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Stanisława de Karłowska and Katherine Mansfield – an (un)obvious connection

Stanisława de Karłowska i Katherine Mansfield – związki (nie)oczywiste

Keywords: modernism, women, social rank, Karłowska, Mansfield

Słowa kluczowe: modernizm, kobiety, pozycja społeczna, Karłowska, Mansfield

Abstract

The article focuses on the links between the life and work of a Polish emigree artist, Stanisława de Karłowska (1876–1952) and the New Zealand modernist writer, Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923). Both women, despite their unquestionable artistic merits, have stayed at the margins of critical attention for quite some time. Nevertheless, while Mansfield has been finally recognized as an innovator and one of the greatest short story writers, Karłowska is still relatively unknown, especially in Poland where her paintings can be found merely in private collections. Therefore, the main aim of this article is to bring the work of Karłowska to the attention of the reader. By presenting her paintings against and in relation to the work of the New Zealand Modernist writer, I want, among others, to demonstrate how much the two women share in terms of their engagement and presence in Modernist artistic life, which in itself is an indicator of their importance and recognition, as well as to point out that the voice of the painter in relation to social criticism was as important as the voice of the writer. In the article, two of Karłowska's paintings are discussed against the social background and a selection of Mansfield's short stories.

The article focuses on the links between the life and work of a Polish emigree artist, Stanisława de Karłowska (1876–1952) and the New Zealand modernist writer, Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923). Both women, despite their unquestionable artistic merits, have stayed at the margins of critical attention for quite some time. In addition, although Mansfield's work did gain more focus immediately

after her death in 1923, nevertheless, for many years the critics tended to regard her fiction as the output of a minor Modernist writer (Kimber 2008: 50). It is only in the 1990s that Mansfield begins to emerge as an innovator and one of the greatest short story writers (Kaplan 1991: 20, 64). As for Karłowska, her work seems never to have been duly recognized. Despite the fact that her paintings can be seen and admired in many galleries in Great Britain (Tate Gallery London, York Museums Trust, Southampton City Art Gallery, Art Gallery in Glasgow, National Museum of Wales, The Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, and many others) and France (Worthing Museum and Art Gallery, St Nicholas-du-Palem, Brittany, France), she is still relatively unknown, especially in Poland where her canvases can be found merely in private collections. As for criticism, her name is mentioned in many sources which are devoted to Modernist art; however, apart from a few articles focusing on the Polish artist, so far there is no book-length work devoted to Karłowska. Therefore, the main aim of this article is to bring the work of Karłowska to the attention of the reader. By presenting her paintings against and in relation to the work of the New Zealand Modernist writer, I want, among other things, to demonstrate how much the two women share in terms of their engagement and presence in Modernist artistic life, which in itself is an indicator of their importance and recognition, as well as to point out that the voice of the painter in relation to social criticism was as important as the voice of the writer.

Stanisława de Karłowska, a Polish painter and a co-founder of the London Group, was born into a Polish noble family who had an estate in Szeliwy, near Łowicz. The Karłowski family was distinguished by patriotism and brought up little Stasia and her sisters Halina and Julia in this spirit (Jaworska 1997: 55). The love towards Polish traditions and the country was later reflected in Karłowska's works, both youthful and mature, which are filled with the spirit of native landscape and local folklore. As for her artistic education, initially, de Karłowska had private drawing lessons at home, and then she attended a painting school for women in Warsaw, followed by further training in Cracow. She exhibited her paintings for the first time in Warsaw at the age of 14, together with other girls from the school. Five years later she started to show her work regularly at art exhibitions in Poznań and Warsaw (1895, 1896 and 1897) (Jaworska 1997: 59). After completing all the artistic education that was available to a woman on the territory of the partitioned Poland, in 1896, in order to develop her artistic talent, she enrolled at the Académie Julian in Paris from which she graduated with honours the following year (Bonett 2011).

Before going home for her summer holidays, Karłowska stopped on the island of Jersey to attend the wedding of her close friend Janina Flamm and the

painter Erick Forbes Robertson. There she met the English painter Robert Beven, the best man, whom she married a few months later in Warsaw¹. Shortly after the marriage, she moved to England where she became involved in the artistic life of London. At the beginning of her time in London things were not easy as she knew neither the language nor many people. On top of that, as a woman, she found it more difficult to show her work to the public and to access artistic groups. For instance, like many other women, she was denied membership of the Camden Town Group. Nevertheless, unofficially she soon became a part of that artistic clique. Her paintings were shown at the exhibitions organized by various London art clubs and associations, like, for example, the Allied Artists' Association or the London Group (Kwiatkowska 2018: 415–417).

