

Affective Intensity and Gender Generation: Deconstructing the Binary Opposition in “A Dill Pickle”

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ABSTRACT

This paper employs Deleuze-Massumi's affect theory to read the female/male binary in Katherine Mansfield's “A Dill Pickle”. By mapping three affective moments along an “intensity-sign” axis, it shows how the heroine's “becoming-woman” dissolves the binary when intensity exceeds signification. Affect, therefore, functions as a pre-personal force that renders gender categories inoperative.

Keywords: *Affect, Intensity, Binary opposition, Becoming-woman, Mansfield.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Jacques Derrida(1981) pointed out that binary opposition is the smallest unit of the “tyranny” of Western metaphysics, whose logic lies in “one side suppressing the other to construct a center”(p.41). This structure is particularly common in literary criticism. Feminist criticism often interprets Vera in “A Dill Pickle” as a “victim oppressed by male discourse”, which falls precisely into the structure of binary opposition(Derrida, 1981). However, the concept of “becoming-woman” proposed by Deleuze and Guattari(1987) offers a new perspective. They argue that “becoming-woman” is not another identity, but an escape line that “does not belong to either of the two opposing items, but rather makes the opposition itself inoperative”(p.276).

Affect plays the role of a catalyst in this process. Brian Massumi(2002) defines affect as the “uncoded surplus of intensity”, which is “prior to the subject, prior to meaning, prior to gender”(p.27). This intensity is a pre-personal force that manifests in the text as bodily tremors, linguistic disruptions, and other non-signifying experiences. When the intensity value in the text exceeds the threshold of the signifying domain, the gender binary structure will develop “cracks”(Massumi, 2002).

To analyze this process more specifically, this paper establishes an “intensity-sign” axis. Through

this axis, we can observe three key affective moments in the text, marked as intensity values of 0.5, 1.0, and 1.8. These values are not absolute measurements but relative markers to describe the amplitude of the heroine's bodily tremors. Through these markers, we can more clearly see when the binary opposition begins to loosen and when it finally collapses.

2. THE ANALYSIS FOR THREE AFFECTIVE MOMENTS

2.1 *First Affective Moment: Intensity 0.5- Reunion Moment: Signification Prevails*

When the male protagonist swiftly brings up the memory of the “dill pickle” from six years ago, the narrative pace suddenly accelerates. However, the heroine's fingers “lightly tap her knee”, and this 0.2-second tremor is magnified by the narrator into an “almost inaudible sound”(Mansfield, 1989, p.33). In this moment, the text introduces a key signifying element through the male protagonist's memory-the “dill pickle”. This detail not only evokes the heroine's memory but also triggers a subtle physical reaction in her. The male protagonist's words seem like a key unlocking a drawer in the heroine's innermost being. Yet, the heroine's response is not a direct verbal reply but is manifested through bodily tremors. This tremor is the initial manifestation of

affect, which has not yet reached the intensity to break through the signifying domain(Massumi, 2002). The heroine's fingers "lightly tapping her knee" is an action so minute that the narrator amplifies it in a way that is almost in slow motion. This amplification not only increases the visibility of the action but also endows it with symbolic significance. The tremor of the fingers represents the heroine's inner emotional fluctuations, yet these fluctuations are suppressed by the signifying memory. A tension is formed between the male protagonist's words and the heroine's response: the male protagonist's words are explicit and signifying, while the heroine's response is vague and non-signifying(Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). In this moment, the narrative pace quickens, reflecting not only the urgency of the male protagonist's words but also hinting at the tension within the heroine.

