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Anna Kwiatkowska
Uniwersytet Warmińsko-Mazurski w Olsztynie*

Short and Sweet. Symbolism of Strawberries in Katherine Mansfield's Short Stories

Abstract
Strawberries were the fruit that the Modernists and Modernism were very fond of. It thus should not be a surprise that strawberries also *feature* in Modernist prose texts of Katherine Mansfield. Although they make their appearance only in a couple of stories, and then merely for a brief moment, they should not by any means be treated as mere tiny blots belonging to the background. For when we take a closer look at them it turns out that, as is usually the case with Mansfield's short stories, there is more to it than meets the eye. Seemingly unimportant, often unnoticed and therefore frequently underestimated, this small, sweet, red and fragrant fruit makes a significant statement in every text it is mentioned.

Katherine Mansfield, strawberry, fruit, symbolism

* Katedra Filologii Angielskiej Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego w Olsztynie
ul. Kurta Obitza 1, 10-725 Olsztyn
e-mail: kukka@wp.pl

Introduction

Reflecting on the Edwardian love of food framed in certain dietary fashions, modernist narratives offer rich, colourful verbal pictures of scenes related to food and eating. It is interesting to note that these culinary images very often are sprinkled with strawberries. While reading modernist texts, we come across "strawberry spots" (as in *Howards End* by E.M. Forster or in Virginia Woolf's *James Woodforde*, *Jackob's Room*, *Lady at the Looking Glass*), or even "strawberry fields" (a famous example of Dorothy Richardson's *Strawberries*) or "strawberry baskets" (as in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*). And Mansfield in no exception. This sweet little fruit frequently features in her work, thus demonstrating not only her personal interest in it but also her awareness of its narrative potential. Moreover, in her private writings we can find strawberries, too; sometimes they are merely mentioned, yet some other time we stumble on whole passages devoted to them. For instance, in one of her letters, dated June 6, 1918, Mansfield gives quite a long and detailed account related to buying and then eating the fruit. This is how she writes on this sweet indulgence:

> (…) and we found the most *Superb* fresh strawberries. (…) They are grown there in gardens overhanging the sea. A. and I took ours and ate them on the cliffs—ate a basket each (½ lb., 8d.) and then each ate and drank our *propre thé* and became 'quite hysterical,' as she says. We could hardly move and stayed much longer than we had meant to. The whole afternoon in my memory is hung with swags of strawberries. We carried home our second baskets (just having 'one more occasionally') and talked about raspberries and cherries and plums. (*Emphasis in Original*, Murry 1930a: 194–195)[1]

The strawberry afternoon must have been extraordinary indeed since the writer mentions it also in the letter to Virginia Woolf ("Wish you were here. We'd have strawberries for tea. They come from Polperro, from little gardens overhanging the sea"; Murry 1930a: 196) and then uses it for a sketchy, little dreamy story entitled *Strawberries and a Sailing Ship*, which she notes down in her journal (Murry 1930b: 91).

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[1] All quotations from Mansfield's private writings as well as from prose used in the hereby article come from *The New Zealand Electronic Text Collection*.

Strawberry Overview

Strawberries were given credit from the very moment they appeared in European gardens, that is in the eighteenth century (Lee 1966: 21). Before, they were small and wild and treated mainly as a sort of medicine. For example, the Romans would give them to women to ease labour pains or they would use them to get rid of bad breath (Boyle 2015). When it comes to England, *The Grete Herball*, which was translated from French and printed in London in 1526, included an entry on strawberries. One could read there that the fruit was "principally good against all evylles of the mylt. The uice therof drunken with hony profyteth mervaylously" (Lee 1966: 17). Both the rich and the poor were in love with the fruit. In the times of Henry VIII, for instance, wild strawberries were regularly farmed and harvested not only for medical purposes (Lee 1966: 16–17). To evidence that, it is believed that Thomas Wolsley was the first to serve strawberries with cream during a banquet in 1509 (Driscoll-Woodford 2010). Nevertheless, it was the nineteenth century that witnessed a true blossom of strawberry interest which had its prime time in the early twentieth century. Let me quote just two examples that come from the early manner and etiquette guides and which point clearly to the importance of the fruit on the Edwardian table:

> For high tea in a large country house, *Manners of Modern Society* recommended "ripe red strawberries and jugs of rich cream…cakes of various kinds-plum, rice and sponge…hot muffins, crumpets, toast, tea-cakes…" (Pettigrew 2010: 110–112)

> The High or Meat tea described by Lady Colin was considerably more substantial than the one eaten by the poor: "bowls of old china filled with ripe red strawberries, and jugs of rich cream by their side. Glass dishes containing preserved fruits of different colours, such as apricots, strawberries, marmalade, &c., take their stands at short intervals." (Holland 2014)

As we can see from the above, strawberries were a must on the tables of the rich. The arrival of the strawberry season called for a small celebration, therefore a proper tea at that time often featured strawberries with cream. Subsequently, it comes as no surprise that the high-brow society gathering at the event of tennis tournaments at Wimbledon would eagerly participate in strawberry eating (Boyle 2015). After all, as the author of the above mentioned article on strawberries and tennis rightly notices, considering the elaborateness of Edwardian cuisine, it must have been one of the easiest and quickest desserts to prepare and serve.

Symbolism of Strawberries

When it comes to the symbolic consideration of strawberries, two interpretations seem to dominate. One is related to innocence and the other to eroticism. As for the former connotation, it is rooted in Christian tradition and dates back to the Middle Ages when the small, sweet fruit was regarded as food of the holy and the prematurely deceased children abiding in Paradise (Seibert 2007: 331). Moreover, strawberries began to symbolize the Virgin Mary, since the plant simultaneously has flowers and bears fruit (Seibert 2007: 331; Fisher 2004: 24)[2]. By the same token, in Christian religion their three-part leaves symbolize Holy Trinity and in medieval paintings depicting biblical stories related to the

[2] For that reason, "medieval stone masons carved strawberry designs, symbolizing perfection and righteousness, on altars and around the tops of pillars in churches and cathedrals" (Small 2009: 493).

original sin, strawberries often stand for earthly pleasures and temptations (Seibert 2007: 331). Turning to the latter association, the fruit is frequently linked to Venus, the goddess of love, since the shape of the berries resembles the shape of the human heart, and their colour is associated with passion and love.

A very good exemplification of the merging of the two symbolic approaches can be found in the painting by Hieronymus Bosch. In his widely discussed *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1510–1515), the artist managed to visualize both meanings at the same time. The strawberries depicted by the painter ring of innocence and pleasure, but also of promiscuity and evil[3].

After this brief strawberry symbolism background, let us now have a closer look at Mansfield's short stories and see how these recurrent emblematic associations are encoded and/or modified there.

The Short Stories

Mansfield's fictional texts in which there are references to strawberries fall into two categories: the first one includes the stories where the focus on the fruit spans for at least a paragraph (these are *Prelude*, *Bank Holiday* and *The Little Governess*); and the other one collects the narratives where the strawberry is only mentioned (for example, *Marriage a la Mode*, *The Young Girl* or *Bliss*). Although it would be interesting to consider the texts from both groups in order to examine, juxtapose and compare the extent, depth and mutual connections of strawberry symbolism in general, I am going to discuss only the three short stories with longer strawberry passages. This is due to the fact that the motif of strawberries which appears in *Prelude*, *Bank Holiday* and *The Little Governess* endows the three texts with an extra symbolic layer: depending on the context, the symbolism of the fruit changes and develops (from innocence to experience), creating an overall symbolic pattern. Besides, an analysis of both groups of texts would by far exceed the length of the article. Following, the present consideration this should be viewed as an introduction to a longer "strawberry discussion", a larger project currently being worked upon at the moment.

The first passage to be discussed comes from *Prelude*. The opening scene of the story introduces us to the Burnell family who are at the point of moving to a new house in the countryside. Everything from the old house is out. Some belongings are already packed in the boxes and placed in the buggy, ready to go. Some other (tables and chairs) are on the front lawn to be taken later. There stand also two little girls, Lottie and Kezia Burnell. Similarly to the furniture, they are left behind and have to wait for the storeman to be picked up in the evening because "[t]here was not an inch of room" for them "in the buggy" (Mansfield 1924a: 2). Fortunately, Mrs. Samuel Josephs, a less prosperous but very motherly, neighbour, offers her help and invites the girls to her house for tea. She promises their mother to take care of them until the carriage comes back to take them to their new place. Both girls are very sad and feel lonely, and Lottie starts crying. To comfort them, Mrs. Samuel Josephs takes the Burnell sisters upstairs to the nursery where her own

