

**Towards a Poetics of Description:  
Philippe Hamon's Theory of Description  
and Katherine Mansfield's Short Stories**

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Strukturalismista kehittynyt narratologinen teoria on keskittynyt kerronnan analyysiin ja jättänyt deskriptiot eli kuvaukset vähemmälle huomiolle. Philippe Hamon on kuitenkin laatinut laajan kuvausten luokittelun, joka pyrkii yksinkertaistamaan ja kaavamaistamaan kuvauksia. Katherine Mansfieldin novelleissa on kosolti kuvauksia, joten ne ovat otollinen aineisto Philippe Hamonin deskription teorian soveltuvuuden testaamiseen.

Tässä pro gradu -työssä tarkastelen sitä, miten strukturalismi ja narratologia ovat kehittyneet, miten narratologisissa teorioissa suhtaudutaan kuvauksiin, millaisia kuvauksen teorioita on ja eritoten millainen Philippe Hamonin kuvauksen teoria on. Sovellan Hamonin teoriaa Katherine Mansfieldin novelleihin "Prelude", "At the Bay" ja "Garden Party" arvioidakseni Hamonin teorian toimivuutta, sekä tarkastelen kuvauksia noissa novelleissa.

Avainsanat: deskriptio, narratologia, Philippe Hamon, Katherine Mansfield, impressionismi

## 1. Introduction

Descriptions are an essential, ever-present part of narrative texts, yet my claim is that descriptions have not yet been given the due attention in the different theories studying narrative texts. Since the early 1970s, the Western culture has started to emphasise the position of visual elements. As descriptions are the “visual” elements in literature, their position has been brought to the limelight in textual analyses alongside with emphasising the primary position of reference and representation, or the position of reader and reading practices.<sup>1</sup>

In this thesis I present the answers for the following questions to do with the problematic and biased nature of descriptions within narratological theories or theories of description: How are the different theories concerned with narrative texts formed? What is the status of descriptions in narrative theories? What are the different theories of description like, Philippe Hamon's theory of description in particular? How applicable is Hamon's theory of description?

In Chapter 2 I present how the different theories concerned with narrative texts are formed and find out what the status of descriptions is like in them. In Chapter 3 I survey the different theories of description, particularly Philippe Hamon's theory of description, which in Chapter 4 I apply to Katherine Mansfield's short stories “Prelude,” “At the Bay” and “The Garden Party” to find out how applicable the theory is to them. Katherine Mansfield's short stories are characterised as being full of descriptions. “It is, after all, the description, the creation of atmosphere, that makes 'At the Bay,' 'The Garden Party' and 'Prelude' so memorable,” David Daiches, a renowned Mansfield critic, comments.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Auli Viikari, “Ancilla Narrationis,” in KSV, 47 (1992), pp. 61 – 62.

<sup>2</sup> David Daiches, “The Art of Katherine Mansfield,” in New Literary Values (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1936), p. 97.

Mieke Bal defines the concept of description as follows: “A description is a textual fragment in which features are attributed to objects. This aspect of attribution is the descriptive function. We will consider a fragment as descriptive when this function is dominant.”<sup>3</sup>

This is the definition of description I also adopt in this thesis. Descriptions are about features to do with objects, animate or inanimate, human and non-human. A description fulfills this descriptive function and is often intuitively recognised by a reader. The dominant nature of a particular fragment is not necessarily clear-cut, but in terms of defining description, it is sufficient to state that a fragment is descriptive if the descriptive function is dominant.

The term poetics in the title of this thesis is used as a synonym of “theory of literature.”<sup>4</sup>

Katherine Mansfield's short stories have many ellipses, marked by three dots. For the sake of clarity, within the quotations I include in the text, I have marked the ellipses in which I have omitted something from the beginning, the middle or the end of the original text I am quoting with three dots inside parentheses ( . . . ) while the ellipses in Mansfield's original text are marked with dots as in the original text without using parentheses.

Katherine Mansfield (1888 – 1923) was a controversial writer whose work included mostly short stories yet also some poems and fragmentary sketches. She was born in New Zealand but spent the later years of her life in Europe, mostly in England.

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<sup>3</sup> Mieke Bal, Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative, trans. Christine van Boheemen from 2nd Dutch ed.(1980; rpt. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1985), p. 130.

<sup>4</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, “Introduction,” in French Poetics Today (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982), p. 1.

Her illness and death in the age of 34, the rich imagery of New Zealand flora and fauna in her writing, her marriage to John Middleton Murry who edited much of her work, her friendship with Virginia Woolf and involvement in the Bloomsbury circle, the feministic nuances in her writing and her impressionistic experimental style of writing have all inspired research, largely biographical, sometimes referred to as “Mansfieldiana.”<sup>5</sup> Ian A. Gordon points out that “she is an industry ( . . . ) almost as busy as the Shakespeare industry.”<sup>6</sup>

Gordon recognises that the biographical research concentrates on two Katherine Mansfields: “There is Katherine Mansfield the heroine of a whole series of biographical studies and there is Katherine Mansfield the writer.”<sup>7</sup> While some studies concentrate on the latter and see Katherine Mansfield as a dedicated writer, many put the main emphasis on the person and see her as either a rebellious adolescent, or a saint, or a black sheep and an escapee and a legendary rebellious daughter, or a feminist, or a lesbian.<sup>8</sup>

Her work has inspired various interpretations, often with a biographical bias. Stylistically Katherine Mansfield has been classified, for instance, as a Symbolist, Modernist, Imagist and Impressionist, and interpreted accordingly.<sup>9</sup> A lot of the criticism coincided with New Criticism, and concentrated on the symbolism found in Katherine Mansfield’s short stories. For instance, a short story “The Fly” inspired a chain of 18 articles in literary journals, debating on whom the

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<sup>5</sup> Julia van Gunsteren, Katherine Mansfield and Literary Impressionism (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1990), p.7.

<sup>6</sup> Ian A. Gordon, “Katherine Mansfield in the Late Twentieth Century,” in The Fine Instrument. ed. Paulette Michel and Michel Dupuis (Sydney: Dungaroo Press, 1989), p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon, pp. 18 – 23.

<sup>9</sup> Gunsteren, p. 7.

fly symbolises in the story of an old businessman, whose son had died in the war, and who is sitting in his office by his desk, eventually drowning a fly with drops of ink from his pen.<sup>10</sup>

In this thesis I follow the approach that Katherine Mansfield is first and foremost a Literary Impressionist. “The fundamental ideology of Impressionism is clear: reality is a matter of perception. It is ever-changing, elusive, inscrutable and unstable,” as Julia van Gunsteren puts it<sup>11</sup>. The Impressionist fragmentary, limited sensory perceptions are apparent in Katherine Mansfield's short stories as well. According to Gunsteren, the emphasis is on the act of perception rather than on the perceived or the perceiver.<sup>12</sup> Such is the case in the following example from “Prelude” in which a little girl looks into a garden through a window and sees her sister. Her vision is distorted by the coloured window panes:

The dining-room window had a square of coloured glass in each corner. One was blue and one was yellow. Kezia bent down to have one more look at a blue lawn with blue arum lilies growing at the gate, and then at a yellow lawn with yellow lilies and a yellow fence. As she looked a little Chinese Lottie came out on to the lawn and began to dust the tables and chairs with a corner of her pinafore. Was that really Lottie? Kezia was not quite sure until she had looked through the ordinary window.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The full list of the articles on “The Fly” can be found in Gunsteren, p. 244.

<sup>11</sup> Gunsteren, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> Gunsteren, p. 55.

<sup>13</sup>Katherine Mansfield, *Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield* (London: Constable, 1945), p.14.

Realism and Naturalism tend to perceive the world as the sum of its objects, as the solid reality of the matter in a brutal inhuman world that is divorced from the subject, while the Symbolist philosophy considers the world the symbol of a hidden reality, a representation of both the idea and the unseen. Meanwhile, according to the Literary Impressionist reality cannot be analysed but only intuitively perceived.<sup>14</sup> While a Modernist character always first thinks, then feels detached, and only thirdly perceives, observes or imagines, a Literary Impressionist character is far less mobile in his or her thoughts, and remains encapsulated in his or her solipsism.<sup>15</sup> Mansfield uses descriptive epithets when identifying her characters. The narrator in her stories is often perceptive but has no prior knowledge of the characters.<sup>16</sup> She also employs the most purely Literary Impressionist method of presenting characters through action and dialogue.<sup>17</sup>

As “Mansfieldiana” concentrates on the biographical aspects of Mansfield's texts, and, thus, such aspects have been thoroughly analysed, in this thesis I contribute towards the textual analysis of Mansfield, looking at descriptions in Mansfield's texts from the point of view of Philippe Hamon's theory of description. So far descriptions in Mansfield's texts have been largely ignored, despite the fact that her short stories are abundant with descriptions.

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<sup>14</sup> Gunsteren, p. 51.

<sup>15</sup> Gunsteren, pp. 152-53.

<sup>16</sup> Gunsteren, p. 152.

<sup>17</sup> Gunsteren, p. 153.



## 2. From Structuralism to Narratology

In this chapter I study the concept of structuralism in relation to its origins in linguistics, its application to larger cultural concepts, and finally, structuralism in literary theory.<sup>18</sup> Amongst the several different perspectives of structuralist theory and its applications, the one most relevant to this thesis is the narratological study of literary narratives. After discussing structuralism, I introduce some historical and contemporary aspects of narratology, present narratological terms, and finally, proceed to emphasise the neglected position of description in narratological research.

### 2.1. Structuralism

#### 2.1.1. Linguistic Structuralism

Structuralism springs from the structuralist linguistic theory introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure in the early twentieth century. According to this theory all linguistic signs consist of two separate parts: a concept and a sound pattern or a visual element, or signification (*signifié*) and signal (*signifiant*), as Saussure prefers to call them.<sup>19</sup> (Respectively, the terms can also be

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<sup>18</sup> By introducing the division into linguistic, cultural and literary structuralism, I do not wish to imply that they all are on an equal level with each other. Rather, I refer to linguistic structuralism as the progenitor of structuralist theories, cultural structuralism as its wide application and literary structuralism as a specific aspect of cultural structuralism.

<sup>19</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983), pp. 66-67. Saussure's term sound pattern may seem rather narrow. However, it comprises both the articulatory and the sound aspect. Moreover, the signal clearly contains the visual element, too, even though Saussure's main concern is the sound pattern.

called signified and signifier; the usage of these translations is more established than the usage of their above-mentioned counterparts.)