Considering the times she lived in, Karłowska was quite a progressive woman, as evidenced, for example, by the fact that after her marriage she kept her maiden name (she would always sign her pictures as de Karłowska) and never gave up on her painting career. Her choice of clothing would also point to her progressiveness – she preferred a blouse, loose tie and a skirt to a traditional dress. She also liked smoking. At the beginning of the 20th century smoking was common across London's bohemia and it indicated, in the case of women, independence and artistic involvement (Clarke 2012). Moreover, Karłowska often travelled on her own. In 1898, pregnant with her first child, she visited France in order to meet with her close friend Janina and her husband who now lived on the outskirts of Paris, and while there, she frequented the various Salons (Clarke 2012). And in 1906, in the midst of serious unrest in Poland, she journeyed there to see her family, armed for self-protection, with one revolver hidden in her muff and the other in her hair (Stenlake 2008: 134–135). This testifies not only to her courage but also to the fact that she must have known very well how to use a revolver.

Having briefly outlined Karłowska's life, let us now turn to the discussion of the links that can be established between the artist and Katherine Mansfield. There are two areas where these connections can be detected. One is related to Mansfield's and de Karłowska's interest in the visual and the type of subject matter they tackled in their works. The other refers to the places they frequented and the people they befriended.

When considering the former, they paid particular attention to the city life and the position of women in the modern world. In this they closely followed in the footsteps of Modernists who were preoccupied with the urban and the modern. John Lucas claims that “the city was to modernism what the Copernican

¹ More about Robert Beven and his Polish connection can be found in Jaworska (1997).

revolution had been to the Renaissance: it changed everything. Space, time, language, human relationships and personal identity – they were all profoundly altered by the experience of the city” (1991: 309). In the case of women, their appearance in public spaces of the city “was used to mark their liberation from enclosure in the private, domestic sphere” (Marcus 2004: 61). Additionally, in literature, “the city came to function as a metaphor for the trajectories of narrative itself. Its new forms of transport and the chance encounters it sustains also provided powerful metaphors for human relationships” (Marcus 2004: 61). Mansfield was conspicuously interested in the place and role of women in modern society. She is widely recognized as an author of literary texts centring on women-related issues (for example: Hanson, Gurr 1981; Moran 1991; Wheeler 1994; Wilson 2020). In order to introduce feminine themes along with her own attitudes and perceptions in this field, the writer would resort to modern, often experimental, modes of narrative technique as well as style shaped to a large degree by symbols, allusions or associations (Boddy 1988: 167). What is of significance, when reading the stories by Mansfield as well as her journals and diaries, one quickly realizes that the writer observed the world around her with the eyes of a painter. This may seem quite natural once we recall that the times Mansfield lived in were literary shrouded in art. Modernism witnesses the emergence of a great number of artistic movements, like Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism or Expressionism. Art and culture become inseparable. As Virginia Woolf noted in her essay “Pictures”, “sculpture influenced Greek literature, music Elizabethan, architecture the English of the eighteenth century, and now undoubtedly we are under the dominion of painting” (Woolf 1947: NP). Subsequently, the everyday, domestic subject matter, a little object or an insignificantly looking urban scene in Mansfield’s narratives becomes a truly visual experience. This correlation between the realm of visual art and the art of writing, has been noted by many scholars discussing Mansfield’s oeuvre (for example, van Gunsteren 1990; Louvel 2011; Wilson 2014; Harland 2017). Subsequently, her narratives are predominantly based on ekphrastic descriptions and many of her stories are constructed with the use of techniques borrowed from the visual arts.

Karłowska, also being something of a true Modernist, executed a series of canvases devoted to urban subjects, thus manifesting her interest in the modern city and its inhabitants. Her works clearly show the affinity with the Camden Town Group whose members favoured the domestic and the common and their painting often feature lower middle-class and working-class women (Webb 2007: 7). In her paintings, similarly to Mansfield’s narratives, Karłowska shows glimpses of urban life. They expose fragments of cityscape that often reference women’s

daily existence. Interestingly, many of her urban scenes have a narrative potential and frequently are characterized by symbolic undertones. To illustrate the point, two of Karłowska's paintings will be analysed.