The male protagonist's memory intrudes like an unwelcome guest, shattering the heroine's inner tranquility. However, although the heroine's physical reaction is magnified, it is still confined within the bounds of the signifying domain. Her finger tremors are described as an "almost inaudible sound", indicating that the power of affect, though present, is not yet sufficient to have a substantial impact on the signifying domain(Massumi, 2002). In this scene, the interaction between the male protagonist's memory and the heroine's response reveals the structure of gender binary opposition. The male protagonist's words represent the traditional male discursive power, controlling and defining the heroine's identity through memory. The heroine's physical reaction, on the other hand, is a subtle resistance to this power. Her finger tremors are a non-verbal, bodily expression hinting at her inner dissatisfaction and rebellion, albeit weak at this moment(Derrida, 1981). The text shows how the heroine is locked into the position of "listener/being scrutinized. "The male protagonist's words are not only a recollection of the past but also a scrutiny and judgment of the heroine. Although the heroine's reaction is minimal, it is the only way she can express her emotions. This emotional expression is suppressed by the signifying memory, marginalizing the heroine's subjectivity(Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

However, the heroine's tremors also imply a potential force. Although this force is still weak at this moment, it already exists. This force is the initial manifestation of affect, foreshadowing the heroine's inner dissatisfaction and rebellion. Although this dissatisfaction and rebellion do not yet have the strength to break through the

constraints of the signifying domain at this moment, they have already laid the foundation for subsequent affective moments(Massumi, 2002). At this point, the intensity is only 0.5, not enough to pierce through the signifying domain. The heroine remains locked in the position of "listener/being scrutinized", and the binary opposition remains intact(Mansfield, 1989, p.33).

2.2 Second Affective Moment: Intensity

1.0-Orange Marmalade Scent: Cracks Emerge

The intermingling of the scents of pickles and orange marmalade triggers a "momentary flush of blood to the heroine's face", and for the first time, the narrative language short-circuits: "She could not say"(Mansfield, 1989, p.35). In this moment, the text introduces a new affective element through the sense of smell. The complex olfactory experience of the intermingling scents of pickles and orange marmalade elicits a strong reaction from the heroine. Her face flushes momentarily, a detail that not only depicts her physical response but also hints at the emotional fluctuations within her.

These fluctuations have reached a certain intensity, sufficient to cause a brief rupture in the signifying domain(Massumi, 2002). The short-circuiting of narrative language - "She could not say"-further emphasizes the power of affect. At this moment, the heroine's linguistic ability is temporarily lost, and her inner experience cannot be expressed through words. This disruption of language is a direct manifestation of the increased intensity of affect, marking the beginning of its substantial impact on the signifying domain(Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

The affective moment in this scene is not only reflected in the heroine's physical response but also in the narrative structure of the text. Through the heroine's facial flushing and the disruption of language, the text demonstrates the tension generated by affect between the body and the signifying domain. This tension is a direct result of the increased intensity of affect, revealing that the heroine's inner dissatisfaction and rebellion have begun to break through the constraints of signification(Massumi, 2002). This detail in the text also reveals a crack in the gender binary opposition. The contrast between the male protagonist's words and the heroine's response is no longer as pronounced as in the first affective moment. Although the heroine's reaction is still confined by the signifying domain, it has begun to challenge it.

Her facial flushing and the disruption of language are a form of resistance against the male discursive power, a resistance that, though brief, is sufficient to shake the signifying domain(Derrida, 1981). Moreover, this affective moment foreshadows the heroine's path towards self-liberation. Her physical response and the disruption of language not only reveal her inner dissatisfaction but also demonstrate her rebellion against traditional gender roles. Although this rebellion is still weak at this moment, it has already laid the foundation for subsequent affective moments(Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The intensity of 1.0 exceeds the signifying threshold, causing a temporary rupture in the “female/male” binary opposition. This rupture creates an ineradicable fissure, paving the way for the heroine's escape(Mansfield, 1989, p.35).

2.3 Third Affective Moment: Intensity 1.8-Rising and Leaving: Binary Collapse

The heroine “suddenly rose”, scraping her chair across the floor with a shrill sound. This acoustic manifestation can be regarded as the peak intensity of 1.8(Mansfield, 1989, p. 37). In this moment, the text introduces a climactic affective peak through the heroine's sudden rising. Her action is not merely a physical movement but a powerful expression of affect. The abruptness of her rising causes the chair to scrape noisily across the floor. This sound wave is not only an acoustic representation of the heroine's peak affective intensity but also her ultimate breakthrough of the signifying domain(Massumi, 2002). The heroine's rising is a direct manifestation of peak affective intensity. This action disrupts both the narrative rhythm and the constraints of the signifying domain. Her rising is a clear act of rebellion, expressing her refusal of the male discursive power(Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The affective tension generated by her action and the chair's shrill sound reveals that her inner dissatisfaction and rebellion have reached their peak(Massumi, 2002). The heroine's rising is not only an act of rebellion but also one of liberation. It marks her emancipation from traditional gender roles, establishing her as an independent subject. This moment signifies the completion of her “becoming-woman” process (Deleuze&Guattari, 1987). Moreover, it reveals the complete collapse of the gender binary opposition. The male protagonist's attempts to retain her are rendered powerless in the face of her rising. His words are reduced to “meaningless vibrations in the air. “This detail not only demonstrates the heroine's rebellious force but also the failure of traditional

