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Crossroads of Consumerism: The Intersection of Reality and Dream in "The Tiredness of Rosabel"

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Cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek defines fantasy as "basically a scenario filling out the empty space of a fundamental impossibility, a screen masking a void" (qtd. in Comitini 4). For shop girl Rosabel, heroine of Katherine Mansfield's "The Tiredness of Rosabel," that "void" is found in the unattainable gap between dearth and desire as she comes to covet the commodities that she sells and the lives of the consumers that she serves. The "empty space" of Žižek's supposition is figured in the emptiness of Rosabel's harsh, banal, and world-weary life. Economic deprivation and the implications of her social status as a shop girl support the "fundamental impossibility" of bridging the gap. True to Žižek's theory, Rosabel seeks solace in fantasy, more aptly described as a "reimagining"[1] of her everyday life. While her imaginative wanderings hint of fairytales and queenly aspirations, reality seeps in at every turn, resulting in a fusion of the real world of consumerism and the fantasy world of romance. I argue that while this synthesis does not erase the void in Rosabel's life, it creates a space in which the "fundamental impossibility" of her circumstances can be negotiated. Fantasy attempts to reconcile "what is" and "what is desired," both from the perspective of Mansfield and her heroine. The strategic literary straddling between the real and fictional worlds allows a creative space in which to underscore the historical and cultural challenges of the shop assistants that the iconic shop girl represents; romanticizing consumerism allows Rosabel to renegotiate the consumer marketplace as a place of potential pleasure.

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1. The reference to Rosabel's fantasy as a "reimagining" and the figuration of the iconic shop girl used throughout this essay come from class notes for "2700E Consuming Women Readings," September 2010, unless otherwise cited.

From the outset, Mansfield embeds the powerful pull of consumer desire into the reality of Rosabel's everyday life. After "a hard day's work" Rosabel satisfies her consumer desires rather than her physical needs. She buys a bunch of violets although "she would have sacrificed her soul for a good dinner" (89). Despite her intense hunger, Rosabel is drawn to the allure of the commercial world beyond the window of the bus, a world that is beyond her economic reach. Slipping into the world of fantasy, she imaginatively transforms the muddy London streets into an enchanting marketplace where the streets are paved with "opal and silver" and jewellers' shops are "fairy palaces." But the discomfort of her rain-soaked feet and the "sickening smell of warm humanity" pull her back to reality (89). Surrounded by a sense of lifelessness, expressionless faces and motionless bodies, Rosabel reflects on her own boredom: "How many times had she read those advertisements – 'Sapolio Save Time, Saves Labour'–'Heinz's tomato Sauce'– and the inane, annoying dialogue between doctor and judge concerning the superlative merits of 'Lamplough's Pyretic Saline'" (89). Rosabel is frustrated by the banality around her. Disdainful of the girl engrossed in the "cheap," paperback romance and the way she vulgarly consumes the text, "licking her first finger and thumb each time that she turned the page," she attempts to distance herself from the cultural figure of the shop girl as the low-class consumer of romance novels (89). Rosabel aspires to something greater, yet the overwhelming monotony of her own life compels her to participate in the consumption of the novel. As she glimpses the pages she appropriates "the hot, voluptuous night, a band playing, and a girl with lovely, white shoulders" as her own, and these images reappear in her self-constructed dream-world where she can leave "what is" behind and live "what is desired" for a time (89).

The heroine's constructive use of romance fiction positions the novel as a viable commodity to fill the empty space in a working-girl's life by fulfilling a psychological purpose

beyond its disposable nature, an aspect of commodity that extends to the marketplace. Rosabel's imaginative relocation of commodities from the marketplace to her dream-world remedies the sparse consumer pleasure that her scanty wages offer, and it allows her to rise above her social status as a shop girl through the possession of commodities that signal wealth and status. The cultural implication of commodity is implied by Anne Herrmann in *Shopping for Identities: Gender and Consumer Culture*:

> Commodities are characterized by their dual nature: material composition and symbolic meaning. They have been shaped by the processes of production, but they are also remade in their removal from the marketplace and their integration into everyday life. Consumers [...] learn to satisfy needs by refashioning available products. (539)

Economically unable to gratify either her physical or emotional needs in real life, Rosabel compensates through their over-abundance in her dreams. Her day's sustenance of a scone, a boiled egg and a cup of cocoa is replaced with an exotic meal of soup, oysters, pigeons, creamed potatoes, and champagne (89, 91). Rosabel's "beautiful, shining dress [...] white tulle over silver, silver shoes, silver scarf, and a little silver fan" exude a shimmering opulence only possible in her imagination (91, 92). Mansfield's use of the motif of fashion has cultural significance. As Rosy Aindow explains in *Dress and Identity in British Literary Culture, 1870-1914,* "fashionable clothing registered the confusion of class boundaries" in its ability to "permeate the class above," and the shop girl "presented a unique threat to the middle class [...] as a member of a group who defined its social position by virtue of knowledge and access to commodities" (4, 120). This cultural anxiety materializes in fashion's ability to transform Rosabel from ordinary shop girl to queenly status: "Rosabel knew she was the most famous woman at the ball that night; men paid her homage, a foreign Prince desired to be presented to

this English wonder" (92). Rosabel ranks above the clientele she serves; they serve *her*, and she surpasses them in honour, desirability, and class. Through the image of this fashioned empire, Mansfield critiques the oppressive authority of a class structure that can be disrupted by something as mutable as fashion.