[3] For a thorough discussion of the strawberry symbolism in Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* see Gibson (2003).

children are waiting to begin their tea. However, the moment the girls enter the room, their mood changes but for the worse. As a form of "welcome", the Josephs laugh at Lottie whose face still bears the signs of crying, and one of the boys physically abuses Kezia:

> "Hallo! You've been crying!"
>
> "Ooh! Your eyes have gone right in."
>
> "Doesn't her nose look funny."
>
> "You're all red and patchy."
>
> (…) Moses grinned and gave her [Kezia] a nip as she sat down; but she pretended not to notice. She did hate boys. (Mansfield 1924a: 3–4)

The teasing continues when the meal is being commenced. All the children are at their table, waiting for the afternoon meal: "the S. J.s, (…) sat on two benches before a long table covered with American cloth and set out with immense plates of bread and dripping and two brown jugs that faintly steamed" (Mansfield 1924a: 3). There are no strawberries on the table but the fruit is, nevertheless, introduced by one of the older boys who, mockingly polite, asks Kezia the following question:

> "Which will you have?" asked Stanley, leaning across the table very politely, and smiling at her. "Which will you have to begin with—strawberries and cream or bread and dripping?"
>
> "Strawberries and cream, please," said she. "Ah-h-h-h." How they all laughed and beat the table with their teaspoons. Wasn't that a take in! Wasn't it now! Didn't he fox her! Good old Stan! "Ma! She thought it was real." (Mansfield 1924a: 4)

Since the short conversation takes place between two children, we expect that strawberries in such a context will take on a clear symbolic meaning, i.e. the one that would enhance innocence, honesty, perhaps even happiness if introduced while playing. However, contrary to our expectations or assumptions, strawberries in the very story represent quite different sets of values and, simultaneously, symbolize the disparity between the two worlds the children live in. Subsequently, Kezia's reaction to the idea of strawberries points to a thoroughly different, utterly incongruent vision of the world on both sides. For her the berries, even though they are not on the table, are real (possible to have). Conversely, for the Samuel Josephs children the strawberries are unreal (an unrealistic wish). This lack of understanding is further emphasized by the laugher of the off-spring of Mrs. Samuel Josephs', the laughter whose source the little girl does not seem to comprehend. Hence, while for the girl the fruit stands for the ordinary and the known (the offer of strawberries does not surprise the girl, ergo it must be a common situation for her), for the boy and his family the berries are apparently associated with the sphere of dreams and fantasies, if not the unknown ("she thought it was real"). Moreover, this invisible, yet felt strongly, strawberry line separating the two worlds is additionally made quite vivid and sharp once the reader realizes that the mentioning of strawberries results, respectively, in the girl's sorrow and in the boy and his siblings' joy. Eventually, then, in such a context, the red berries gain quite a complex, multilayered symbolism. Through the figures of children, strawberries are linked with childhood and play, however, the childish teasing results in emotional cruelty and spitefulness. As a consequence, the fruit is also emblematic of sadness, naivety

and disillusionment. And on top of that, strawberries stand for the lack of acceptance of "the other side" and for a mutual dislike. This is visible on two levels, i.e. between boys and girls (Kezia hates boys as such for the way they behave) and between the Josephs children and the Burnell girls. Diane McGee observes that the menu joke emphasizes the fact that the two Burnell girls are but "outsiders at the family table, excluded from the habits and rituals of a group of initiates" (2002: 102).