The signal is the visual or sound element related to the sign; for instance, the visual signal c-a-t refers to the concept, the idea or image of a small, furry, meowing domestic animal. This relationship is purely arbitrary, unmotivated: "arbitrary in relation to its signification, with which it has no natural connexion in reality."<sup>20</sup> Otherwise the same signal, cat, would refer to the same signification throughout the world, not just in the English-speaking realm. (Some onomatopoeic words and exclamations, with their vast, yet not universal distributions, may seem to rival this perception but should still be taken as exceptions, not as a rule. Saussure points out that "they are never organic elements of a linguistic system".)<sup>21</sup>

According to the perception Saussure initiated, there is a gap between signs and the world. As he explains it: "thought is like a swirling cloud, where no shape is intrinsically determinate. No ideas are established in advance, and nothing is distinct, before the introduction of linguistic structure."<sup>22</sup> Meanings exist within language and signs are employed as tools in making sense of the world. Thus, according to this perception, signs do not reflect or represent the world but construct it.

Signs have a structural relationship between each other. As Saussure concludes: "In the language itself, there are only differences ( . . . ) In a sign, what matters more than any idea or sound associated with it is what other signs surround it."<sup>23</sup> The difference between the signs constructs the meaning: beautiful gains its meaning in a continuum in a relationship with

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<sup>20</sup> de Saussure, Course, p. 68-69.

<sup>21</sup> de Saussure, Course, p. 69.

<sup>22</sup> de Saussure, Course, p. 110.

<sup>23</sup> de Saussure, Course, p. 118.

homely, plain, ugly and ghastly, whereas poor in relation to comfortable, well-off and rich etc. In that sense signs exist in a web or a network of structural relationships between each other.

Saussure also characterises language as a social institution. According to him "a language is a system of signs expressing ideas, and hence comparable to writing, the deaf-and-dumb alphabet, symbolic rites, forms of politeness, military signals, and so on." Eventually he introduces the possibility of a science that would take the role of signs into consideration, and names semiology as the science "which studies the role of signs as a part of social life."<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, Saussure makes a distinction between *langue* (linguistic structure) and *parole* (speech). *Langue* is the abstracted essence of a language, the system of a language, which the speakers use to create *parole*, the speech acts. As Saussure describes it, *langue* is "a body of necessary conventions adopted by society to enable members of society to use their language faculty",<sup>25</sup> and *parole* "an individual act of the will and the intelligence."<sup>26</sup>

In order to differentiate between the two branches of linguistics with different perspectives in relation to time, Saussure introduces the terms synchronic linguistics for the static concept of linguistics, which does not take the historical aspect of language development into account but perceives linguistics on the axis of simultaneity, and diachronic linguistics for the evolutionary perspective in linguistics, which concerns evolution, development in language.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> de Saussure, Course, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> de Saussure, Course, p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> de Saussure, Course, p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> de Saussure, Course, p. 80-81.

### 2.1.2. Cultural Structuralism

Roland Barthes defines structuralism as "a mode of analysis of cultural artefacts which originates in the methods of contemporary linguistics."<sup>28</sup> This definition expands the realm of structuralist thinking to all cultural artefacts. Explaining the justification of this expansion, Jonathan Culler points out that because of their quality of possessing meaning, social and cultural phenomena escape the classification as material objects or events; instead, social and cultural phenomena can be classified as signs, although "they do not have essences but are defined by a network of relations, both internal and external."<sup>29</sup> Thus, the network characteristic of linguistic signs is expanded to be valid in all social and cultural phenomena.

If one, then, takes a specific object of interest from the classes of social and cultural phenomena, say, an artefact or event with meaning, one can study the way it is endowed with meaning. Eventually, one can reach the conclusion that "the defining qualities of the phenomena become the features which distinguish them one from another ( . . . )"<sup>30</sup> The same idea of difference applied to linguistic signs is valid with cultural artefacts or events. The quality of difference from other objects surrounding the object of interest can be characterised in a special way: "The object is itself structured and is defined by its place in the structure of the system, whence the tendency to speak of 'structuralism'".<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Roland Barthes, "Science versus literature," The Times Literary Supplement, 28 Sep. 1967, pp. 897-98, quoted in Jonathan Culler, Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1975), p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Culler, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> Culler, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Culler, p. 5.

### 2.1.3. Literary Structuralism

While in the cultural perception of structuralism the object of interest is any cultural artefact or event, in literary structuralism it is specifically a literary text. Robert Scholes describes the role of structuralism in literary structuralism as follows: "structuralism seeks to explore the relationship between the system of literature and the culture of which it is a part."<sup>32</sup>

The contribution of linguistic structuralism to the study of literature can be seen in three different aspects. As Jonathan Culler perceives this heritage, structuralist linguistics has supplied literary structuralism with the principle of scientific study, with a number of concepts applied in discussing literary works and "a set of general instructions for semiotic investigation."<sup>33</sup>

Attempts have been made to exemplify the special characteristics of a literary text which distinguish it from other texts. The Formalist theories looked for specific literariness in the text; the literary text was supposed to contain an element of defamiliarization. Moreover, structuralist theory has been applied in an attempt to study the special characteristics of an individual literary text: a specific literary text has been perceived as the *parole* of the body of all texts, *langue*.

However, according to the structural perception of literary research and Roman Jakobson's communication theory in particular, it is not essential to seek for the qualities which differentiate literary texts from other texts; the main thing is to perceive the specific structural

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Scholes, Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1974), p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> Culler, pp. 255-56.

position of a literary text in a larger structure of functions: a literary text carries out a specific poetic function in communication.<sup>34</sup>

While linguistic structuralism emphasises the position of structure in linguistics, literary structuralism stresses the particular structural, systematic nature of literary texts. As Robert Scholes puts it:

At the heart of the idea of structuralism is the idea of system: a complete, self-regulating entity that adapts to new conditions by transforming its features while retaining its systematic nature. Every literary unit from the individual sentence to the whole order of words can be seen in relation to the concept of system. In particular, we can look at individual works, literary genres, and the whole of literature as related systems, and at literature as a system within the larger system of human culture. The relationships that obtain between any of these systematic units may be studied, and that study will be, in some sense, structuralist.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, the structuralist notion of systematic relations uniting linguistic, cultural or literary fields is brought to the centre of attention. Cultural phenomena are not perceived as chaotic, disjunctive entities but as an orderly system of organised webs or networks uniting the different elements.

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<sup>34</sup>Scholes, pp. 22-26.

<sup>35</sup> Scholes, p. 10.

However, is there a uniform methodology to apply in order to gain results that would be in accordance with the structuralist perceptions of uniting relations between different phenomena? Culler answers this question in the following way:

There is no structuralist method such that by applying it to a text one automatically discovers its structure. But there is a kind of attention which one might call structuralist: a desire to isolate codes, to name the various languages with and among which the text plays, to go beyond manifest content to a series of forms and then to make these forms, or oppositions or modes of signification, the burden of the text.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, structuralism does not provide a toolbox for analysis; neither does it comply with a strict mode of analytical constraints. Rather, it is a realm of thought, a means of structuring reality.

One application or mode of literary structuralism with a desire to isolate codes and discover forms is the study of narrative, narratology, to which I proceed next.

## 2.2. Narratology

Narratology continues the structuralist tradition in the area of narratives. Narratology can be defined as the study of narrative texts in a scientific way.<sup>37</sup> It comprises both the theory of narratology and the applications of the theory.

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<sup>36</sup> Culler, p. 259.

<sup>37</sup> The concept text can be applied to a large number of cultural artefacts, not to literary texts alone.

Narratology is by no means a uniform field of study, although the majority of the so-called narratologists share concepts related to the area, albeit with differing definitions. Different researchers set out to study slightly different things: Gerard Genette studies narrative discourses, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan narrative fiction, Seymour Chatman narrative structures; Mieke Bal describes her object of study as the theory of narrative--narratology, that is.<sup>38</sup> Despite the heterogeneity of terms, the uniting factor of all these various aspects of research is the study of narrative texts in one form or another; in that sense it is justified to group them all under the heading of narratology.<sup>39</sup>

### 2.2.1. Historical background

The early roots of narratology can already be found in the theories of Plato and Aristotle. Plato divides the realm of *lexis* (way of saying) into two categories: imitation proper (*mimesis*) and simple narrative (*diegesis*), which is "whatever the poet relates 'in his own person.'"<sup>40</sup> Aristotle uses *mimesis* as the main category divided into narrative (*diegesis*) and the imitative mode in drama. Despite the apparent differences between these approaches (especially the difference in distribution of the term *mimesis*), both Plato and Aristotle agree on the opposition

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<sup>38</sup> see Gerard Genette, Narrative Discourse, trans. Jane E Lewin from 1st French ed. (1972; rpt. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980); Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics (London and New York: Methuen, 1983); Seymour Chatman, Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1978).

<sup>39</sup> Within this jungle of terminology, I reserve the liana of literary narrative for the object of narratological analysis in the field of literary narrative texts.

<sup>40</sup> Gerard Genette, "Frontiers of Narrative" in Figures of Literary Discourse, trans. Alan Sheridan from 1st French ed. (1969; rpt. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982), p. 128.



between the dramatic and the narrative form, and furthermore, both find dramatic *mimesis* more fully imitative than narrative.<sup>41</sup>

The more recent roots, however, can be traced in the study of Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp. In his Morphology of the Folktale (published originally in Russian in 1928) he attempts to study the basic structures of 100 folk-tales, and resists the traditional concept of characters as central factors in them. Instead, he reduces characters to roles in the action: the villain, the donor, the helper, the sought-for-person and her father, the dispatcher, the hero and the false hero. These roles can be combined to form 31 different functions in the studied folk-tales.<sup>42</sup> The pattern of analysis Propp initiates has also inspired the more recent analyses of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Claude Bremond.<sup>43</sup>

Some of the topics the theories of narratology have further explicated were first brought to attention by some theoreticians of New Criticism, a predecessor of structuralism with a passion for close readings and symbolism. In the initial tentative attempt towards the classification of the different aspects of point-of-view used in representation, in his compilation of prefaces, The Art of the Novel, Henry James employs the term narrative in the first person to differentiate it from the concept of narrative in the third person.<sup>44</sup>

The terms mentioned above were to be modified and made more precise in subsequent narratological theories: James limits the points-of-view of narrative to two variables only, first-

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<sup>41</sup> Genette, "Frontiers," pp. 128-30.

<sup>42</sup> Vladimir Propp, Morphology of the Folktale, trans. Laurence Scott from 1st Russian ed.(1928; rpt. Austin, TX: Univ. of Texas Press, 1968).

<sup>43</sup> see Claude Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1968); Claude Bremond, Logique du Récit (Paris: Seuil, 1973).

<sup>44</sup> Henry James, The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces (New York and London: Scribner's, 1934), pp. 320-21.

person narrative and third-person narrative; subsequent theories have made a distinction depending on "who sees" and "who speaks." Moreover, James recognises that we as readers are addressed by the narrator, not by the author. The position of the author has been questioned by later theories, too. As Roland Barthes puts it: "*who speaks* (in the narrative) is not *who writes* (in life) and *who writes* is not *who is*."<sup>45</sup>

Another way of classifying narrative variables introduced by New Criticism is the division into showing and telling, of which showing is perceived as the direct presentation of events in which the narrator is rendered invisible (akin to Plato's *mimesis*), whereas telling (the counterpart of Plato's *diegesis*) is a presentation mediated by the narrator, containing narratorial intervention (summaries etc.).

