
Modernist Soundscape in Katherine Mansfield’s “The Wind Blows”

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the extent of soundscape in shaping individuality in selected short stories of Katherine Mansfield. Shifting from New Zealand to England, she explores not only the opportunity it renders but also the anxiety it pushes forward. Whereas many modernist authors traverse the human condition from diversified perspectives, Mansfield does it from her own experience rooted in geographic relocation. In a number of her epiphanic short stories, soundscape has a crucial functionality in deciphering the psychology of an individual in the juncture of modernity. She optimises sound circumferentially so that a character can have silent auditory experience or voiced impression of individual consciousness. Sound helps one determine how one can respond to certain elements in a given or lived space and time. Such response can be mesmerizing as in "The Wind Blows." In other words, sound, in its variegated form, helps denominate social interaction and discrete sensation through the blending of audible and inaudible engagement or detachment as exemplified in a particular soundscape. This paper aims to find the scope of soundscape in fashioning a character within the domain of modernist spatiality and temporality.

Keywords

Modernism, soundscape, Katherine Mansfield, rhythm, individuality

Soundscape is equivalent to landscape experienced through acoustics. Not visual but auditory perception is the key to understanding soundscape. It brings to the realization of how an individual is engaged in or disengaged from a particular sonic environment, how sound may have its impact on an individual. This auditory experience can include any type of sound, but primarily it can be human or non-human. It can be natural, or artificial, even arbitrary. Soundscape incorporates sounds that can be appealing or disturbing in nature. However, its nature and impact vary in different times and in different places.

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People's attitude to sound and soundscape depends on their running into that sonic world where they belong. Even when there is no sound, it can be labelled as silence, or silent sound. This belonging brings together different elements to a sphere where they can feel each other. Jonathan Sterne says that over the past two centuries, sound rather transformed its identity from mere voice or music to a realm of thought and practice, thus becoming the more rationally comprehended rather than just heard or uttered (Sterne, 2003, p. 2). The change in understanding the scope of sound is thus acknowledged for allowing human acceptability of how sound becomes functional in life. What was regarded as simple sound has now become the source of a strong bond between two different entities. In other words, it is not sound but human perception that has been able to reinterpret and apply sound on a wider ground.

The study of soundscape in relation to individuality has been a major literary expansion since the Victorian era. The Victorian experience of the new passages of sound has contributed much to its literature. "Victorian Soundscape," says John Picker, "was so varied and vast as to be too much for one pair of ears to apprehend." He further says that it was "alive with the screech and roar of the railway and the clang of industry, with the babble, bustle, and music of city streets, and with the crackle and squawk of acoustic vibrations on wires and wax – yet alive as well with the performances of the literary figures who struggled to hear and be heard above or through all of this" (Picker, 2003, p. 4). It has been a great enthusiasm that this aurality was given space enough in the literature of its own. Changes brought to the Victorian tradition motivated the practitioners to look differently, if not consciously, at the sources of the acoustic reality all around. The progression of industrialism in particular paved the way for the new look. Novel development of machine and mechanics expanded the life-style; from horse-carts to motor vehicles, from railroads to locomotives contributed all the more to urbanization and people's migration from the rural areas to the towns and cities. So, the existing soundscape came to realization. People were able to recognize a different interpretation of the sonic world.

Apart from the scientific advancement, the impact was visible in the literary world as well. London was thriving not only with sound but with disturbing noise as well. *The Times* published an article on May 2, 1856, with a few glimpses of London life, "The perpetual rumble of carts and roll of carriages are bad enough; but that is a necessary evil. Not so our street cries, our street music. They are an entirely gratuitous aggravation of the disagreeables inseparable from a town life" (p. 9). A report like this shows how urban soundscape during the Victorian period felt like. All urbanity had been experiencing such commotion, din and bustle, with the expansion of metropolis or the foundation of new city areas. The soundscape of a city can easily be imagined with various types of sound heard or felt in it. Besides, an ever-growing multicultural city's soundscape is likely to be more profound in nature. Rapid change in life-style and culture can lead even an unconscious mind to be cautious about the surroundings, especially about the sound that is frequently experienced. All the sounds – from home to work-place and anything in between – must then contribute to the formation of the soundscape that