Let us now turn to the second of the selected stories, i.e. *Bank Holiday*, to see how the symbolic meaning of strawberries is modified by the context it appears in. The short story is composed of several street scenes. In one of them the reader is presented with a description of a girl visibly older than Kezia, with a basket of strawberries. The girl is on her own and she is engaged in a short conversation with a by-stander, a participant of the on-going bank holiday celebration:

> A crowd collects, eating oranges and bananas, tearing off the skins, dividing, sharing. One young girl has even a basket of strawberries, but she does not eat them. "Aren't they dear!" She stares at the tiny pointed fruits as if she were afraid of them. The Australian soldier laughs. "Here, go on, there's not more than a mouthful." But he doesn't want her to eat them, either. He likes to watch her little frightened face, and her puzzled eyes lifted to his: "Aren't they a price!" He pushes out his chest and grins. (Mansfield 1922: 252)

Although it is a short paragraph, the strawberry scene produces a long-lasting impression on the reader. And, as is often the case in Mansfield stories, the engagement of the recipient of the text is not based on what is verbally expressed but rather on what is not. Thus, on the one hand, we are presented with a seemingly cheerful picture of two young people talking about strawberries. But on the other, there is something uncomfortable and disturbing about this short exchange. First and foremost, the girl is too serious once we consider her young age (NB duly noticed by the observer of the scene), the time and place (a day off, with a merry crowd around to which she physically belongs). Secondly, her ponderous approach to common fruit seems out of proportion. While others around her consume more exotic oranges and bananas without pondering over them (they are simply "eating" them, "tearing off the skins, dividing, sharing"), she is interested in the look of the fruit rather than its taste. And thirdly, the reaction of the soldier as well as his body language (he laughs, pushes his chest, and grins) creates a stark contrast to the peaceful, contemplating and frightened little owner of the strawberries. His self-confident attitude towards the girl plainly points to the fact that the soldier, being a grown-up man, knows more than she does. However, this knowledge is quite disconcerting to the reader since it seems to have nothing to do with the fruit in question. Moreover, the young man, actually, enjoys watching her "frightened face" and "puzzled eyes" expressing her bewilderment and hesitancy. Nevertheless, realizing the innocence of the girl, he does not make an open pass at her but instead fakes his interest in the strawberries. Consequently, although he verbally encourages her to eat the berries, his gestures (and his thoughts) communicate something entirely opposite. The reader becomes, therefore, aware of a dual nature of the man's words: for one thing, he is referring straightforwardly to the act of eating, but for the other what he is saying is charged with erotic undertones that the girl is visibly unaware of. It seems that it is only the observer and the reader that notice this "double" interest

of the young soldier. For while the girl takes her time to admire the fruit, as if she saw it for the first time, the young man seems to admire her rather than the fruit. This, to some extent, shifts the symbolic focus to the innocent and the childlike, underlining the purity of the girl's mind that the man is very well aware of. She is not eating the strawberries yet; she is not even touching them. And even the grinning soldier does not mean what he says when he utters the words of encouragement.

All in all, strawberries in *Bank Holiday* imply, on the one hand, innocence and freshness, novelty, being on the verge of emotional awakening towards some unknown feeling, which seems to be pleasant but frightening at the same time; while on the other, strawberries stand there for lust and experience. And it is interesting to note that these contrasting ideas are all in one basket. Consequently, the strawberries become a connection between the two worlds seemingly wide apart. Because of that, one may also very well say that they are additionally symbolically expressing the liminal state of the young girl who is obviously on the doorsteps of a profound change — soon she will become a member of the world of adults. There are already the first signs of her leaving the teenagehood and these are: her entering into a conversation with a young stranger; the impression she makes on the man; the fact that she looks at the soldier ("her puzzled eyes lifted to his"). And her puzzlement may be thus interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, she is genuinely mesmerized by the beauty of the pointed fruit and so she is seeking the confirmation of her finding ("Aren't they dear!«, "Aren't they a price!«). Both, the repetition of the remark and the exclamation marks signal revelation and excitement on the part of the girl. Yet on the other hand, the emotional state she is in may be also linked with "the discovery" of the young man beside her; she consciously looks into his eyes, frightened but intrigued at the same time. In comparison with Kezia from *Prelude*, she does not hate boys anymore. She looks at the other sex as if with different, new eyes. And although she is frightened, the anxiety she experiences is reminiscent of pleasure and curiosity rather than sadness and anger.