Image 1. Fried Fish Shop, S. de Karłowska, c. 1907, Tate Britain, photo credit: Tate²

The first of these, entitled *Fried Fish Shop*, was painted around 1907 and offers “a snapshot of working class experience from the vantage of the pavement”, as Robert Upstone succinctly put it (Upstone 2009a). The ascetic colour scheme along with the contrast between the warm, lit space of the interior of the shop and the gloomy, murky pavement outside, as well as the distribution of figures, are intensely suggestive of, on the one hand, a conciliatory mood, but on the other, are keenly redolent of resignation, disconnection and isolation. Shrouded in hazy light, the scene becomes mysterious. The lack of clear contours and the facelessness of the crowd huddling together adds to the ambience. Likewise, the blots representing the faces of the figures in the shop resemble the meagre flames of the gas lamp. Therefore, the feeling of meagreness, anonymity and monotony looms large in the scene. Furthermore, the uneven distribution of figures ostensibly

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introduces the notion of exclusion. The positioning of the figure of a woman with an umbrella at some distance from the little crowd, instantly draws the onlooker's attention to her and classifies the woman as a lonely outsider. Though she is painted in the foreground, at the same time, she is presented at the margin of the whole scene. The woman's separation is underlined with her being a little way from the door and from the source of light. Her face does not glow like the faces of the crowd. Furthermore, although the shop door is open, the entrance nevertheless is blocked by the crowding customers. Perhaps she is on the point of joining the queue, however, her posture does not suggest an easy answer. All in all, thanks to such a presentation of the subject matter, the painting gains a symbolic quality. Specifically, the concrete, that is the fried fish shop and its clientele, transforms into a springboard for the abstract. In other words, the picture becomes a social comment. As in the case of Mansfield's stories, where a description of an ordinary, common street scene often turns into a profound criticism of society, Karłowska's painting shows the life of the working classes and in particular, that of working class women. The colour pattern, the symbolic quality of the canvas and, above all, the figure of the woman alone in a city street may bring to mind the settings and the characters from Mansfield's stories. The ambience of the painting, its composition and framing which forces the onlooker to focus on the woman in the shadow, reminds one of Mansfield's "Pictures" or "Life of Ma Parker". The curious female figure in the painting could be Miss Ada Moss, the protagonist of "Pictures". A former singer, Miss Moss is visiting various agencies all day long in pursuit of some work in the movies. Unfortunately, all her efforts are in vain. No-one needs her, no-one is interested in what she can offer. And when Miss Moss enters a cheap tea place to cheat her hunger with a hot drink, she is also entirely ignored:

[...] when she came to the A B C she found the door propped open; a man went in and out carrying trays of rolls, and there was nobody inside except a waitress doing her hair and the cashier unlocking the cash-boxes. She stood in the middle of the floor but neither of them saw her (Mansfield 1998: 91).

Generally unnoticed or insulted by the people around her, towards the end of the day she is overwhelmingly lonely and very hungry. Even nature seems to take on a similar attitude towards Miss Moss. In the streets "[t]here was a high, cold wind blowing; it tugged at her, slapped her face, jeered [...]" (Mansfield 1998: 95).

Similarly, the figure from the canvas can represent another lonely protagonist, that is Ma Parker who soon might be "hobbling home with her fish bag" through the cold, dark streets of the city:

She bent her head and hobbled off to the kitchen, clasping the old fish bag that held her cleaning things [...]” (Mansfield 1983: 143).

Many a time, hobbling home with her fish bag she heard them, waiting at the corner, or leaning over the area railings, say among themselves, »She’s had a hard life, has Ma Parker« (Mansfield 1983: 146).

It was cold in the street. There was a wind like ice. People went flitting by, very fast; [...]. And nobody knew – nobody cared (Mansfield 1983: 152).

Subsequently, Karłowska’s *Fried Fish Shop*, which at first glance offers a seemingly peaceful and poetic rendition of a common street scene, could be read as a social commentary on the loneliness and anonymity of the city where “nobody knew – nobody cared”, as well as on the poor life of the working classes. The choice of the subject, that is a fried fish shop, seems to intensify this comment. Fish and chips takeaways were very much a part of working-class diet at the beginning of the 20th century. What is more, fried fish shops were perceived as vile places by the members of middle classes. It was chiefly because of the smell of generally old oil used in such places but also because they were associated with the values, beliefs, and morals of the lower classes (Walton 1992: 165). Apparently, the year when Karłowska painted the street scene, 1907, the Public Health Act was issued in which fried fish shops were referred to as an “offensive trade” (Walton 1992: 11).