becomes unavoidably audible. Dickens, George Eliot, Tennyson, and other Victorian authors portray the same reality in their writings. While Dickens, in novels like *Dombey and Son* (2008) and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (2002) embeds the relation between sound and individual experience with sound's movement and agility in a character's apprehension of the space where that sound dominates, Eliot shows the feasibility of hearing ability as a manifestation of individual connection to the closest soundscape in novels like *The Lifted Veil*, and *Brother Jacob* (2009) and *Middlemarch* (2019). G. Tate (2020) argues that Tennyson, in some of his poems like "The Miller's Daughter", tends to prioritise the acoustic over the textual aspects of poetry (p. 146). The Victorian aurality is, in this way, too resonant to ignore.

With the advent of modernism after the fin-de-siècle, the analytic shift changes from societal or political or economic exploration and contemplates more on individuality within the public sphere, which offers an outburst of anxiety as well as opportunity for the contemporary intellectual pluralism. A binary pragmatism like this remains at the centre of the modernist authors, who are divided into two categories: canonical and non-canonical. Though some of them shifted from other places to England, not all became well-set; conversely, some others became very influential modernists. However, they had to struggle for sustaining their authorship. Such a high modernist author is Katherine Mansfield, who migrated from New Zealand before WWI. A notable short story writer, she uses both the settings to channel what she has come across as a migrant author in a place of her own choice. Notwithstanding, her choice of place may have an adverse response to her expectations because she had to go through much hardship – as a migrant author and as a woman – that taught her how to sustain rather a hostile environment, though later on she was well accepted by other modernist figures like Virginia Woolf and Lady Ottoline Morrell. Her stories, though not autobiographical, reflect individual experience through characters, places, and events. Coming from a different geographical location, she has managed well how to use both the environments and settings. In doing so, she uses, among others, the soundscape of both the places as a means to display the relation between individuality and the surrounding. In other words, she exploits the soundscape for establishing the association between the inner world and the external world.

While commenting on Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot writes, "What I call the 'auditory imagination' is the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end" (Eliot, 1948, pp. 118-119). Eliot's auditory imagination has long been in vogue, though unrealized, in literature. His definition of this imaginary reality is a demonstration of how sound, in its diversified form, can help an individual prompt to different situations, which can be external or internal. From personal feeling of sound that is heard or felt through to the public sphere of engaging or disengaging sound on a wider ground, it is the realm of sound that draws one to one's involvement with this world. The imagination is extended so that the new domain can accord

to how one feels with every bit of a particular sound and how it is produced. One's own breathing sound, own voice, like the humming of a bee, even the internal monologue, or other external sound of any type can initiate a certain level of thought. Sounds in this way can be thought-provoking and may introduce a new dimension of perception. Sounds within and all around can invigorate a discrete feature of complicity. This mutuality, the connectivity between sound and individual, upholds how sound generates and is generated on the one hand, and how an individual progresses or regresses on the other.

Soundscape has its characteristics depending on places. This may be within one place, or different places, within one time-frame, or extending over several time-frame. Comparing country sound and urban sound, Ford Madox Ford says in his book *The Soul of London* that while a clock sounds like "Alive-Dead; Alive-Dead" in the country, the same clock sounds "Never-Again; Never-Again" in London (Ford, 1995, p. 53). The interpretation of sound and its cohesive meaning is relative. The tick-tock clock echoes divergent sound to express how people react to a certain sound produced by a certain mechanical body. Decisively, it is not the sound but people's perception and the spatiality that tend to reflect how the clock sounds; sound expresses perception. This is how human beings can be integral to soundscape. In the same way, in order to perceive soundscape and its impact on an individual, one has to be aware of the spatiality and temporality and people's connection with it. Ford's understanding and observation can help explore the passage that leads to how soundscape contributes to individuality. Whereas country people identify themselves with the definitive way of their interpretation of the sound, urban people explain it from their perspectives. The clock-sound, part of both rural and urban soundscapes, upholds spatial identity. Danielle Fosler-Lussier (2020) argues that people's awareness of sound and its environment allows them to choose to represent themselves as part of the sonic world or as separate entity within that domain (pp. 153-154). An individual can opt for becoming a part of that environment or continuing to be a distinct, unalloyed being. Soundscape, thus, in a broader sense, can be instrumental in comprehending individuality.