Quite a similar, but as we will soon see not exactly the same, "strawberry situation" appears in *The Little Governess*. In the short story a young girl is travelling on her own, for the first time, to a foreign country. She knows the language of the land and she knows how to behave — she was generally advised to "mistrust people at first rather than trust them" since "it's safer to suspect people of evil intentions rather than good ones…" (Mansfield 1924b: 239–40). Yet, she is not familiar with cultural differences and she definitely lacks experience. In the course of the journey she meets an old man, "[n]inety at least" (Mansfield 1924b: 239–40) according to the little governess' estimation, who gradually wins her trust — he is caring, protective and amusing. He is a real gentleman and a grandpa figure in one. As a result, before she arrives at her destination, the little governess decides that the old man she met on the train is a good man and cannot possibly harm her. Apparently, the whole process of convincing the girl to place confidence in the stranger is done with the help of strawberries. Similarly as in *Bank Holiday*, in *The Little Governess* the strawberries are presented to the reader from two perspectives, that of a young girl and that of an old man. First, the fruit is mentioned by the narrator from the point of view of the young girl, the governess, who looks out of the train window and sees that:

> [a]huge fat woman waddled through the glass doors of the station with a tray of strawberries. Oh, she was thirsty! She was very thirsty! [And then again when the train stopped, the girl] (…) let down the window and the fat woman with the strawberries passed as if on purpose; holding up the tray to her. "*Nein, danke*", said the little governess, looking at the big berries on their gleaming leaves. "*Wie viel?*" she asked as the fat woman moved away. "Two marks fifty, Fräulein". "Good gracious!" She came in from the window and sat down in the corner, very sobered for a minute. (*Emphasis mine*, Mansfield 1924b: 251)

Although in the above quotation the reader can also easily spot the young female protagonist, the basket filled with strawberries and notice the admiration for the fruit, the mood of the scene is utterly different. Let us, therefore, see what factors are responsible for the change. First and foremost, unlike in *Bank Holiday*, the girl, at least at the beginning, does not hold or possess the berries but she looks at them from some distance. Additionally, she is clearly familiar with the fruit and its taste. What follows, she wishes she could obtain the strawberries in order to eat them and not merely to admire them. What is more, she is physically separated from them — for one thing she is on the train while the woman with the strawberries is outside, on the platform, and for another, she cannot afford to buy them. Consequently, she is trapped and confined to her small compartment and suffers twofold: she is very thirsty and (what is even more agonizing) she cannot quench her thirst although the juicy fruit is within her reach. As a result, strawberries acquire a symbolic meaning — they start to be associated with craving ("Oh, she was thirsty!") and temptation (the woman walking up and down with the tray full of big berries "on their gleaming leaves", as if on purpose, under the girl's nose). Yet, besides this straightforward, uncomplicated, self-evident symbolism demonstrated above, there is already a hint at a more complex, canny, and above all artful symbolic layer.

First, when we consider the fact that although the little governess's words "*Nein, danke*," in the above quotation are meant for the woman, the girl is nevertheless addressing the tray with the fruit for she is "looking at the big berries". And second, what the governess is looking at is literarily framed by the construction of the train window. In other words, the character seems to be contemplating a painting, a classic example of a still life, rather than real food. In such a context, the colour of strawberries and their three-part shiny leaves take on a new, deeper, adult, symbolic meaning. The colour red dominates the composition, just like the thirst dominates the girl's thoughts. However, the strawberries are on the leaves, which, according to the culturally grounded symbolism, stand for earthly pleasures and desires. In such a context the berries are linked with the temptation related to original sin. What follows is that they are losing, or are on the point of losing, their innocent, child-like meaning; they have already become stained with adult-like overtones. Of this the girl, unlike the narrator and the reader, is certainly oblivious. This unawareness and childishly limited view are additionally emphasized by the fact that although the girl initially pays attention to the strawberry woman (she follows her moves), she eventually ignores the seller and concentrates only on "the big berries", as if entranced or blinded by the strawberries and their leaves. Nevertheless, the price of the strawberries manages to break that trans-like state of the governess, sobering her, as the narrator truthfully and dutifully notices, but for a while.