Among "New Critics" this classification inspired some normative accounts as to the preferred mode of narrative. Percy Lubbock is a keen supporter of showing: "The art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be shown."<sup>46</sup> Wayne C. Booth, however, has a more favourable attitude towards telling: "Whatever our ideas may be about the natural way to tell a story, artifice is unmistakably present whenever the author tells us what no one in so-called real life could possibly know."<sup>47</sup>

Even if this kind of argumentation proves to be rather fruitless in relation to the development of narrative theories, it has brought some of the key elements of narratology into the forefront of attention. I will now proceed to view some of the central elements in

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<sup>45</sup> Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" in The Semiotic Challenge, trans. Richard Howard from 1st French ed. (1966; rpt. Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 124.

<sup>46</sup> Percy Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction (New York: Viking Press, 1963), p. 62.

<sup>47</sup> Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 3.

narratological theories and to give their accounts of the above-mentioned concepts; I will concentrate mainly on the theory of Gerard Genette, for he has developed the most extensive theory of narratology, which has been used by his successors as a firm, virtually undisputed foundation of narratological theories.

### 2.2.2. Narratological theories

In order to be narrative, a text has to fulfil certain prerequisites: a conventional criterion is that it must represent at least two events with a temporal difference between them; the events also have to be logically related in a causal chain. As mentioned earlier, a wide range of cultural artefacts can be perceived as texts, and the texts that fulfil the conditions of narrativity are narrative texts as well.

Some theorists restrict the concept of narratology to the transferable aspect of narrative.<sup>48</sup> However, this perception may prove to be rather reductive, for not all aspects of narrative may be transferable from one media to another. As the object of interest here is literary narrative especially, it is worth noting the special characteristics of the literary medium, namely "the verbal nature of the medium used to transmit the message. It is this that distinguishes narrative fiction from narratives in other media, such as film, dance, or pantomime."<sup>49</sup>

Literary narrative contains three different aspects of narrative reality. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan translates Genette's *histoire* as story: "the narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the text and reconstructed in their chronological order together with the

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<sup>48</sup> see Tzvetan Todorov, Grammaire du Décaméron (The Hague: Mouton: 1969); Gerald Prince, A Grammar of Stories (The Hague: Mouton, 1973).

<sup>49</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, p. 2.

participants in these events."<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Genette's *récit* is translated as text, which "is a spoken or written discourse which undertakes their telling [the telling of the narrated events]."<sup>51</sup> To put it more plainly, "the text is what we read."<sup>52</sup> To explicate Genette's term *narration*, Rimmon-Kenan employs the English equivalent narration.<sup>53</sup> It "can be considered as both real and fictional. In the empirical world, the author is the agent responsible for the production of the narrative and its communication ( . . . ) Within the text, communication involves a fictional narrator transmitting a narrative to a fictional narratee."<sup>54</sup>

Gerard Genette names the relationships between these aspects as his main object of narratological analysis: "Analysis of narrative discourse will thus be for me, essentially, a study of relationships between narrative and story, between narrative and narrating (narration), and ( . . . ) between story and narrating (narration)."<sup>55</sup>

In order to study these relationships, Genette employs the linguistic categories of *temps*, *mode* and *voix--time*, mood and voice, that is. While studying the relationship between the time of the story and the time of the narrative, he introduces the following determinations: "connections between the temporal order of succession of the events of the story and the pseudo-temporal order of their arrangement in the narrative"; "connections between the variable duration of these events or story sections and the pseudo-duration (in fact, length of

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<sup>50</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> Genette's *narration* has also been translated as narrating; see Genette, Narrative Discourse, p. 27.

<sup>54</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, pp. 3-4.

<sup>55</sup> Genette, Narrative Discourse, p. 29.

text) of their telling in the narrative"; and "connections of frequency, that is ( . . . ) relations between the repetitive capacities of the story and those of the narrative."<sup>56</sup>

Considering the duration of an event in the story and in the narrative, story time may be equal with narrative time (scene); story time may be longer than narrative time, with the special case of ellipsis in which the narrative time is zero; story time may also be shorter than narrative time (summary).<sup>57</sup>

Genette contributes towards the hazy sphere of point-of-view, narrative perspective, *Ich-Erzählung* and *Er-Erzählung*, first-person narration and third- person narration, showing and telling etc. with his clarifying division between the mood and the voice; thus, he makes a distinction between the question "who sees?" and the question "who speaks?"<sup>58</sup>

In order to further clarify the aspect of vision through which the elements are presented, he employs the term focalization. In his three-term typology, the first one is nonfocalized narrative, or narrative with zero focalization; some schools of criticism call it the narrative with omniscient narrator; it is usually manifested in the classical narrative. The second type is internal focalization, in which the narrator employs and expresses what the character knows, thinks or feels, thus capable of piercing into the character's psyche. The third type is external focalization, in which the narrator expresses less than the character knows, and employs the physical, optical point-of-view of the character. The types of focalization immanent in a literary work are often mixed (pp. 186-92).

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<sup>56</sup> Genette, Narrative Discourse, p. 35.

<sup>57</sup> Genette, Narrative Discourse, p. 94-95.

<sup>58</sup> Genette, Narrative Discourse, p. 186.

The voice of the narration mediates the narrative. Genette's perception of the voice resists the traditional division between first-person narration and third-person narration; classifying the narration on grounds of a personal pronoun is rather simplistic--as if the first person could not speak of her/himself in the third-person form. Instead of regarding the implicit pronouns, Genette acknowledges the following factors which influence the reader's understanding of the story: "the narrative level to which the narrator belongs, the extent of his participation in the story, the perceptibility of his role, and finally his reliability."<sup>59</sup>

Structuralist theories have further developed the variants of *mimesis* in fiction, especially the types of speech representation--an area neglected by Genette although touched upon in his theory of *mode* and focalization. A special emphasis has been given to the concept of free indirect discourse.<sup>60</sup> It is used as a technique for presenting consciousness, and "like psycho-narration it maintains the third-person reference and the tense of narration, but like the quoted monologue it reproduces verbatim the character's own mental language."<sup>61</sup>

Structuralist theories have also drawn attention to the communication model of a narrative text. Whilst studying the way a narrative text is communicated, Wayne Booth recognises the lack of a term for the "ideal" author--"an implied image of the artist" or "the author's second self," which fills in the gap between the real author and the narrator--and calls

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<sup>59</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, p. 94.

<sup>60</sup> Also known as *erlebte Rede* (Ger.) and *style indirect libre* (Fr.), in English also as free indirect speech, indirect interior monologue, reported speech, narrated monologue etc. For discussions of the subject, see Brian McHale, "Free Indirect Discourse: A Survey of Recent Accounts," Poetics and Theory of Literature, 3 (1978), 249-87; Dorrit Cohn, Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press: 1978).

<sup>61</sup> Cohn, p. 14.

this intermediate, "ideal" author the implied author.<sup>62</sup> The implied author can be perceived as "the governing consciousness of the work as a whole," who, nevertheless, is both voiceless and silent.<sup>63</sup>

However, Booth's notion of the implied author cries for an audience and is supplemented by the implied reader.<sup>64</sup> Seymour Chatman sums up the created communication model of a narrative in the following way:

A narrative is a communication; hence, it presupposes two parties, a sender and a receiver. Each party entails three different personages. On the sending end are the real author, the implied author, and the narrator (if any); on the receiving end, the real audience (listener, reader, viewer), the implied audience, and the narratee.<sup>65</sup>

Rimmon-Kenan modifies this model by excluding the implied author and the implied audience, and insists on the inclusion of the narrator and the narratee, for "there is always a teller in the tale" and "the narratee is the agent which is at the very least implicitly addressed by the narrator."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Booth, pp. 67-77.

<sup>63</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, pp. 86-87.

<sup>64</sup> An account of the concept of implied reader can also be found in Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press: 1974).

<sup>65</sup> Chatman, Story and Discourse, p.28.

<sup>66</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, pp. 88-89.

Thus, the perspectives of narratology range from the structural analysis of the functions of the text to Genette's theory of relations between story, text and narration, and, furthermore to the study of the communication model of the narrative. All these aspects have aroused diverse opinions, yet none of them has explicitly scrutinised the notion of descriptions in the text. I will next study the relationship between narratology and its predecessors and description.

### 2.2.3. Description in narratology and its predecessors

As narratology by its very definition studies narratives, the position of description within narratological theories is problematic. Description resists narrativity; pure descriptions introduce a lapse from narrativity in the text. If one emphasises the position of narrativity in the text, descriptions may seem like something to be avoided, something one can skip and preferably ignore altogether. At worst the recommendation for the treatment of descriptions can be like Boileau's in his Art Poétique (1674): to skip twenty pages to avoid the "fruitless abundance" of the writer. According to Boileau, the reader is not to strain her/himself with futile details.<sup>67</sup>

The predecessors of narratology, Plato and Aristotle do not express a favourable attitude toward narratives, let alone descriptions. Plato wishes to condemn poets as lying imitators, whereas Aristotle is inclined to value drama over the epic. For both of them, "narrative is the weakened, attenuated mode of literary representation."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Boileau, Art Poétique, pp. 59-60, quoted in Philippe Hamon, Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif (Paris: Hachette, 1981), pp. 14-15.

<sup>68</sup> Genette, Figures, p. 130.



Propp's approach, followed by Lévi-Strauss and Bremond, is minimalist in terms of descriptions: characters with their descriptive characteristics are reduced to performing roles; descriptions are ignored. Even though a role is endowed with a quality (the villain, the helper, for instance), the quality is related to the functional performance of the role in the narrative--the qualities portrayed in a possible description in the narrative are not essential.

This concept of roles is further examined by A.J.Greimas. He suggests that roles, or *actants* are the anthropomorphic form of purely logical or conceptual oppositions. If then *actants* are given social or cultural qualities, they become *rôles*, and, furthermore, if they are given individuating qualities, they become *acteurs*, or characters.<sup>69</sup> However, this account does not take the descriptions into account as such, but reduces descriptive qualities to lexemes suitable for semantic analysis. Thus, Greimas expresses a strictly structuralist view.

"New Critics," especially the one favourable towards the concept of telling, have created a multitude of "close readings" of descriptions. However, no theories of description have been formed. For instance, Wayne Booth treats description as a self-evident category in texts, thus speaking of "description of physical events or details" as an objective of telling.<sup>70</sup> Yet he does not attempt to problematise the concept of description nor to define it. The only suggestion of a definition of description he offers is the prerequisite that a description must be reliable in terms of not conveying the point-of-view of a character, or else it may cease to be a description: "Whenever a fact, whenever a narrative summary, whenever a description must, or even might, serve as a clue to our interpretation of the character who provides it, it may well lose some of its standing as fact, summary, or description."<sup>71</sup> However, this suggestion is absurd as it would

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<sup>69</sup> Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Sémantique structurale* (Paris: Larousse, 1966).