Another example of an urban painting by Karłowska which offers a concealed social comment is *Swiss Cottage*. Here we move up the social ladder and look into a more privileged part of London. Only slightly outside the city centre, Swiss Cottage was, and still is, an attractive residential area. Well-connected with other parts of London through the bus and the Underground services, it offered more peaceful and green surroundings (Upstone 2009b). This was also the area that Karłowska and her husband decided to live in. The depicted scene is different both in ambience and in palette from the *Fried Fish Shop* one. It correlates with the social rank of the area. At first sight, the presented fragment of the street hints at a more pleasant reality: the colour scheme is more cheerful and, subsequently, the crowd, composed of men, women and children, seems friendlier. Thus, the scene, colourful and shown in broad daylight, emerges as agreeable. Through such elements as the elegantly dressed figures, clean streets, the red city bus (a fragment of which is just disappearing round the corner) or neatly arranged groceries, the painting speaks of comfort and prosperity. However, giving the picture a second glance, we realize that it is not as cheerful as the colours might at first suggest.



Image 2. Swiss Cottage, S. de Karłowska, c. 1914, Tate Britain, photo credit: Tate scheme³

Taking a closer look at the crowd, it turns out that the faces of the figures are expressionless or hidden from view. Two figures in the foreground, the girl in yellow and the woman holding her hand, are an exception. Yet, the woman seems to be preoccupied with her thoughts as she does not follow the gaze of the girl and continues walking while the girl, visibly in a sulky mood, is as if on hold – she has stopped and appears to look straight into the eyes of the viewer. However, it is the lack of communication between the figures that is most emblematic. The people in the street keep just to themselves – there are no signs of them being engaged in conversations, of greeting one another. Once we realize that, the atmosphere of the painting undergoes a transformation: from aimable and even joyous, considering the figure of the girl with a hoop, a toy connoting playfulness, into drab and indifferent. In addition, despite the lucidly painted elements and accurately represented fragment the Swiss Cottage area, that is the intersection of Finchley Road, Fitzjohn’s Avenue and Adelaide Road (Upstone 2009b), an element of the unreal can be detected in the picture. It is introduced by the elongated bodies of the people painted against otherwise mimetically rendered setting. As a result of this clash, the exaggerated silhouettes of human figures come out as humorous. Therefore, the seriousness of the crowd, and by extension, the lives of its

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individual members as well as the social conventions they live by, are mocked. Also, similarly to the *Fried Fish Shop* scene, there is one figure which is outside the crowd, a thin woman in dark clothes pushing a big dark pram. She seems to pass by unnoticed – none of the unsmiling faces looks in her direction. Yet, for the onlooker, this big dark element draws the attention: the woman and the pram establish balance to the composition. In other words, they are as important as the crowd. In symbolic terms, the position of the figure of the woman on the canvas points, on the one hand, to her importance within the society, but on the other to her isolation, often followed by loneliness. The type and distribution of elements apparently manifest the position of women in general – this is the domestic, socially marginalized, sphere where they belong. Such a reading can be enhanced by the fact that the already mentioned pair, the woman and the girl in yellow, are also presented as defining elements of the whole composition. To put it another way, these are the women with children that are the focal points of the canvas. Following, the seemingly ordinary and cheerful scene of urban life becomes a comment on the role of women in the modern city. As we can see, the modern city offers more freedom to women – they can go for a walk on their own or use the public transport, yet, their position is still defined through the domestic sphere. Karłowska's painting provides us with a fragment of a modern city which is characterized by anonymity and indifference, and where the women still live according to the limiting conventions of patriarchal society. A similar viewpoint is expressed by Deborah Longworth who notes that Karłowska's painting is "representing gender divides of urban domestic life, juxtaposing the pub and the vegetable shop, and men returning from or catching the omnibus while mothers with children shop for food or push prams" (Longworth 2012). Such an observation is also to be found in Mansfield's narratives. One of the short stories that could be linked with *Swiss Cottage* is "Bliss" where in the opening paragraph we learn that although Bertha Young, the protagonist, sometimes "wanted to run instead of walk, to take dancing steps on and off the pavement, to bowl a hoop" (Mansfield 1998: 67), she simply does not dare to show her emotions outside for she does not want to be taken for "drunk and disorderly" (Mansfield 1998: 67). Additionally, the cheerless girl with a hoop from Karłowska's canvas can conform, simultaneously, to Bertha's child-like mood and to the mask of conventionality that Bertha puts on in public. Moreover, the dark-clad woman pushing the pram in the picture reminds one of the nanny from the story who would literally take Bertha's little daughter away from her. On top of that, just like in Karłowska's painting, in Mansfield's story the seeming bliss of Bertha's life is strongly suggested with the whole range of colourful elements: for example, the blue dish, pink

apples, yellow pears, white and purple grapes, the white flannel gown of the baby, the blue woollen jacket of little B, the jade-green sky and Betha's green shoes and stockings, to mention but a few. Yet, sadly, the brightly rendered luxurious food items or fine clothes merely mask Bertha's colourless existence. In the course of the story the readers learn that the protagonist, despite the omnipresent wealth and opulence, is emotionally trapped in a seemingly perfect family situation. Her domestic life is void of true happiness and/or friendship.