However, the moment the old man who travels with her in the same compartment, comes back with a basket of the strawberries, her sobriety is gone:

> (…) as he closed the door and, turning, took from under his cape a basket of the strawberries. "If Fräulein would honour me by accepting these…" "What for me?" But she drew back and raised her hands as though he were about to put a wild little kitten on her lap. "Certainly, for you," said the old man. "For myself it is twenty years since I was brave enough to eat strawberries." (…) "Eat them and see," said the old man looking pleased and friendly. "You won't have even one?" "No, no, no." (Mansfield 1924: 252)

In the above quotation, the strawberry perspective changes. Now the focus is on the old man and his attitude towards strawberries. He brings them under his cape, hiding, as if buying strawberries and eating them were something shameful, at least at his age (it is "twenty years since" he "was brave enough to eat strawberries«). And what is more, they are the strawberries, the ones that were admired and desired by the girl. Subsequently, they are linked with pleasure and temptation: "Eat them and see" says the companion to the girl, thus bringing to mind the biblical story of original sin. Like the biblical serpent, the old man is hissing adorable words and behaving courteously. And ones he manages to lure her into eating the fruit, he starts to observe her with eagerness. He notices with great attention how

> [t]imidly and charmingly her hand hovered. They [strawberries] were so big and juicy she had to take two bites to them—the juice ran all down her fingers—and it was while she munched the berries that she first thought of the old man as a grandfather. (…) The sun came out, the pink clouds in the sky, the strawberry clouds were eaten by the blue. "Are they good?" asked the old man. "As good as they look?" (…) After all, she really did not know him. But he was so old and he had been so very kind—not to mention the strawberries… (Mansfield 1924b: 253)

The passage is almost silent. The two characters are entirely preoccupied with eating: the girl with munching the strawberries, whereas the man with consuming the girl with his eyes. The moment is charged with desire and physical pleasure. As Sydney Kaplan observes, in this particular story "Mansfield employs the same symbolist technique (…) that she used years earlier in *Summer Idylle* where eating and sexuality are interchangeable" (Kaplan 1991: 121–122). However, the whole scene is pregnant not only with the feeling of bliss, though of different type, depending which character is being considered, but also with hints as for the fate of the girl. In the end "the strawberry clouds were eaten by the blue"which foreshadows the change of emotions: the happy (the girl finally quenched her thirst), dreamy (she first thought of the old man as a grandfather), relaxed (he was so old and he had been so very kind) atmosphere is soon to turn into hopeless, fearful and not playful at all. After all, the colour blue, among others, connotes sadness as well as obscenity. And the question "As good as they look?" signals the later event of the story. Namely, when the pair reaches the place of destination, the man eventually manages to lure the little governess to his flat under the pretext of giving her "the attar of roses" he told her about on the train, "for remembrance" (Mansfield 1924b: 257). Once in the flat, he tries to seduce the girl and forces a kiss on her.

Finally, it is worth to note the closing, ambiguous phrase from the quoted passage, i.e. "–not to mention the strawberries…" It is hard to establish to whom it belongs and thus what it actually expresses. If the comment is made from the perspective of the girl, as are the thoughts about the kind, very old man in the same sentence, than it holds no double meaning and it may barely imply that the man is not only polite but also generous,

for he bought the fresh strawberries especially for the little governess, as a gift. But if the remark comes from the all-knowing narrator, then the phrase may include a veiled reference to the two-faced nature of the man: generally he is kind and caring, except when he buys "evilish" strawberries for young girls, but since this happens very rarely, it is not worth mentioning.

Summing up, the symbolism of the strawberries in *The Little Governess* is stripped of innocence and naivety. The process of eating them may stand for the process of corruption or its beginning. The girl eventually finds out about the true nature of the old man but only when it is too late. She learns this hard way. Because of the old man, she loses her job before she even commences it. All things considered, strawberries in this short story symbolize temptation and yielding to it, silliness, gullibility and disillusionment, perversion, unscrupulous deception and taking advantage. In other words, these are the strawberries of all evil whose price turns out to be much higher than two marks fifty.

Conclusions

The findings resulting from the above analysis of the strawberry passages of the selected short stories are at least twofold. First, the symbolism of strawberries is not fixed in any way but it undergoes modifications depending on the context of the stories. For that reason in *Prelude* the symbolism of strawberries is focused on childhood and its emotional states, whereas in *Bank Holiday* the image of strawberries evolves towards innuendos, thus only pointing to desire, eroticism, and temptation. Finally, in *The Little Governess*, the strawberries stand for the brutal introduction into the world of adults. However, what links the three symbolic approaches is their dual structure: the strawberries are always shown from two different perspectives, thus giving way to two different, often opposing, symbolic readings. We can also notice that in all the discussed passages this duality of perception is facilitated by the clash between innocence and knowing experience. Furthermore, these two notions are visibly competing, as if fighting for dominance. As a result, the balance of power seems to shift constantly, leaving the reader in the state of anxiety.