<sup>70</sup> Booth, p. 169.

<sup>71</sup> Booth, p. 175.

mean, for instance, that any descriptions within free indirect discourse would cease to be descriptions.

As suggested by this point-of-view, descriptions may convey information about the "real" state of affairs, which descriptions filtered by the "subjective" point-of-view of the literary character apparently, according to Booth, fail to convey. However, Booth does not problematise the notions of a literary character or the perception of reality in literary text but endows a literary text with the capability of revealing objective reality within literature. Thus, he evaluates the status of a description on the basis of the mimetic mediation of the description. I suggest, however, that a description does not cease to be a description even if it conveys aspects which Booth would rate as belonging to the "subjective" perception of a literary character; the notion of reality in literature is not as clear-cut as Booth seems to suggest. These aspects of literature and reality have been further examined and questioned by phenomenological approaches to literary research.<sup>72</sup>

In narratological theories, especially in Genette's contribution to narratology, description is perceived as a special case of duration, in which there occurs a descriptive pause in the text.<sup>73</sup> Thus, description is reduced to the status of a pause in narration. As Genette further explains this:

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<sup>72</sup> For some aspects of the subject, see Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in French Literary Theory Today. A Reader, ed. Tzvetan Todorov, trans. R. Carter from 1st French publ., (1968; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 11-17; Michael Riffaterre, Fictional Truth (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1990); Alexander Gelley, "The Represented World: Toward a Phenomenological Theory of Description in the Novel," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 37, No. 4 (1979), pp. 415-22.

<sup>73</sup> Genette, Narrative Discourse, pp. 99-106.

narration is concerned with actions or events considered as pure processes, and by that very fact it stresses the temporal dramatic aspect of the narrative; description, on the other hand, because it lingers on objects and beings considered in their simultaneity, and because it considers the processes themselves as spectacles, seems to suspend the course of time and to contribute to spreading the narrative in space.<sup>74</sup>

In his article "Frontiers of Narrative" Genette gives an account of the relationship between description and narration:

Every narrative in fact comprises two kinds of representations, which however are closely intermingled and in variable proportions: on the one hand, those of actions and events, which constitute the narration in the strict sense and, on the other hand, those of objects or characters that are the result of what we now call description.<sup>75</sup>

Thus, Genette acknowledges the parallel and supplementary existence of narration and description.

Furthermore, Genette ventures to discern descriptions scattered all around narratives: "the most neutral designation of the elements and circumstances of a process can already be

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<sup>74</sup> Genette, Figures, p. 136.

<sup>75</sup> Genette, Figures, p. 133.

regarded as the beginnings of a description."<sup>76</sup> He recognises the descriptive nature of the nouns (or, as he terms them, substantives) which "can be regarded as descriptive by the very fact that they designate animate or inanimate beings"; neither is any verb free from descriptive resonance.<sup>77</sup> Strangely, however, Genette does not here emphasise the descriptive qualities of adjectives and adverbs, which are often defined as the describing wordclasses.

Genette suggests that "description is more indispensable than narration, since it is easier to describe without relating than it is to relate without describing."<sup>78</sup> If description is such an indispensable element of narratives, how can it be ignored by narratological theories? Genette provides an answer:

description might be conceived independently of narration, but in fact it is never found in a so to speak free state; narration cannot exist without description, but this dependence does not prevent it from constantly playing the main role. Description is quite naturally *ancilla narrationis*, the ever-necessary, ever-submissive, never-emancipated slave.<sup>79</sup>

Genette recognises that descriptions can, in fact, occupy a larger place than narration in some narrative genres, yet description always remains "a mere auxiliary of the narrative"; descriptive genres do not exist, either.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Genette, Figures, p. 133.

<sup>77</sup> Genette, Figures, p. 134.

<sup>78</sup> Genette, Figures, p. 134.

<sup>79</sup> Genette, Figures, p. 134.

<sup>80</sup> Genette, Figures, p. 134.

To exemplify the character of description, Genette introduces the functions of description in narratives, namely a decorative kind which offers "a recreational pause in the narrative, carrying out a purely aesthetic role," and the explanatory and symbolic function: "physical portraits, descriptions of dresses and furniture tend ( . . . ) to reveal and at the same time to justify the psychology of the characters, of which they are at once the sign, the cause, and the effect."<sup>81</sup>

The decorative kind of description is prevalent in the "classical" literary tradition (from Homer to the end of the nineteenth century), and the explanatory and symbolic function during the period of realism. Even though the position of the descriptions fulfilling the explanatory and symbolic function is very significant, Genette recognises that explanatory and symbolic descriptions still only work toward emphasising the dominance of narrative elements: "without the slightest doubt description has lost in terms of autonomy what it has gained in dramatic importance."<sup>82</sup>

Although Genette acknowledges that it may seem that some twentieth-century novels are "attempts to free the descriptive mode from the tyranny of the narrative," he nevertheless denies this possibility, and, rather, perceives the work of Robbe-Grillet, for instance, as "an effort to constitute a narrative (a *story*) almost exclusively by means of descriptions."<sup>83</sup> This perception can be questioned or even defied if one takes the conventional nature of reading into consideration. Roland Barthes suggests that perceiving causal-temporal relationships is a part of the deep structure of human thinking and that a reader has a tendency to construct a story.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Genette, Figures, p. 134-35.

<sup>82</sup> Genette, Figures, p. 134-35.

<sup>83</sup> Genette, Figures, p. 135.

<sup>84</sup> Roland Barthes, The Semiotic Challenge, p. 95.

While narration is concerned with actions or events, according to Genette, it also is the more active type of discourse. Description, however, appears to be more contemplative, "more 'poetic.'"<sup>85</sup> Eventually Genette concludes that "description, as a mode of literary representation, does not distinguish itself sufficiently clearly from narration, either by the autonomy of its ends, or by the originality of its means."<sup>86</sup> Yet this concept seems to be at odds with Genette's previous notion of recognising descriptive qualities in seemingly neutral nouns and verbs (assuming that descriptive qualities are closely linked with description). Moreover, if description and narration are not clearly distinguishable categories, it seems to be rather short-sighted to deny the role of description on Genette's basis mentioned above.<sup>87</sup> Hamon and Sternberg, for instance, prefer to speak of a dominant mode in a mixed text.<sup>88</sup>

Claiming that descriptions are not distinguishable in the text seems to be at odds with the notion that descriptions are intuitively recognisable by any reader and present in every text in one form or another. Genette, however, does not make an attempt to embrace both description and narration as two equal types of discourses in his theory of narratology. Neither does he subject description to careful scrutiny or systematic analysis. Instead, he chooses to discard description:

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<sup>85</sup> Genette, Figures, p. 136.

<sup>86</sup> Genette, Figures, p. 137.

<sup>87</sup>For accounts of narratized descriptions and descriptized narrations, see Meir Sternberg, "Ordering the Unordered: Time, Space, and Descriptive Coherence," Yale French Studies, 61, No. 2 (1981), pp. 60-88; Harold F. Mosher, "Towards a Poetics of 'Descriptized' Narration," Poetics Today, 12 (1991), pp. 426-45.

<sup>88</sup>Hamon, Introduction, p. 159; Sternberg, "Ordering the Unordered," p. 73.

If description marks one of the frontiers of narrative, it is certainly an internal frontier, and really a rather vague one: it will do no harm, therefore, if we embrace within the notion of narrative all forms of literary representation and consider description not as one of its modes (which would imply a specificity of language), but, more modestly, as one of its aspects--if, from a certain point of view, the most attractive."<sup>89</sup>

This is an expression of textual chauvinism with its day-dreams of the attractive "ever-submissive, never-emancipated slave," *ancilla narrationis*, the servile maid always at the disposal of the master narrative.

Despite his chauvinistic attitude towards description Genette, nevertheless, acknowledges the existence of description--albeit only as an aspect of narratology--and, thus, contributes toward the problematisation of the ontology of description.

Of narratologists, Mieke Bal does give a normative account in favour of descriptions: "Although descriptive passages would appear to be of marginal importance in narrative text, they are, in fact, both practically and logically necessary. Narratology, therefore, must take these segments of the text into account."<sup>90</sup> I shall study Bal's perception of description in more detail in the following chapter.

Similarly, in his chapter "Description Is No Textual Handmaiden" Seymour Chatman condemns Genette's point-of-view of reducing description to the position of *ancilla*

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<sup>89</sup> Genette, *Figures*, p. 137.

<sup>90</sup>Bal, p. 129.

*narrationis*.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, Chatman wishes the concept of description to be defined more closely and to be used with more care:

we should avoid such sloppy expressions as "the narrator *describes* such and such a narrative event." Objects and characters may be described, but actions are "described" only if they function as part of the described setting rather than as links in the event chain. Story-relevant events are only "narrated," not described.<sup>92</sup>

In the following chapter I present the problematic concept of description and the different theoretical contributions toward a theory of description.

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<sup>91</sup>Seymour Chatman, "Description Is No Textual Handmaiden," in Coming to Terms. The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 22-37.

<sup>92</sup> Chatman, Coming to Terms, p. 37.



### 3. Description

In this chapter I give a brief historical account of the development of the concept of description and introduce the different definitions and categories given to the concept. Finally, I explicate Philippe Hamon's theory of description.

#### 3.1. Historical background

Despite the fact that classical rhetoric does not provide much help in defining description, as it was foremost preoccupied with defining microscopic textual figures (metaphor, oxymoron etc.), there are traces of the recognition of figurative usage of language akin to description to be found. Classical rhetoric used several words for what is often called description in contemporary literary theory: enargeia, evidentia, descriptio and ekphrasis.<sup>93</sup> Of these, enargeia was frequently used "in order to sway the listeners within the limits of what they may swallow as probable and possible."<sup>94</sup> Evidentia is related with the existential situation of witnessing something and has forensic connotations.<sup>95</sup> Descriptio was mainly used in Roman texts, while its Greek counterpart, ekphrasis, was used for aesthetic purposes.<sup>96</sup> In other words, the types of oratory were divided into legal, political and epideictic discourse.<sup>97</sup> The goal of the

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<sup>93</sup> Michel Beaujour, "Some Paradoxes of Description," Yale French Studies, 61 (1981), p. 28.

<sup>94</sup> Beaujour, p. 29.

<sup>95</sup> Beaujour, p. 29.

<sup>96</sup> Beaujour, p. 30.

