. The ironic image of the woman is additionally underlined by the reference to the way she supervised the lessons. She would be "poking the girls' feet with her long white wand" while her presence evidently made the pianist, "little woman in a brown velvet toque with rabbit's ears thumping the cold piano," look "poor" and "terrified" (Mansfield, 1984/1921, p. 428)

All in all, "Her First Ball" offers no positive connotations with old age and the process of aging. Old people are presented as unattractive, unsmiling and

boring (Miss Eccles, the chaperons), treacherous (the fat man) or ridiculous (Miss Eccles as a mock fairy with her white wand and the pianist in her toque with rabbit's ears). Old age is thus the stage characterized by cynicism and grotesque, or decay and bitterness. The negative image of oldness and maturity is further enhanced by the military associations imposed by the drill house and the feeling of imprisonment that permeates the dancing classes of Miss Eccles. This in turn alludes to the type of future awaiting young people. Namely, their prospective lives bespeak of the loss of autonomy, emotional awareness, and individuality, the army-like existence. Therefore, in the story, old age is conceptualized as a loss of freedom or/and innocence demonstrating the process of aging as a part of decay narrative.

This interpretation corresponds to one of the patterns of narrative responses to old age literary characters described by Lefcowitz and Lefcowitz. According to them, certain old characters are presented in an unidealized way and they stand for "… regret for lost opportunity or for inability of a person to grasp from his dwindling hoard of days anything more than an intensification of feeling of loss and betrayal …" (1976, p. 449). Old people in Mansfield's story are portrayed as representatives of a tyrannical society and death. Lefcowitz and Lefcowitz came to similar conclusions when commenting on old age dynamic present in literature where "… characters are treated as symptoms of either an oppressive social order or an overall spiritual stagnation" or "any obstacle… to life force itself" (1976, p. 448).

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR SECONDARY STUDENTS

Turning to the pedagogical implications of "Her First Ball," the vision of old age in Mansfield's short story could be a starting point for the fruitful discussion, and, potentially, to reformulation of students' own personal attitude to this phase of life. While discussing critically "Her First Ball," secondary students could be invited to create their own "progress story" in accordance with Gullette's suggestion. For instance, assuming there are two class units (of 45 minutes each) devoted to the story, the first one could be spent on presenting some information (for example, related to the life of Katherine Mansfield) prepared by students in advance, on pre-reading activity, and on reading "Her First Ball" for the gist. As for the preliminary task, it could include finding online three most controversial facts from Mansfield biography, or selecting one of her pictures and imagining what hashtags the writer would select herself is she was still alive and posting it on Instagram. The aim of this task is to identify some social and historical context of Mansfield's work while using tools which do not intimidate students. The example

of pre-reading activity includes showing the students two pictures – the first of a ball hall and the second of a military unit. Then, the teacher asks students about their associations with the two pictures. Students are encouraged to brainstorm ideas, phrases, colocations and individual words connected with the pictures. The reason for this activity is stimulation of creative thinking and recollecting some vocabulary which will come handy in the further discussion. Moreover, the pictures direct students' attention toward the underlying metaphor of drill house in the story they are about to read. Lastly, the first 45-minute unit finishes by having students skim the story for the main idea, namely the process of growing old or what the students are able to establish about aging in their view. Additionally, the reading is accompanied by extra tasks, like, for example, identifying the characters and the relationship between them or retelling the plot of the story in five sentences.

During the second 45-minute class unit, students should be able to engage into a more in-depth discussion of the motif of aging in "Her First Ball." This could be encouraged by dividing pupils into smaller groups to enable more individual speaking time and personal interaction. One of the activities prompting students to focus on the images of old age would be to characterize the protagonist and the old man in the story. In the next step students would be asked to compare the old man to the old people they know or used to know. This task is followed up with a discussion related to the following questions: Are the old people they know similar to the old man in "Her First Ball"? How does one identify a predator? What qualities do students admire in the old people they know? Are there any positive examples of aging in popular culture, their school, their family? How is Leila going to change after her first ball? Which personal qualities are the students determined to preserve in their old age?

Another task would refer to music in the story. After identifying the musical pieces in "Her First Ball," students focus on the motif of music and dance by answering the questions concerning the emotions delivered by the music as well as the autonomy, and freedom of movement in the story. Next, the students are asked to compile a playlist which could serve as their soundtrack in threshold situations which could remind them of their priorities and their worth. Students share the most important pieces of their playlists and explain why the songs empower them.

Finally, students' attention is drawn again to the two pictures from the pre-reading activity. Students decide which set of associations corresponds more to the image of old age as presented in Mansfield's "Her First Ball." They try to decide if the aging depicted in the story has an empowering quality and they are asked to think of their own metaphor of old age. The teacher prompts the class with pertinent

questions which direct students towards the values they would like to emulate in the future.

CONCLUSION

Although Katherine Mansfield's short stories were meant for adults, at present, with the change of societal position of young people, the development of information technology and the general tendency of demographic aging of modern societies (Grigorievna, 2022), the implied readership can also include younger people, like secondary school students. Since the meaning of old age is a socially constructed phenomenon, then, naturally, the image of aging is woven with different kinds of cultural transmission. Moreover, as the above analyses demonstrated, the stories of Mansfield are not devoid of the master narrative of decline, and as such they could be employed in the pedagogical process during classes of English in secondary schools to deconstruct this narrative and build a more personal and more empowering vision of old age. Bearing in mind the observations of narrative analysts about the transformative power of stories (Mishler 1999; Cortazzi 2001; Riessman 2003) as well as Gullette's words about the empowering narratives (2013, p. 35), "Her Frist Ball" might constitute a starting point of identifying the dominant narrative of aging and transforming it into a more useful tool for developing social competences and fostering personal growth. On top of that, through the creative reworking of the existing framework of old age, the students become not only passive recipients, but also the creators of the conceptual image of aging. At the same time students gain some reading and speaking skills which proves that literary texts constitute a useful material for teaching simultaneously, social and personal competences and ESL.

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