Second, the strawberry symbolism shows certain similarities, too. In all the discussed texts, the fruit in question viewed from the female perspective stands for emotional truth and innocence, pleasure and desire but void of sexuality; childhood or childishness. These notions are often pared with silliness, if not stupidity, with unawareness and naivety. Because of that, the girls are easily manipulated, tricked and fooled. In the case of boys/men, strawberries viewed from their perspective tend to represent negative attributes, like dishonesty and ambiguity, mock seriousness and fake helpfulness; cheating. Moreover, although they are additionally associated with desire, this time this feeling is a match to eroticism, bare instincts and innuendos.

Apart from the above, Mansfieldian strawberries quite acutely depict a border phenomenon. The female characters who are "in contact with" the fruit, either by looking at it and/or admiring it, desiring or eating it, are always on the verge of some important change. Though different ages and walks of life, all of them are about to step into a new phase of their lives: a small girl is waiting to be taken to her new house (*Prelude*); a teenage girl is waking up emotionally, she is on the point of becoming a woman (*Bank Holiday*); a young girl is entering the world of adults, eager to start her first work (*The Little Governess*). They are all in a liminal phase — one door has just closed behind them and another

is not yet fully opened. The girls are literally at the doorstep, waiting to be let in. Thus, strawberries act as some ritual fruit, an indispensable element of a rite of passage. The strawberry-induced liminality is further emphasized by the fact that all the above mentioned characters are plainly on the move. Kezia is walking away from her old house; the nameless girl from *Bank Holiday* is in the street, among the crowd moving slowly towards the top of the hill; and the Little Governess is on her way to a big foreign city. Additionally, the spaces the girls are in are the spaces in between, public places away from home: the neighbours' kitchen, the street, the train/the hotel, respectively.

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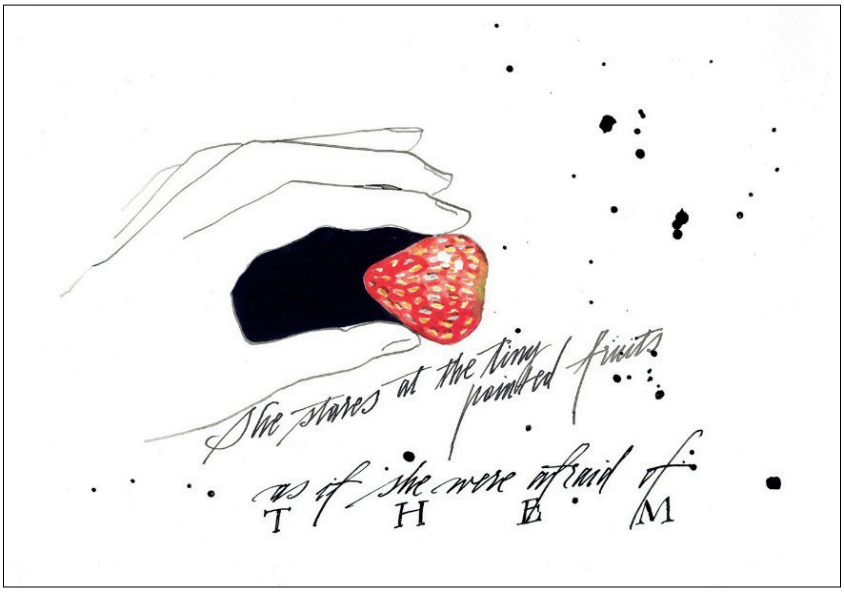
All things considered, strawberries featuring in Katherine Mansfield's short stories seem to be closer to the realm of children, the notions of childhood and innocence, the dream. However, at the same time they are boarding with the world of adults, with cruelty, spite and bad intentions. Sweet strawberries in Mansfieldian fiction compose a kind of (natural) vestibule that offers some glimpses of happiness which eventually turn out to be merely bitter illusions; "[a]nd the ship sailed on. Leaving us in a kind of dream, too. With the empty baskets…" (Murry 1930b: 91).



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