<sup>97</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," pp. 12-13.

latter was to excite the audience and, thus, to carry out an aesthetic purpose in language. Ekphrasis can be seen as a manifestation of epideictic discourse: "a polished piece, and detachable ( . . . ) whose object was to describe places, times, people or works of art."<sup>98</sup> This tradition of ekphrasis was carried on from the second century to the Middle Ages.<sup>99</sup>

Since New Criticism in the 1950s, another meaning has been given to the term ekphrasis, referring to a verbal representation of a visual piece of art or performance. Ekphrasis is not imitation, however, but a presentation of a performance, and, thus intertextual, as Michael Riffaterre characterises it.<sup>100</sup> In Mansfield's "At the Bay," Alice, the servant girl visits her friend, the widowed shop owner Mrs. Stubbs, and is shown a photograph of Mrs. Stubbs:

Mrs. Stubbs sat in an arm-chair, leaning very much to one side. There was a look of mild astonishment on her large face, and well there might be. For though the arm-chair stood on a carpet, to the left of it, miraculously skirting the carpet border, there was a dashing waterfall. On her right stood a Grecian pillar with a giant fern tree on either side of it, and in the background towered a gaunt mountain, pale with snow. (p. 230)

With such representation of a photograph, the visual experience of seeing is transformed into words and shared with the reader, building a continuum between a character in the text and the reader. The conventions of studio photography when mentioning and questioning the staging

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<sup>98</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," p. 13.

<sup>99</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," p. 13.

<sup>100</sup> Michael Riffaterre, "L'illusion d'ekphrasis," in La pensée de l'image. Signification et figuration dans le texte et dans la peinture (Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 1994), p. 221.

with a waterfall, Grecian pillar, fern tree and a mountain in the photographer's studio are brought up as well, challenging the reader to interpret the ekphrasis depending on the reader's experiences and, thus, competence. The narrator's voice is also conveyed ("well there might be," "miraculously") and an impression of the photograph is presented.

Following the principle of *ut pictura poesis*, a classical text could discuss an imaginary painting as if it were a text. This method suggested that the picture really existed, hence the above principle could be reversed as *ut poesis pictura*.<sup>101</sup> The idea was "to make the reader believe that there looms a powerful non-verbal signifier behind the verbal text, which endeavors to provoke the same emotion which the thing (picture) itself would cause were it present under our very eyes."<sup>102</sup> Foremost, this method was employed to increase the perceived value of the mimetic medium, literary text in relation to paintings, although it can also be seen as a device of make-believe, a textual function I will mention later.

Katherine Mansfield's short fiction is characterised as being Impressionistic, which, stylistically, is a classification foremost related to painting. The old connection between written text and painting can, thus, be recognised in that instance as well.

Philippe Hamon points out, however, that from Antiquity to the Middle Ages description is somehow bound to the Institution "in the form of praise of certain individuals, places, times of the year, socially privileged monuments of objects" and, thus, could never be free. He also sees some of this aspect present even in the nineteenth century literary texts.<sup>103</sup>

The actual term description, derived from Latin de-scribere, writing according to a model, can be found as early as the sixteenth century, yet the types of descriptions prevalent

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<sup>101</sup> Beaujour, pp. 30-31.

<sup>102</sup> Beaujour, p. 32.

<sup>103</sup> Philippe Hamon, "Rhetorical Status of the Descriptive," Yale French Studies, 61 (1981), p. 3.

served either economic, military, historical or encyclopaedic ends in forms of guides, geographic descriptions etc.<sup>104</sup> To describe was to describe for something--classical discourse in the seventeenth and eighteenth century regarded independent description as a suspicious, ornamental element.<sup>105</sup>

Beaujour sees that description in realistic novels often carries out a metonymical function and increases the realistic verisimilitude by supporting the characterisation and plot. But if this function is given a secondary status, the literary medium springs on to a different plane--a plane that is symbolic and visionary.<sup>106</sup>

Instead of perceiving adoration for the uplifting qualities of description, Beaujour recognises prejudices that engage in negative value judgements:

Description, which opens (or should in principle open) windows in reader's imagination, which expands worlds and multiplies quasi-perceptions, ought to be considered a life-force, the ever-available key to inexhaustible treasures. It is, on the contrary, scorned, skipped, or else praised for the paradoxical reason that it has nothing to do with the real world. Within our high culture, the history of description and its appreciation is that of a continuous and seemingly undeserved misfortune. When we do not give it up as inferior to narration and poetry, we declare it to be, in the strong sense of the word, deadly.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Hamon, "Rhetorical," p. 4.

<sup>105</sup> Hamon, "Rhetorical," pp. 6-7.

<sup>106</sup> Beaujour, p. 36.

<sup>107</sup> Beaujour, p. 47.

Indeed, this deadly nature of description echoes Roland Barthes' opinion on the futile attempt of literary texts to imitate life: "'Capturing life' really means 'seeing dead.' Adjectives are the tools of this delusion; whatever else they may be saying, their very descriptive quality makes them funereal"<sup>108</sup>. This comment may seem odd from the point of view that the descriptions are often seen as a very entertaining part of the text. Writers would not include descriptions in the text if they saw descriptions as futile, let alone “funereal.”

The comment about the deadly nature of descriptions should not be seen as criticism for the descriptive qualities of adjectives in the text but it reflects the perception that regards literary texts as mirroring reality and evaluates them accordingly. In the following chapter I will present some aspects to do with this so-called reality effect. I will also study the different definitions and possible functions given to description.

### 3.2. Description: different definitions and functions

When studying descriptions in literature one always faces the fact that words can only imitate words. If descriptions seem to imitate something extra-linguistic, something outside the language, that is, such reference is always metaphorical by nature. Thus, when simply defining descriptions as metaphorical and mimetic, one is stating a self-evident fact beyond which the theories of description should strive in order to give answers to the questions “how?” and “why?” as well as “what?”

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<sup>108</sup> Roland Barthes, Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975), p. 72.

In the theories about description the recognition of a description in the literary text is mostly based on the intuition of the reader and not all the formal definitions have been satisfactory in defining description sufficiently. The descriptions have several definite functions in the text. This aspect, however, has not been thoroughly studied in the different theories of description. It is very reductive to assume that the only function descriptions have is the mimetic function, or that the value of an individual description should be assessed merely by estimating how well the description fulfills the function of referentiality or the creation of verisimilitude.

The different functions cannot be grasped by merely studying the descriptions alone, but the functions of the individual descriptions are only brought about when studying the text as a whole and taking the interaction between the narration and the descriptions into account. One also needs to consider the text type (short story, novel etc.), the stylistic nuances of the descriptions and the stylistic period the text belongs to, and the function of the descriptions during that period (for instance, the educational aspect of descriptions from the period of Realism etc.).

Mieke Bal defines description in the following way:

A description is a textual fragment in which features are attributed to objects. This aspect of attribution is the descriptive function. We will consider a fragment as descriptive when this function is dominant.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Bal, p. 130.

According to this perception a description fulfills the descriptive function.

Mieke Bal also recognises the special qualities of description in a dominantly narrative text: "When separate sections of narrative are devoted to the presentation about space alone, we refer to descriptions. The space is then not simply indicated in passing, but is an explicit object of presentation."<sup>110</sup> Thus, according to this perception, descriptions offer a presentation of space. The problematic nature of description is revealed, though, if one thinks of descriptions engaged in describing a character's movement, which can be seen either functioning as a presentation of space and, thus, description, or action, which is often classified as narration. In order to be clearer in this aspect, Bal's definition lacks the recognition of the so-called mixed text even if, in reality, pure descriptions and pure narration are rare, and intermingle in virtually every text.

Based on the perception of descriptions interrupting a narrative, description is perceived as requiring justification in the text. Mieke Bal calls this justification in the text motivation and sees that motivation in the text is brought about by the means of speaking, looking or acting. For instance, a character in the text authenticates the description by perceiving the described elements.<sup>111</sup>

Not all descriptions, however, have someone justifying them by speaking, looking or acting. According to Bal, motivation does not necessarily always occur at the level of text with a character describing the object. Instead, it can occur at the level of story when the character's perceptions are explained. Motivation can also occur at the level of fabula (Genette's narration), in which case the character is engaged in action with the described object.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Bal, p. 98.

<sup>111</sup> Bal, p. 130.

<sup>112</sup> Bal, p. 131.

Mieke Bal classifies descriptions according to the metaphoric-metonymic relations they have. By metonymical relations Bal refers to the kind of relation as between a theme and a subtheme; the relationship is metaphorical if the elements in a theme can be replaced by and compared with those of another theme.<sup>113</sup>

Thus, Bal studies the different themes to do with descriptions and approaches the descriptions from a lexical, thematic point of view. He, however, skips the question about a specific function of a description in the larger textual whole. The specific function of description is not problematised.

Michael Riffaterre discusses the creation of verisimilitude in his Fictional Truth. This process involves descriptions as well or, as Riffaterre calls them, the descriptive systems. He defines a descriptive system as "the network of words, phrases and stereotyped sentences associated with one another in a metonymic relation to a kernel word to which they are subordinate."<sup>114</sup> Any of the metonyms can serve as the metaphor of the whole.

The kernel or nuclear word can generate a story by transforming its semes into words, which are organised by narrative structures. The story is also organised by the inner grammar of the sememe. This process, together with the narrative motivation, creates verisimilitude, which increases as motivation occupies more and more textual space as it moves from the implicit motivation of the descriptive system to the explicit narrative system.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Bal, p. 132-33.

<sup>114</sup> Riffaterre, Fictional Truth , pp. 126-27.

<sup>115</sup> Riffaterre, Fictional Truth , pp. 5-7.



Thus, the descriptions serve as a lexicon which is organised by the diegetic syntax generated by the grammar of the first description. It is, therefore, just to say that "description begets narrative; in fact, narrative cannot come into being without description."<sup>116</sup>

Riffaterre points out the common flaw of assessing the compatibility or incompatibility of a description in relation to the literal representation. His suggestion is, however, that "the image should be seen not as referring to an object but as a different discourse, as a second set of signs, referring to the literal description, to the literal set of signs."<sup>117</sup> Thus, descriptions do not offer a representation but, rather, dictate an interpretation (p. 125). Descriptions invite the reader to a dance and rather than submitting to the reader's whims, they lead the reader along their own path, even if not a completely predestined one.

Riffaterre contributes to the functional field of descriptions by discussing the metaphoric-metonymic relations of a description and the way it is linked to narration yet, like Mieke Bal, does not offer pragmatic guidelines as to how to recognise an individual description in a text. The question "what?" is given a reply, yet the question "why?" remains unanswered.

Seymour Chatman makes a distinction between the surface representation of the text and the underlying structure of the text as a whole. Thus, according to the example of Robbe-Grillet Chatman presents, the seemingly descriptive surface representation of Robbe-Grillet hides, in fact, an underlying narrative text-type. "What is demonstrated is ( . . . ) the actualization of one kind of textual function, narrative, by sentences typical of another (description)."<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Riffaterre, Fictional Truth, p. 24.