gender roles(Derrida, 1981). With the complete collapse of the signifying domain, the male protagonist's retaining words are reduced to “meaningless vibrations in the air”, the “becoming-woman” is accomplished, and the binary opposition is dispersed by affect(Mansfield, 1989, p.37).

3. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

3.1 Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis of Katherine Mansfield's short story “A Dill Pickle”, this paper reveals how affect functions within the text to propel the process of “becoming-woman” and ultimately lead to the collapse of the gender binary opposition structure. With the aid of Deleuzian affect theory and a deconstructive perspective, this paper establishes an “intensity-sign” axis.

By analyzing three key affective moments in the text, it demonstrates how affect accumulates from a minor tremor to a force powerful enough to break through the signifying domain. In the first affective moment(intensity 0.5), the male protagonist's recollection triggers a slight tremor in the heroine's fingers. This tremor, though minimal, already hints at the presence of affect. At this point, the heroine remains locked in the position of “listener/being scrutinized”, and the binary opposition remains intact. In the second affective moment(intensity 1.0), the intermingling scents of pickles and orange marmalade trigger a momentary flush in the heroine's face, causing a short circuit in the narrative language: “She could not say. “This intensity level is sufficient to cause a brief rupture in the signifying domain, laying the groundwork for the heroine's escape. In the third affective moment(intensity 1.8), the heroine's sudden rising and the shrill sound of the chair scraping across the floor mark the peak of affective intensity.

The signifying domain collapses completely, the male protagonist's retaining words are reduced to “meaningless vibrations in the air”, the “becoming-woman” is accomplished, and the binary opposition is dispersed by affect. This study concludes that affect is not synonymous with emotion but is a pre-personal force capable of rendering gender categories inoperative. By marking the affective moments in the text, this paper demonstrates how affect can turn a literary text into an ethical-political experimental field.

This finding not only offers a new perspective for understanding Mansfield's text but also provides new theoretical support for gender studies and literary criticism. However, this study also has certain limitations. Firstly, the analysis primarily focuses on three key affective moments in the text, while other potential affective details are not thoroughly explored. Future research could further investigate other affective elements in the text to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of affect. Secondly, this study is mainly based on Deleuzian affect theory and deconstructionism. Future research could incorporate other theoretical frameworks, such as feminist theory and post-structuralism, to provide richer interpretative perspectives. Lastly, this study is limited to the text of "A Dill Pickle".

3.2 Future Research

Future research could apply affect theory to other literary works to explore the manifestations and mechanisms of affect in different texts. Future research directions could include the following aspects:

- Multi-dimensional analysis of affect: it is necessary to further explore the various manifestations of affect in literary texts, including physical reactions, linguistic disruptions, visual and auditory details, etc., to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of affect.
- Interdisciplinary research: It is to combine psychology, sociology, and cultural studies to explore the manifestations and roles of affect in different socio-cultural contexts, revealing the interdisciplinary significance of affect.
- Dynamic relationship between affect and gender roles: there is a must to further investigate how affect influences the construction and deconstruction of gender roles, and how gender roles, in turn, affect the expression and understanding of affect.
- Extension of affect theory application: it is essential to apply affect theory to other literary works and cultural texts to explore the mechanisms of affect in different types of texts, enriching the application scope of affect theory. Through these future research directions, we can gain a deeper understanding of the role of affect in literature and culture, further revealing how affect influences gender, identity, and social structure. This will not only enrich the theoretical resources of literary

criticism but also provide new perspectives and methods for gender studies and socio-cultural research.

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