Sound layered on sound forms soundscape of a particular space where an individual inhabits and becomes exposed to that soundscape. This sound, associated or dissociated in nature, can be an essential part of everyday life or an ignorable entity. Patricia Pye says, "Victorian and Edwardian Londoners arguably experienced much greater exposure to ambient music, at a time when ideas about a distinctly popular culture had begun to emerge" (Pye, 2017, p. 78). The socio-cultural transformation in London also motivated its inhabitants or even visitors to be exposed to several sounds as the by-product of that change. Pye talks about music, ambient in nature, and its acceptance within the London society. If the idea can be shifted from music to other sounds and its places, the extent of that soundscape can be materialized. Sound then can become more than ambient, even discursive because it may not sound attractive. The impact of sound may even vary from one recipient to another. What may sound like simply "sound" can sound like "noise" to others. It is all due to how, when, and where that sound is perceived. Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (2000)

portrays this dilemma when the motor car's sound arouses curiosity in its surrounding listeners yet terror in Septimus (pp. 12-13). Such diversity in a soundscape can produce mixed reaction towards sound that simultaneously conjoins and divides attention. Ford's London and that of the Victorians and the Edwardians have at least one thing in common: the urban spatiality entertains soundscape to be a holistic ground for the mass, which comprises many individuals.

So, what does modernist soundscape look like? Or, what does it sound like? A modernist cognizance of soundscape has already been discussed. To answer such query, further instances will be helpful. While coming from the country areas to the urban spaces, people must develop a mood of knowing the metropolis, which is highlighted with much sound and much noise. For these country people, it is more like noise than the typical sound. Even the silence differs from one place to another. Not only the busy street sound but the silent sound in the parks can also be integral to soundscape. Merged with it are the modernist ideologies, the new music with new instruments, the new sounds of more people and more vehicles, the entertainment places like theatres and cinema halls, parks and river-banks, museums and galleries, and the new look of life blessed with anxiety and hope. The modernist soundscape then promises a mixed aurality, a blending of blessings and curses. Many sounds leading to one soundscape have the potential of helping an individual to sustain or be lost in it. This heard or the unheard sound is comparable to what is visually experienced. Human experience of the sound depends on how the sound is produced and how the sound is received by the listener, both within the same soundscape. Once the production and distribution of the sound is acknowledged, the next question might be: how does sound motivate/demotivate an individual?

The sound, not one but many, depending on its origin, comes from numerous sources. Apart from all the external sources as discussed earlier and such other likely places, this sound may even come to existence from within. Rhythm, in many forms, is what comes from inside. Rhythm of movement or motion, rhythm of voice or body language erupts as a feasible source of internal and natural – human-made though – sound. When it is vocal sound in the form of rhythm, it expresses many emotions. As Douglas Kahn says, “The register of the sound of speech, for instance, is not limited to pure sensation but arrayed across a range of chatty spirit personalities speaking out loud, murmuring and belching out words” (Kahn, 1999, p. 118). This sensory expression, then, reveals different characteristics of an individual about the thought process and how it is affected by exterior or interior elements. At the same time, it is also understood how it affects others. This reciprocal impact thus leads to a certain recognition of the sound as a fount of individual experience. It is in this way that sound, part of a soundscape, influences an individual. Such leverage ultimately promotes the interdependence of individuals and sounds.

During the modernist period, it is soundscape that became an inevitable reality for the literary practitioners. Not that they pondered on it; the development around and the new way of life allured them to merge with it. The flâneurs of the era are open to experiences like this. In doing so, they, like the typical