<sup>117</sup> Michael Riffaterre, "Descriptive Imagery," Yale French Studies, 61, No. 2 (1981), p. 108.

<sup>118</sup> Chatman, Coming to Terms, p. 21.

This approach employing the search for the overriding text-types, however, presents some problems concerning the division between the two text-types. Chatman acknowledges: "Not that the lines between Description and Narrative are always clear or unambiguous: post-modern fiction regularly problematises the relations between the text-types."<sup>119</sup> Thus, the different aspects of description can greatly vary depending on whether the fiction belongs to the period of realism, modernism or post-modernism etc.

As Bal and Riffaterre concentrate on recognising the different types of descriptions depending on their metaphoric-metonymic relations and Seymour Chatman studies the underlying structures, Roland Barthes concentrates on the relationship between descriptions and reality particularly in the genre of realist novel. In his essay "The Reality Effect" Barthes likens realism in literature to its contemporary, "objective" history or the representation of the "real" in the form of photography.<sup>120</sup> If the objective of descriptions in literature, according to Barthes, is to convey a photographic representation of reality, no wonder Barthes sees that literature fails in this task.

According to Barthes, description seems to be insignificant, additional. As Barthes characterises it:

Description ( . . . ) has no predictive aspect, it is 'analogical', its structure being purely additive, and not incorporating that circuit of choices and alternatives which makes a narration look like a vast traffic control centre, provided with referential ( . . . ) temporality.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Chatman, Coming to Terms, p. 34.

<sup>120</sup> Barthes, "The Reality Effect," p. 15.

<sup>121</sup> Barthes, "The Reality Effect," p. 12.

This echoes the previous notions of the auxiliary nature of descriptions. Barthes commented on descriptions in "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives": "What is being described is what separates two moments of the story."<sup>122</sup> This corresponds to Genette's perception of descriptions as pauses in narration.

However, instead of regarding descriptions as something completely auxiliary, Barthes moves on to recognise that descriptions create the referential illusion. Instead of being mere arbitrary additions, descriptions convey the message of reality. The very presence of the seemingly additional elements in the otherwise predictive narration creates the reality effect, the basis for the *vraisemblance*.<sup>123</sup>

In her Poetics of Description, Janice Hewlett Koelb criticises Barthes's tendency of seeing value in descriptions only if they serve the purpose of narration and how Barthes fails to see the figurative usage of descriptions. "The motivation for Barthes's project in "The Reality Effect" ( . . . ) starts from the assumption that a great deal of the descriptive material has no thematic or poetic role in the structure of the work ( . . . )" <sup>124</sup>

Roland Barthes regards descriptions as something additive, yet moves from recognising the auxiliary position of description as the hand-maiden of narration to emphasising the plurality of the text. His starting point seems to echo the classical principle of *ut pictura poesis*. As Barthes explains in S/Z: "Every literary description is a view: It could be said that the

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<sup>122</sup> Barthes, "Introduction," p. 108.

<sup>123</sup> Barthes, "Introduction," p. 16.

<sup>124</sup> Janice Hewlett Koelb, The Poetics of Description. Imagined Places in European Literature (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 8.

speaker, before describing, stands at the window, not so much to see, but to establish what he sees by its very frame: the window creates the scene."<sup>125</sup>

The author places a frame in front of the objects and simultaneously transforms the "real" objects into framed and therefore depicted objects. If the author then removes an object from his picture, he de-depicts it. In that sense, according to Barthes, realism copies a copy of the real and continuously sets reality further away.<sup>126</sup> "( . . . ) Realism cannot be designated a 'copier' but rather a 'pasticheur,'" Barthes admits.<sup>127</sup> This resembles Plato's condescending attitude toward poets as lying imitators.

Kendall L. Walton studies the creation of make-believe in fiction--akin to Barthes' reality effect: "Words are well suited for use in make-believe. They come with built-in semantic and syntactic properties whereby they can be combined in innumerable ways to indicate a wide range of propositions."<sup>128</sup>

Walton studies the difference between visual or pictorial investigations and fictional descriptions, however, and points out that there is always a certain open-endedness in visual or pictorial investigations: "One can finish reading a novel but there is no such thing as completing either the task of examining a painting or that of visually investigating the real world."<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Roland Barthes, S/Z, trans. Richard Miller from 1st French ed.(1973; rpt. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 54.

<sup>126</sup> Barthes, S/Z, pp. 54-55.

<sup>127</sup> Barthes, S/Z, p. 55.

<sup>128</sup> Kendall L. Walton, Mimesis as Make-Believe (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990), p. 353.

<sup>129</sup> Walton, p. 307.

Neither Barthes or Walton offers a thorough definition of description even if they both discuss different aspects of description and study description in relation to the tangible world. The very weakness of their theories is putting the emphasis on recreating the reality with verbal means—an impossible project. It is hardly fruitful to ponder on what literature does badly compared with the real world, but would be more beneficial to consider why the entertaining abundance of descriptions is present in literature. Instead of perceiving all authors as failures when employing descriptions in their texts, one could work on the positive functions of descriptions.

Meir Sternberg offers some rules as to how descriptions can be compiled, and for recognising descriptions he offers the functional tool employed by Mieke Bal as well. Sternberg recognises descriptive writing as focusing on "static entities and relations"<sup>130</sup>. Like Walton, Meir Sternberg pays attention to how verbal description is different from pictorial discourse and actional discourse (i.e. narration). Pictorial discourse extends in space only while actional discourse finds existence solely in temporality. Verbal description does not, however, fit into either of these categories or their dimensions but reserves an obscure area and moment in-between<sup>131</sup>.

Sternberg finds that the key characteristic typical of verbal description is "the asymmetry between the spatiality of its object and the temporality of its representation."<sup>132</sup> As description does not bear a natural line of progression in the form of chronology or causality, it must

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<sup>130</sup> Sternberg, p. 62.

<sup>131</sup> Sternberg, pp. 60-61.

<sup>132</sup> Sternberg, p. 61.

employ other points of reference, such as a spatial point or body, an actual or potential perceiver in some locus of observation or an actional route.<sup>133</sup>

There are various mechanisms as to how to form a sequence of different objects with spatial existence, and Sternberg calls this ordering of the unordered "a representational ("mimetic") junction where art, world and language meet."<sup>134</sup> Thus, according to him the elements of description bring about wider cultural elements instead of just being mere narratological oddities.

One mechanism of ordering is letting the spatial items follow a chronological sequence in terms of some kind of occurrence, even if spatial items cannot form a chronological sequence as such but only be assimilated to one. Echoing Genette's notion, Sternberg stresses that actional mimesis always presupposes some kind of descriptive element: all action is located in some place and presupposes existence.<sup>135</sup>

Sternberg points out that the represented action "not only takes place but makes place, not only changes and moves existents but portrays existence."<sup>136</sup> Therefore, it depends on the dominant function as to whether the text can be classified as actional or descriptive writing--two types of discourse which rather form a polar than contrast.<sup>137</sup>

Another mechanism of managing a descriptive sequence and, thus, establishing a perspective, is the hierarchical order, which follows the underlying sociocultural factors of the

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<sup>133</sup> Sternberg, pp. 69-70.

<sup>134</sup> Sternberg, p. 72.

<sup>135</sup> Sternberg, p. 72.

<sup>136</sup> Sternberg, p. 72.

<sup>137</sup> Sternberg, pp. 73-76.

prevailing world-order.<sup>138</sup> When the sequence does not comply with the public point of view, but a private one, the third ordering mechanism, the perspectival sequencing, is present.<sup>139</sup>

The perspectival sequencing entails a mediator from within the the literary world--in Genette's words the narrative is focalised. The logic of this type of sequencing often fulfills a mimetic function, yet it can also be employed for some special functional, rhetorical means, such as surprise, control of attitude etc.<sup>140</sup> The unique element present in mediated narration is the dynamic force it can thrust over immobile objects: "( . . . ) space is projected into the axis of fictive (as well as reading) time, and external description transformed into internal action."<sup>141</sup>

Sternberg recognises that the very shift from existential to perspectival coherence marks the transition from realism to modernism.<sup>142</sup> Such an aspect is fruitful to note especially if one is trying to compose some universal poetics of description as Philippe Hamon, for instance. I will now move to introduce the key points of his theory of description.

### 3.3. Philippe Hamon's theory of description

Philippe Hamon discards the vaguely referential or morphological criteria for recognising description and calls for a more thorough definition. In his article "What is a description?" Hamon tentatively defines description as a textual unit which contains the following properties:

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<sup>138</sup> Sternberg, pp. 77-80.

<sup>139</sup> Sternberg, pp. 81-83.

<sup>140</sup> Sternberg, pp. 82-84.

<sup>141</sup> Sternberg, p. 84.

<sup>142</sup> Sternberg, p. 84.

it is continuous or discontinuous, a relatively autonomous expansion, characteristically referential; it is interchangeable with, and in certain conditions equivalent to a *word* ( . . . ) or a *deictic pronoun* ( . . . ): The unit has overall semantic autonomy, independent of its stylistic setting and of the meaning of its constituent elements (a description is thus a *hierarchy*); and it can, on the level of the utterance, have a single, collective function.<sup>143</sup>

Hamon sets out to test his definition and recognises some questions evolving from the definition, such as how a description is incorporated in a larger textual ensemble and whether there are some special signs that demarcate, introduce or conclude the description. He also pays attention to the internal functioning of a description and a possible typology concerning it. (p. 148)

Regarding the signs that demarcate, introduce or conclude a description, using Zola as an example, Hamon points out that a description of a locomotive, for instance, is brought about by introducing a character who looks at the locomotive and has the vision and the ability to see it. Sometimes the ability to see requires a transparent medium, such as a window. Thus, according to Hamon, this method explains the occurrence of open doors and windows in Zola (pp. 149 - 50).

Hamon sees that the author feels he has to justify the characters' gazing with a desire to see and, therefore, gives the characters the characteristics of a spy, an idle and curious person

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<sup>143</sup> Philippe Hamon, "What is a description?," French Literary Theory Today. A Reader, ed. Tzvetan Todorov, trans. R. Carter from 1st French publ., (1968; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982), p. 148. Further references appear in the text.



etc., yet the very existence of these characters is caused by the description--not vice versa. The characters are either stationary with panoramas and moving or changing objects to watch or the characters are moving while the scene is fixed. "By definition a description is an interruption in the syntagmatics of the narration due to a paradigm (a catalogue, an enumeration, a lexicon), and thus a prolongation of the act of looking of the character who is assigned the description," Hamon concludes the justification for the act of looking (p. 150).

Hamon lists different occasions in Zola when the character is looking at a described object and summarises them in the following formula: Character + expression indicating a pause + verb of perception + the object being described + expression indicating a transparent medium (p. 151).