Looking at the second area of connections between Karłowska and Mansfield, that is places and people, London and its artistic *société* come to the fore. When the New Zealand writer came to London in 1903 for the first time, the Polish painter was already there, happily married and taking care of her two children. But despite her domestic obligations, Karłowska actively participated in the artistic life of the English capital. She would take part in exhibitions, not only as a visitor, but most importantly as an artist who showed her work to the public. On the other hand, Mansfield was also markedly interested in art shows. The writer, for example, was present at the 1910 and 1912 Post-Impressionist exhibitions (Smith 1999: 146–55) which featured the works of Karłowska. It is clear, then, that Mansfield must have met Karłowska, even if only through her paintings, especially that the artist was already attracting some critical attention. For instance, art critic Frank Rutter mentioning the already discussed *Fried Fish Shop*, notes that the painting was “a delightful and wholly personal rendering of a common Whistler subject transfigured by a vibrating luminism that was unknown to Whistler” (1911: 5). In 1910 Karłowska was praised by another critic, Huntly Carter who remarked on Karłowska's use of colour and the way she was able to manipulate with it the emotions of the viewers: “[w]hat S. de Karłowska has to say she tells us lucidly in pure and harmonious colour. Her two studies of still life speak in the broadest, simplest, and most convincing terms” (Carter 1910: 452). Importantly, his review was published in the same issue of *The New Age* magazine as Katherine Mansfield's short story “Baron” (1910: 444) and the letter to the editor commenting on her other story, “Germans at Meat” (Chesshyre 1910: 454).

Apart from exhibitions, Mansfield and Karłowska could have met in less formal circumstances, like private gatherings, for example during the “at homes” organized on Sundays by Karłowska and her husband in their Hampsted home; or in cafes and among them, Café Royal in Regent Street, which was a place associated with the capital's artistic world. On Saturdays one could meet there artists like Lucien Pissarro, Walter Sickert, Augustus John, Spencer Gore, Harold Gilman, Robert Bevan and also his wife Karłowska. Apart from artists, writers were frequently spotted there, too, and among them Katherine Mansfield (Clarke 2012).

Another chance for the two to meet was through their overlapping circle of acquaintances. The long list of mutual friends included Dorothy Richardson, Dora Carrington, Walter Sickert, Lucien Pissarro, or Wyndam Lewis, to name but a few. Perhaps one of the most interesting links between Karłowska and Mansfield is the figure of the French sculptor, Henri Gautier-Brzeska, a person who formed strong emotional relations with the Murrays and the Bevans, respectively (Ede 1931: 133–138, 169–170). Additionally, the husband of Mansfield (John Middleton Murry) and the husband of Karłowska (Robert Bevan) knew each other well.

In conclusion, the conducted research clearly shows that there are quite a few crossing points between Stanisława de Karłowska and Katherine Mansfield (although there is no direct evidence that they knew each other). First, they manifested a similar commitment in pursuing the artistic and the new, by participating in the events and discussions that were soon to change the general approach to art and literature, and by voicing their opinions on contemporary society through, respectively, painting and writing. Furthermore, the analyses of two of Karłowska's canvases conspicuously suggest that her artistic work should be considered against a broader, social perspective. Subsequently, apart from the employment of the Modernist theme (the city) and the modern way of presenting early 20th century life (a snapshot), the urban scenes rendered by Karłowska, as in the case of Katherine Mansfield, are capable of serious social comment. Seemingly bright and colourful (*Swiss Cottage*) or tranquil and silent (*Fried Fish Shop*), the visual descriptions are more than just (modern) wall decorations. Karłowska, like the New Zealand writer, manages to pack her innocently looking pictures with ideas, questions and stories regarding life at the brink of the new century, with a special focus on the place and role of women in these new spatiotemporal circumstances. Moreover, it is interesting to note that Karłowska, like Mansfield, began to gain critical attention already during her lifetime. Yet, when the Polish artist died, her works and her life gradually fall into oblivion. And it is only the last few decades that we can witness a slow revival of interest in the many activities and artistic oeuvre of Stanisława de Karłowska. This is very much thanks to Karłowska's great grandson, Partick Baty, who has been presenting information about the artist and her family via his website, talks or occasional lectures.

By way of a final note, it is tempting to think that the various connections and similarities between Karłowska and Mansfield, both in life and art, suggest that the two were familiar with each other. Indeed, the works of the Polish emigre painter might have caught the attention of Mansfield, who NB. was quite fond of Polish culture (*The Polish...* 2022), and perhaps even influence her stories.

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