modernists, unconsciously do some experimentations that are recorded in the period's literature. Virginia Woolf (2000) presents Clarissa Dalloway, the title character of her one-day stream-of-consciousness novel *Mrs Dalloway*, partially as a flâneuse. Mansfield's story "Miss Brill" is a good example of it although the title character is not a flâneuse in its proper sense. Characters that visit the park where Miss Brill comes regularly play that role. Mansfield's narrative occurs through the internal monologue of Miss Brill – her interpretation of people and place all around – and the connectivity between the two. Her "'special' seat" (Mansfield, 2002, p. 225) moves around and makes her the observant. It is the monologue that reveals what Mansfield wants to expose: the ambient rhythm. In a letter she proclaims the making of the story, "In Miss Brill I chose not only the length of every sentence, but even the sound of every sentence . . . to fit her on that day at that very moment" (Mansfield, 2008, p. 165). The eyes while reading the story can hear the sound that the author has argued through Miss Brill. Mansfield utilizes both the spatiality and the temporality of her own to bring about the experience through this imaginary character. What Mansfield presents in "Miss Brill" is how sound and rhythm work to decipher the mind and mood of an individual at a certain – cruel yet undeniable – stage of life. This inevitability is an outcome of Mansfield's experimentation with sound and rhythm. If experimentation is one of the core concepts of modernism, no doubt she manages it skillfully. Helen Rydstrand writes in her essay, "In 'Miss Brill', rhythm is used to evoke the title character's internal as well as her outward habits, becoming a way into a sympathetic but complex portrait of the psychological effects of social isolation" (Rydstrand, 2017, p. 188). Miss Brill's secluded life remains an enjoyable one, albeit ironically, because of the rhythm she has developed to break the monotony. Her vision helps the author explicate a sonorous identity that grants the character access to an undiscovered reality.

Mansfield as a modernist author was appreciated much by Woolf. Both the authors, as discussed above, use soundscape to deal with the dilemma of the characters. The bond between the two authors opens the scope for inspiration. Since Mansfield comes from another part of the globe, she finds Woolf as a high stimulation. She expresses how her writings were appreciated by Woolf. She writes about the re-publication of her story "The Wind Blows" – first published in 1915, later reprinted in 1920 – in another letter, "I put it in because so many people had admired it. . . . Virginia, Lytton – and queer people like Mary Hamilton & Bertie all spoke so strongly about it I felt I must put it in" (Mansfield, 2008, pp. 273-274). The urge to re-publish the story comes from two grounds then: from reader's interest – not ordinary but highly intellectual readers – in it, and from the story itself. The setting of this "admired" story uses a soundscape in an environment that deliberates individual poignancy. The story extensively uses its own soundscape – with sounds emanating from weather and wind, music, voice, rhythm, and voyage – to show how relationship works and how individuality is affected by the surroundings. The convincing sound heard through the narrative poses many questions about how an individual sustains in a reasonably unfriendly environment.

The story begins with a violent weather; even the first word of it has an atmospheric commotion in it. What follows is rather an organic portrayal of the sound – heard and realized – of the weather, “Suddenly – dreadfully – she wakes up. What has happened? Something dreadful has happened. No – nothing has happened. It is only the wind shaking the house, rattling the windows, banging a piece of iron on the roof and making her bed tremble” (Mansfield, 2008, p. 74). Wind’s mobility allows the mind to receive, perceive, and be conscious of the impression of the sound that acts like a natural phenomenon because it is capable of bringing reality to a baffled mind. Kristie Schlauff (2018) says that personal experience may foster particular understandings of sound, create soundscape, and conceptualize the impact of sound technologies (p. 8). This sound works as a waking-up bell. However, the setting and the soundscape of the day carry along the tension in Matilda, the central character, who wants to be free from the suffocating weather inside the house, herself, and outside. The relish comes from the morning itself; its powerful and destructive sound is set in contrast to the expected music lesson to start soon. The story thus introduces two different types of sound for unveiling a soundscape – quite modernist in nature as well, mixed with desolation and aspiration. It is Matilda’s interpretation of the rhythm of life the way the “two Chinamen lollop along” (Mansfield, 2008, p. 74) whereas the strong wind fails to stop them from their venture. Being frustrated with the outside, she unconsciously pushes the frustration inside her. Her position is chained with everything that she faces all around. The only way-out is the music lesson for which she runs out of the house despite her mother’s warning call. In order to uphold her spirit, she must get access to a different aurality that awaits her in the teacher’s house.