Alternatively, the character in Zola may speak of the locomotive and acts as the writer's spokesman. The types of characters involved are intruders, apprentices, professionals, garrulous or pedantic personalities etc. and the information is addressed in semi-direct discourse in the form of, for instance, confidences or gossip. Hamon points out that semi-direct style often works as a demarcative boundary before a description. These types of occurrences in Zola are squeezed in the following formula: Character + un- or underinformed + character informed, talkative + expression indicating speech + object being described (pp. 152 - 53).

Alternatively, the characters such as technicians, people moving out etc. can themselves act on the described subject and the description is organized in a way that may resemble a set of technical specifications even though simultaneity is replaced with successivity. This type of "Homeric" description is cherished by classical rhetoricians. The observing character may even be a helpless or paralysed individual. The formula for a typical introductory sentence of this type of description is the following: An active character + a spectator + a verb of action + the object or scene being described (pp. 152 - 54).

Hamon notes that descriptions are a "natural" way of inserting the ideological competence (dominant values, rules etc.) of the narrator in the form of evaluative comments which accompany the seeing, speaking or working of the character. Seeing may include an aesthetic evaluation; speaking may be fluent or unsuitable; working may reflect the rules of the society by being careful or unsuccessful (p.155 - 56). "Almost always, the description also appears as a normative space, a domain of law, which reflects not only the narrator's lexical and linguistic knowledge, but also his knowledge of the laws, rules, rites, rituals, etiquettes which organize all aspects of social convention" (p. 156).

Hamon summarises the above-mentioned formulae in a communication pattern in which a character who is a sender passes information to a character who is a receiver and, simultaneously, an author passes the very same information to a reader (p. 156). The terminology of this communication pattern might be disputed by Booth or Chatman but essentially it follows the same principles as the communication models introduced in the previous chapter.

Hamon stresses that every description needs to be justified and, in order to be so, needs certain types of pretext and themes which bring up floods of other themes. In Zola, such themes include transparent media (windows etc.), character types (painter, street idler etc.), typical scenes (taking a walk, pausing etc.) and psychological motivations (interest, gazing vacantly etc.) (pp. 156 - 57).

Hamon sums up the justification of these themes:

All of these themes, clearly, function purely as demarcations, as devices marking the introduction to a description, and they constitute an *empty* thematics, one entirely predetermined by the author's postulates (verisimilitude, etc.), whose

function is above all that of avoiding gaps between description and narration, of filling in the chinks in the narrative by making the interruptions plausible.(p. 157)

This resembles Barthes' notions about descriptions as views. In that sense, demarcations can be seen as the author placing a frame in front of the objects as Barthes put it<sup>144</sup>. On the other hand, according to Hamon, the introductory themes dictate the themes that will conclude the description and are often the logical conversions of the introductory themes: the light disappears, the door closes etc. (p. 157)

Hamon recognises that a description has a tendency to be "a quantified ( . . . ) 'halt' in the narration" (p. 158). This resembles Genette's notion of description as a special case of duration with a descriptive pause in narration. Hamon emphasises that the measurement of a halt is both metalinguistic and referential, for the halt is really more a programming of the time the reader spends reading the description rather than the duration of the incident described (p. 158).

According to Hamon, the prolongation of the description is not caused by the complexity of reality but by one of the following factors: "( . . . )the limits of the lexicon available to the author, the exhaustion of what is in his working files, or the intrusion of the story (the full thematics)." (p. 158). Hamon points out that the author has many devices in order to demarcate a description, such as a blank space, certain markers such as changes of pronoun or tense or what Hamon calls specialised vocabulary marking the direction, such as "to the right"(p. 158).

Hamon stresses that a narrative calls for logical predictions from the reader while a description creates lexical and stylistic expectations. "Thus, a story is to be *understood*, primarily, while a description is to be *recognized* ( . . . )" (pp. 158 - 59).

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<sup>144</sup>Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 54.

Hamon calls description "the lexicographical consciousness of fiction" for it does not involve semantics like narrative but involves the linguistic-semiotic domain. "To describe is almost always to actualize a latent lexical paradigm based on an underlying system of referential knowledge about the world ( . . . )" (p. 159). Similarly, Riffaterre recognises the kernel or nuclear word spinning a story out of its metonyms.<sup>145</sup>

According to Hamon, the most "expected" linguistic combination in a description is adjective + noun with its variations. A description often acts as the intrasemiotic exploration of a transformational field. Regarding the internal cohesion of the description, sometimes the introductory theme may well feed the description with its phonemic construction (p. 159).

When defining a typology for different types of descriptions, Hamon points out that a description often has some of the following elements combined: one or more characters (C), the setting or the introductory theme of the description (IT), which often brings about sub-themes or vocabulary (V) that have a metonymic relationship with the introductory theme. Sub-themes can bring about their own glossary ie. qualificative or functional predicative expansion (PE). These elements can be used for a formula of a description:

$C + F + IT (V + PE_q / PE_f)$

in which F often stands for look or speak or act and any of the units may be disjoint, absent or may permute (pp. 159 - 60).

Hamon parallels the sequence IT>V>PE with the organisation of what Hamon calls a dictionary article starting with an entry which leads to a definition and finally to examples and cross-references. According to Hamon this parallel nature accounts for the fascination all descriptive writers have felt for the dictionary. This resemblance between descriptions and

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<sup>145</sup>Riffaterre, Fictional Truth, p.5

dictionary articles may also explain some of the perceptions of descriptions as auxiliary or as something to skip over (p. 160).

Hamon points out that the object to be described is often announced at the beginning of a description and acts as the common denominator for the whole description. If the object to be described is mentioned in the title it sets up a system of expectations "designed to facilitate (or frustrate) the readability of the following description." Sometimes the term may be delayed and announced only at the end of the description or it may even be omitted as in riddle-constructions (p. 160).

Regarding the lexical options and constructions Hamon concludes:

To be precise, every description has the form of a metonymically homogeneous lexical block whose extension is related to the available vocabulary of the author, not to the degree of complexity of the reality itself; it is above all an extendable lexicon whose limits are more or less artificial, and constituted by items whose appearance is more or less predictable. The author has at his disposal a certain number of possibilities for regulating the amount of predictability and adjusting the semantic homogeneity of the description.(p. 162)

Hamon comes up with a typology containing five different abstract categories of descriptions even if descriptions rarely are homogeneous and several sub-types to these five categories do certainly exist. The type 1 contains descriptions that are so technical that their readability may suffer and the introductory theme may be difficult to identify. Therefore, this paradigm of technical words is followed by explanatory qualifying predicates (PE). The types of qualifying predicates often employed include comparison, paraphrase, explanatory

apposition and the anthropomorphic metaphor and they clarify and balance the otherwise technical language (pp. 162 - 63).

"The description will thus be an authoritative matching of two lexical paradigms or sets, one desemanticized and of low predictability, the other semanticized and of high predictability," Hamon characterises the technical terms and their explanations (p. 162). Hamon points out that this type of description resembles dictionary articles and the descriptions are rather pedagogical by nature (p. 163).

In the type 2 of descriptions the introductory theme and the involved lexical paradigm may be more easily identifiable. For instance, if the IT is garden it would be followed by V such as tree, flower etc. However, the metaphorical predicates (PE) counteract this strong predictability and are kept apart from the introductory themes and sub-themes. If compared with the type 1 descriptions, this type of PE are more poetic and have low predictability yet may contain very technical vocabulary (pp. 163 - 64). For instance, the flower may be explained to be "an opal stalagmite" (p. 164). As Hamon puts it: "Here description approaches the fantastic--the unknown is used to obscure the known" (p. 164).

In type 3 the author employs specialised technical lexicon in technical terms (V) and predicates (PE). This type of descriptions evoke a semantic blank space into the text, which may be interpreted differently by different readers. For instance, a syringa may have the colour of ceruse (p. 164).

In type 4 the maximal readability is employed. An IT brings about stereotyped lexicon, which causes the description to resemble tautology, pleonasm or cliché. For instance, the IT portrait would be followed by a forehead which is "white as snow" (p. 164).

Descriptions may employ technical terms without any explanatory predicates and, thus, resemble the sales brochure or a parts catalogue. Such usage may appear bookish and fail to

communicate. On the other hand, the description may include predicates and metaphorical paraphrases from other technical lexicons or distant semantic domains. The communication may be poor but the description may be perceived to be poetic.

However, type 5 avoids specialised terminology but rather uses ordinary gloss. The author may employ readable predicates (PE) and avoid technical vocabulary if the vocabulary of the object of description has not been saturated by frequent usage as in the case of certain sensory or aesthetic objects. If a fixed vocabulary V is absent the reader can be connected to the IT through the method of inclusion (belonging to the same whole) or perhaps by employing the vocabulary connected with the five senses, which bring about a personalised appearance. Hamon points out that type 5 descriptions are employed by impressionism, fantasy adventure, science fiction and in the riddle (pp. 165 - 66).

All in all, the author may combine several procedures in each description. He or she either works with condensation or expansion, readability or unreadability, presence of an introductory lexicon (V) or absence of V, predictable appearances of lexical occurrences of V after IT or unpredictability, reinforcement of effects (readability or unreadability of V is reinforced by that of PE) or neutralisation, metonymically coherent lexicons or metaphorically coherent lexicons (pp. 166 - 67).

When studying the function of description, and its role in the economy of the context, Hamon sees a description as the crucial point at which the readability of narrative is organized or destroyed, and, thus, a description has the appearance of a kind of highly organised semantic network (p. 167).

Hamon points out that if narration is defined as meaning which is stored and transformed, then the description is the point where the narration stops, is suspended, but also the indispensable point where it is 'preserved,' where its information is pulled together, where it

‘sets’ and is reduplicated, where the characters and the setting, in a kind of semantic ‘gymnastics’(. . .) participate in a redundancy. (p. 168)

He claims that descriptions can give readers indications of the future of the characters in a story and, thus, organising the narrative can be seen as the role of description as well as acting as a memory of the narrative through the redundancy the description introduces into the narrative (p. 168).

Hamon recognises some stylistic processes which can promote semantic circulation and cohesion between the environment and its inhabitants. Some of these rhetorical leitmotifs are metaphors, which are either anthropomorphic, zoomorphic or reifying, depending on the type of relation the author wishes to create between the environment and its inhabitant. Another such stylistic process is the dynamicising and anthropomorphizing of the lexicons, lists and vocabularies through using durative forms. Instead of using expressions that indicate location, descriptions can also use certain marks that mimic the flow of time, more commonly used in narration (‘in front of,’ ‘behind,’ ‘nearer’ etc.) (pp. 168 – 69).