The ambiguous social status of the shop girl associated with fashion extends to the mass market, represented in Westbourne Grove. In *Shopping for Pleasure*, Erika Rappaport discusses the historical significance of the growth in department stores and the diversity of commodities available in and around Westbourne Grove in the early 1900s as a symbol of London's "mass culture and economy." Rappaport frames the confusion of class structures within this mass market: "This mass market is not a synonym for either a working-class or a bourgeois public. Rather it implies heterogeneity" (18). The positioning of Rosabel's barren flat *within* the social heterogeneity of Westbourne Grove registers the shop assistant's intermediate social status between working-class and middle-class defined by her work, but with the consumer buying power of the working-class. Mansfield figures the shop assistant's futile economic struggle to participate in the marketplace in Rosabel's laborious climb to her lonely flat, which was "very much like bicycling up a steep hill, but there was not the satisfaction of flying down the other side" (90). Rosabel departs the bus at Westbourne Grove and is initially enchanted by the spectacle of its night lights, but reality soon displaces fantasy, and "from the corner of the street until she came to No. 26 she thought of those four flights of stairs. Oh, why four flights!" (90). Rosabel longs for the conveniences the marketplace offers; she wishes every house had a lift, "or an electric staircase like the one in Earl's Court – but four flights!" The burden of her life haunts her in the form of "the stuffed albatross head on the landing, glimmering ghost-like in the light of the little gas jet," the dimness far-removed from the magical brilliance of Westbourne Grove, and

"she almost cried" (90). Yet, her resilience triumphs and, in her room, Rosabel closes the door on reality for a time and escapes to the unencumbered world of imagination.

In her dream-world, the consumer comforts Rosabel covets intersect with the world of romance, and Mansfield implies this connection in the romantic, gendered, and sexual nuances of Rosabel's description of Westbourne Grove's urban space "as she had always imagined Venice to look at night, *mysterious, dark* [...] *tongues of flame licking* the *wet* street – *magic fish swimming* in the Grand Canal"[2] (90). This intersection of romance and commodity culture is reminiscent of the girl on the bus, *licking* her fingers as she turns the pages of the romance novel. Inspired, Rosabel imagines Westbourne Grove as a magical place with the possibility of love and sexual pleasure, and where she can enjoy consumer comforts through the world of romance. In the solitude of her flat she continues the fantasy, fashioning romantic scenes underpinned with consumer comforts: a get-away in Harry's motor car; the intimacy of an exotic lunch at Gerard's, enhanced with flowers, sensuous music, and swaying palm trees; a matinée, "something that gripped them both;" and the "joyous intimacy" of "tea at the 'Cottage'" (91). As Eva Illouz points out in "Consuming the Romantic Utopia," such romantic scenes have class implications: in the real world, argues Illouz, romance as a commodity is not equally distributed among the working and middle classes because of differing amounts of disposable income and leisure time, thereby "hindering the working-class access to the 'romantic dream'" (294). To compensate, Rosabel becomes a subversive agent in the romance marketplace through the power of her own imagination, creating her own access to the romantic dream and all the consumer comforts that it promises.

An extract from Clara Collet's "The Employment of Women" (1893) confirms the historical relevance of Illouz's claim. Collet describes the deplorable living and working

[2] Italics added for emphasis, but not in original quote.

conditions of shop assistants like Rosabel, whose meager wages and excessive work schedules of up to seventy-seven and a half hours per week render both money and time almost nonexistent. Only in an imagined classless world could shop girls reconcile this disparity to enjoy the pleasures of romance insinuated in romance fiction and assumed by the bourgeoisie. Yet, even in dreaming Rosabel can not entirely escape from the harsh reality of her life. As implied in the title, Rosabel's consuming "tiredness," wrought by her labour as a shop girl, infiltrates her dream-world: after the ball "she became very tired," in the haven of Harry's arms "she was very tired," and on her wedding night "she was tired [...] and went upstairs to bed...quite early" (92). Mansfield emphasizes the depth of Rosabel's tiredness by its power to eclipse the fulfillment of her sexual passion for Harry: "her forehead was hot...if those slim hands could rest one moment...the luck of that girl!" (91). Rosabel's "tiredness" suggests that the consuming fatigue of her labour devitalizes her both sexually and physically.

From a cultural perspective, the non-consummation of Rosabel's marriage has a redemptive quality that deflates Harry's inference that the real Rosabel is available to fulfill his own consumer fantasy as an object for sale alongside the commodities she sells. In *Consuming Fantasies: Labour, Leisure, and the London Shopgirl*, Lise Shapiro Sanders positions the figure of the shop girl within the fantasy of consumerism:

> The shopgirl embodied the very moment at which fantasy entered the process of consumer exchange: her vocation required that she mediate the desires of consumers on the other side of the counter, be they women who longed to purchase the goods on display or men who might desire the shopgirl herself as another type of merchandise. (1)

Harry's proposal embodies the latter, with its prostitutional references to painted women, payment, and the body: "he counted the money into her hand – 'Ever been painted?' he said. [...]