Mansfield presents yet another paradoxical soundscape for uncovering Matilda’s struggle. Her arrival at Mr Bullen, the piano teacher, is contrasted with sea-roar and cave-peace. The cave – the teacher’s lesson-room – is peaceful. Mansfield’s depiction of the whole atmosphere vitalizes Matilda through a sensory reality; the sonorous ramification pulls her towards a mesmerizing reality where she can lollop. The distracted girl is retracted in the cave all due to the sonic environment, the rhythm of the sound of silence, which remains so convincing as to make her feel like crying without any reason. The silent cry is another way of acknowledging the rhythmic voice of the teacher. As Sam Halliday says, “[M]odernist literature invests heavily in the idea of music’s close association with the ineffable, defined as something ‘beyond’ but nonetheless in close proximity to language” (Halliday, 2013, p. 43). Action fails Matilda who unknowingly leans on the teacher not to support but to unburden herself of the pressure of the aural environment she finds soothingly suffocating. The technique Mansfield uses here is a definitive one experimented by the modernists for introducing the engaging influence of instrument, music, and sound on individual mind and mentality. Rhythm in this way can be felt at two levels: the individual and the social. In other words, both the individual and the public react to rhythm that becomes the base where others perform.

The last section of the story “The Wind Blows” is set at a harbor where

Matilda and her brother – much grown-up now – rush along with their memory. But her keenness about the sonority makes her an observer of what the weather makes of the day and how it contributes to the soundscape, as Mansfield writes, “Bogey’s voice is breaking. When he speaks he rushes up and down the scale. It’s funny – it makes you laugh – and yet it just suits the day. The wind carries their voices – away fly sentences like the narrow ribbons” (Mansfield, 2002, p. 77). Movement of the brother along with the language perforates the harshness of the wind. The day, albeit blessed with natural disturbance, permits the sound around to govern. The adjustment seen by Matilda is full of rhythm of life like the waves in the sea. The juxtaposition of sound and wind constructs a life-like reality to be tied with ribbons that, paradoxically, have the capacity to untie the mind from its social liabilities. Their departure, along with the story’s end, is glorified with three more visible sounds that add to the soundscape of the momentous parting. The first is the post office clock’s chime that can be heard for the last time. The second one is not from the present time but from memory; it is Matilda’s memory that ignites Bogey’s memory as well: the rhythm of the unexplainable cave-cry during her music lesson many days ago. In other words, the current soundscape is overlapped with a previous one to showcase Matilda’s sense of belonging. Her migration echoes that of her narrator.

The last sound presented in the narrative is that of the water that cannot be seen in the dark but heard. The mood is excited, agitated for the upcoming voyage towards the destination, but the past is unforgettable for Matilda, as she cries, “Good-bye, little island, good-bye. . . .” (Mansfield, 2002, p. 78). The reality is whenever there is good-bye, there is always a welcome note stretched ahead. The story ends with the motion of the wind, like the motion of Matilda and the commotion of her mind. The chime is heard for the last time, but its legacy continues in the rhythm of her life. Murray Schafer says, “[T]he soundscape is no accidental byproduct of society; rather it is a deliberate construction by its creators, a composition which may be as much distinguished for its beauty as for its ugliness” (Schafer, 1994, p. 237). The wind is strong, even outrageous to some extent, but the rhythm in it may not be realized by all at all time. People living in a society experience wind the way they want to, and as a result miss the core that remains undiscovered. Matilda has managed to overcome that limitation because she has materialized the scales of rhythm of life.

“The Wind Blows” is a story that voices the use of voice and sound, sound made by nature, made by people, made by instruments, and made from within, and that sound that makes human beings its integral part. The soundscape of the story is two-fold, two-spaced, and two-timed. Each group accommodates the other with human-bridge, Matilda being at the centre of each reality, playing the part Mansfield wants her to perform. The two-part story’s narrative is a rhythmic attuning of loss and gain, like the modernist clock’s tick-tock. The voyage commences with a destination in mind, but, more importantly, the voyage also becomes the peripheral arena of an epiphanic identity of an individual who discovers the aesthetic pragmatism of sound, of rhythm. The modernist authors are on the process of pointing at the inner person corre-

sponding to the external world and its pressure, the ever-changing scenario all around. Mansfield also follows the same process with a different tone, a tone that transforms wind power into rhythmic authenticity. The credible sources of the sound constitute the strength one deserves in the face of a strong force that tends to destroy one. Mansfield uses the modernist soundscape with a view to demonstrating the challenges a prospective art-practitioner may come across; at the same time, she dissects that soundscape and explores the reliability of each component to such an extent where an individual can maintain the very individuality.

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