You've got such a damned pretty little figure" (91). The real Rosabel appears to welcome the proposition; she is aroused as "she saw again those slim hands counting money into hers," yet the sexual transaction is never completed in Rosabel's fantasy (91). In the world Rosabel constructs she is not the object of sexual barter; she is the object of Harry's devotion and she can enjoy all the consumer pleasures that entails without engaging in an act that would align her with the cultural image of the shop girl as a seller of her own sexuality in exchange for marriage to a wealthy suitor. Deferment of Rosabel's sexual gratification also suggests that both she and Mansfield intuit the unlikelihood of realizing the happy ending of romance fiction. When she awakens the warmth of Harry's hand is replaced by the "cold fingers of dawn" and a return to harsh reality. Nonetheless, the remembrance of the dream affords Rosabel the strength to carry on with her quotidian life with renewed optimism.

The figure of the shop girl as a mediator of consumer fantasy is incomplete without considering the demoralizing demands of women shoppers, as evident in Rosabel's encounter with the girl who accompanies Harry and who is looking for a fantastical hat, reminiscent of a Puss n' Boots fairytale hat: "a black hat with a feather that goes right round it and then ties in a bow under your chin, and the ends tuck into your belt" (90). Despite the impossibility, the weary but determined Rosabel produces a bewitching hat that "charm[s]" them both, emphasizing the interplay of fantasy and reality in her everyday life. The fantasy continues as Rosabel models the hat for the girl, and turning to her own image in the mirror she sees a reflection of her own consumer desires. For a fleeting moment, she changes places with the girl and figuratively changes hats, from shop girl to consumer, confirming Rachel Bowlby's figuration of the store as a place where women could "look and dream" (*Just Looking* 4). The image before her allows

Rosabel to negotiate class boundaries by participating in the "bourgeois leisure activity" of shopping (4). Bowlby explains the transformative allure of shopping:

> Consumer culture transforms the narcissistic mirror into a shop window, the *glass* which reflects an idealized image of the woman (or man) who stands before it, in the form of the model she could buy or become. Through the glass, the woman sees what she wants and what she wants to be. (31)

Rosabel's illusion is shattered by the intrusion of reality when the girl declares, "Oh Harry, isn't it adorable [...] I must have that!" reducing her to an object of display. This scene embodies the dehumanization of a shop assistant's everyday life as she function like a mannequin in a store window, modeling items of fashion so that other women might fulfill *their* consumer desires (Sanders 6, 7). Rosabel's "ridiculous feeling of anger" is not only directed toward the girl who embodies all that she desires and is denied (91), but also toward herself, the experience being one of "class-bound shame that structures the shopgirl's everyday life" (Sanders 7). Rosabel restores her dignity in her imagined bourgeois world where the glass reflects the woman she desires to be, one whose social status allows her to fulfill her own consumer fantasies.

For the real Rosabel, the shop window symbolizes the socio-economic barriers between her status as a shop girl and her bourgeois desires, but in her imagination the window of her barren flat becomes a symbol of possibilities where *she* can look and dream, the glass reflecting *her* desires and not those of the outside world. The great expanse of the shop window is reduced to "just one little sheet of glass between her and the great wet world outside!" (90). The rain-spattered window becomes a portal to a place where Rosabel can rewrite the tear-spattered pages of the novel with herself as heroine. As she pulls the blind up and puts out the gas her room takes on a cinematic quality, and from its dark interior Rosabel projects her own desires onto the

screen that is her life as she ponders the events of the day. This scene recalls Bowlby's figuration of cinema as the "Hollywood 'dream factory,'" and the making of Rosabel's dream is much like a cinematic production. As Bowlby explains, in order to "construct the illusion" cinema attempts to hide functional elements that detract from the viewing experience; by "suppress[ing] its mechanical, labored parts" the "dream factory" produces "something characterized by its very separation from the relative ordinariness of everyday life" (6). But also, like the limited and transient nature of cinema, Rosabel's separation from reality is incomplete. Mansfield reinforces this limitation with the parenthetical interjection of "(The real Rosabel, the girl crouched on the floor in the dark [...])" into the fantasy narrative (92).

The "tragic optimism" of the final sentence encapsulates a cautious hope in closing the gap between "what is" and "what is desired," for both Mansfield and her heroine. Despite its transience, reimagining the world around her allows Rosabel to negotiate the misfortunes and endless routine of her life and to sample the pleasures of consumerism and romance otherwise denied her. Mansfield's own optimism is her hope to inspire reform through the act of writing by exposing the social injustices experienced by shop assistants like the fictional Rosabel. Her agency is using her warm fingers around the pen in hopes of mitigating the cold fingers of reality that script the shop girl's "tear-spattered" everyday life.

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