Hamon concludes that as descriptions introduce themes that enhance plausibility, they constitute an empty thematics. The description is where the narrative comes to a temporary halt while continuing to organise itself. Hamon finds that “the fundamental characteristic of realist discourse is to deny, to make impossible, the narrative, any narrative” (p. 170). A narrative that becomes saturated with descriptions, multiplies its empty thematics, and, thus, instead of evoking the real, it evokes itself (p. 170).



## 4. Descriptions in Katherine Mansfield's "Prelude," "At the Bay" and "The Garden Party" and Philippe Hamon's theory of description

### 4.1. "Prelude," "At the Bay" and "The Garden Party"

The reason for selecting Katherine Mansfield's short stories "Prelude," "At the Bay" and "The Garden Party" as the texts to be analysed using aspects from Philippe Hamon's theory of description in this thesis, is that Katherine Mansfield's short stories are renowned for being full of vivid descriptions. Particularly the longer stories "Prelude" and "At the Bay," which were intended to form the beginning of a novel, are abundant with descriptions. "Prelude" (supposedly the first chapter of a novel, hence the title) consists of several fragments, all to do with the different characters moving houses and settling in, spanning over several weeks in time. "At the Bay" consists of fragments as well but spans over the incidents of one day in the same family's life at their beach house. "The Garden Party" depicts the life of a wealthy family arranging a garden party while some working man from a poverty-stricken dwelling down the lane has accidentally died. A few other stories with relevant features that match Hamon's theory are also mentioned.

The kinds of descriptions used in these texts are typical of Katherine Mansfield's short stories. The chosen three short stories are also mentioned as containing fine examples of descriptions: "A consideration of her technique in description will reveal some of her finest qualities as a writer." Sydney Janet Kaplan likens Mansfield's descriptions to the verbal equivalents of paintings<sup>146</sup>.

<sup>146</sup> Sydney Janet Kaplan, Katherine Mansfield and the Origins of Modernist Fiction (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991), p. 205.

René Godenne finds Mansfield's stories so full of descriptions that "sometimes she altogether eliminates the narrative from her texts<sup>147</sup>." Thus, Mansfield's text is so full of descriptions that the narrative takes a second place. "Scenically, how keen is her eye for the telling detail!" Elizabeth Bowen exclaims and carries on that Katherine Mansfield engraves a scene even more deeply if it contributes to a mood or crisis<sup>148</sup>. C.K.Stead emphasises that Katherine Mansfield comes from a physical environment full of empty spaces, distances, sky and water, all full of light at any season<sup>149</sup>. Stead believes this explains the rich imagery in Mansfield's stories. "Quite a number of her shorter fictions do have something of the character of a 'story,' though few rely primarily on narrative for their effect. They develop around a single image or scene or situation, and they move towards the recognition, or realization ( . . . ) of something latent there."<sup>150</sup>

Glimpse is the term given to these moments of epiphany by Katherine Mansfield<sup>151</sup>. Gunsteren points out that such glimpses of insight occur in moments of recognition even if the perceptions of the characters in Literary Impressionist stories generally are fragmentary, blurred and individualistic.<sup>152</sup> In the following chapter I will study the descriptions in Katherine Mansfield's short stories "Prelude," "At the Bay" and "The Garden Party" and study the

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<sup>147</sup> René Godenne, "Katherine Mansfield's 'Nouvelle-Instant,'" in The Fine Instrument, ed. Paulette Michel and Michel Dupuis (Sydney: Dungaroo Press, 1989), p. 111.

<sup>148</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, "Stories by Katherine Mansfield," in Afterthought: Pieces about Writing (London: Longmans, 1962), p. 65.

<sup>149</sup> C.K.Stead, In the Glass Case. Essays on New Zealand Literature (Auckland: Auckland UP, 1981), p. 30.

<sup>150</sup> Stead, p. 33.

<sup>151</sup> Gunsteren, p. 16.

<sup>152</sup> Gunsteren, p. 138.

descriptions in the light of some key aspects of Philippe Hamon's theory of description. Some of the descriptions occur in a mixed text with many narrative elements and I have not specifically marked the descriptive elements separately but trust in the reader's instinct in recognising the description in each extract.

#### 4.2. "Prelude," "At the Bay," "The Garden Party" and Philippe Hamon's theory of description

##### 4.2.1. The textual motivation of the description

Hamon studies how the description is incorporated in the larger whole of a text using examples from Emile Zola, and finds out that a character either looks at the object, talks about it or works on it, thus prolonging the act of looking. Kai Mikkonen points out that in Zola's poetics literature, painting and science meet within the visual sphere, and that the Impressionist painters' manner of "pure" seeing functioned as a model for Zola.<sup>153</sup> Gunsteren also mentions theorists who classify Zola as a Literary Impressionist.<sup>154</sup> Thus, a theory derived from the texts of Zola, who was inspired by Impressionists, should be relevant to Mansfield's, an Impressionist's texts as well.

Some of the descriptions in Mansfield's short stories follow Hamon's formula character + expression indicating a pause + verb of perception + expression indicating a transparent medium, as shown in the following examples. The descriptions are often thematically motivated: Gunsteren points out that in Mansfield, as in the characterisation of Kezia in

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<sup>153</sup> Kai Mikkonen, *Kuva ja sana* (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2005), p. 234.

<sup>154</sup> Gunsteren, p. 38.

“Prelude”, the Literary Impressionist characters are often engaged in new, unfamiliar actions and realisations.<sup>155</sup>

In “Prelude,” “At the Bay” and “The Garden Party” there is a constant preoccupation with perception and how the characters see each other. Windows and mirrors recur, as in “Prelude” in the extract with Kezia looking through coloured windows, or when Beryl sees herself in the mirror, and the image of herself is described as if perceived by the eyes of an assessing stranger: “What had that creature in the glass have to do with her and why was she staring? (p. 58)” Beryl ends up asking herself, reflecting the Impressionist restricted perceptive consciousness. Similarly, echoing Hamon's formula, in “The Garden Party” Laura catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror wearing her new hat: “There, quite by chance, the first thing she saw was this charming girl in the mirror, in her black hat trimmed with gold daisies and a long black velvet ribbon. Never had she imagined she could look like that” (p. 256).

After Laura brings her mother the disturbing and socially unfitting news of the death of a worker man, the mother gives Laura a new hat and holds up a hand mirror to show Laura what she looks like. Carole Froude Durix sees that the mirror Laura's mother offers her reflects the outside world: the outward facade exists to blind the people to the hard realities of life that may be disturbing to their comfort<sup>156</sup>. René Godenne points out that unlike in a plot story, in instances like this with the emphasis on the descriptive images, Katherine Mansfield cuts short the plot interest: “the odd event remains unexplained (the dead person) and is used only as an element of the story, not as the cause of the drama as it would in a plot story.”<sup>157</sup> The emphasis

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<sup>155</sup> Gunsteren, p. 150.

<sup>156</sup> Carole Froude Durix, “Both Sides of the Broad Road in Katherine Mansfield's 'The Garden Party' and Witi Ihimaera's 'This Life is Weary' in The Fine Instrument, ed. Paulette Michel and Michel Dupuis (Sydney: Dungaroo Press, 1989), p.182.

<sup>157</sup> Godenne, p. 111.

is not on the plot, the narrative, but on the impressions. Gunsteren finds that this “contrasting setting provides Mansfield with ample background to work out the juxtaposition ( . . . ) which destroys the beauty of life”,<sup>158</sup> a dilemma an Impressionist comes to face.

Hamon suggests that there is a demarcative boundary between the narration and the description following the formula: character, un- or underinformed + character, informed, talkative + expression indicating speech + object being described. In Mansfield the boundaries between narration and description are not quite so structured . The descriptions are not aimed from a person A to a person B but are more haphazard and fragmentary in nature, thus reflecting the Impressionist perception of reality.

The characters do not speak of the object in these short stories nor do they work on the object in the manner of a Homeric description, as Hamon's theory suggests. The nature of the descriptions tends to be more obscure and multi-faceted, and the descriptions are the perceptions of the narrator or the characters in the story, or a mixture of the two in the manner of free indirect discourse. As in “The Garden Party” with Laura experiencing the party preparations:

And now there came a long, chuckling absurd sound. It was the heavy piano being moved on its stiff castors. But the air! If you stopped to notice, was the air always like this? Little faint winds were playing chase in at the tops of the windows, out at the doors. And there were two tiny spots of sun, one on the inkpot, one on the inkpot, one on a silver photograph frame, playing too. Darling little spots. Especially the one on the inkpot lid. It was quite warm. A warm little silver star. She could have kissed it. (p. 249)

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<sup>158</sup> Gunsteren, p. 144.

In this extract, Laura's observations and her inner reflections are mixed. In this sense, Hamon's theory seems incomplete in assuming the necessity of the presence of person A who offers a description of something to person B. Naturally, a person A or B is not always present in motivating the description. However, a narrator is present in every description, as Mikkonen points out.<sup>159</sup>

Hamon finds certain elements that function as a padding for plausibility in the stories: transparent media such as the above-mentioned windows and mirrors, certain character types such as a stroller, like Kezia in "Prelude" when inspecting the town house from which the family was moving out. Other such paddings are typical scenes, such as visiting a place (Kezia strolling around the house in "Prelude") or taking a walk (Kezia walking through the orchard and the garden in "Prelude", Linda and her mother walking through the garden together in "Prelude," the opening two pages of "At the Bay" describing a morning stroll etc.)

Hamon lists the requirement for psychological motivation, such as the absence of mind, which, for instance, "Prelude" is abundant with, and which is typical of the impressionistic multi-facetedness. As Linda and her mother take a stroll in the garden, they also see the aloe plant: "As they stood on the steps, the high grassy bank on which the aloe rested rose up like a wave, and the aloe seemed to ride upon it like a ship with the oars lifted. Bright moonlight hung upon the lifted oars like water, and on the green wave glittered the dew" (pp. 52 – 53). Linda is carried away on the waves of imagination.

In "At the Bay" Linda looks at the garden, feels existential anxiety, and lets herself float like a leaf in the wind:

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<sup>159</sup> Mikkonen, p. 230.

If only one had time to look at these flowers long enough, time to get over the sense of novelty and strangeness, time to know them! But as soon as one paused to part the petals, to discover the under-side of the leaf, along came Life and one was swept away. And, lying in her cane chair, Linda felt so light; she felt like a leaf. Along came Life like a wind and she was seized and shaken; she had to go. Oh dear, would it always be so? Was there no escape? (p. 221)

Gunsteren points out that, thematically, as in the above example, “in general, the perception of nature as hostile or benevolent or indifferent is an indicator of important philosophical issues” (p. 138). She stresses, though, that frequently in Mansfield's fiction, Nature is “a beautiful and serene phenomenon among the calamities of human strife” (p. 138). Thus, the descriptions of nature do not simply offer a setting but invoke a philosophical interpretation.

Hamon points out that the above-mentioned themes also function as demarcations, which mark the introduction to a description. Anne Holden Rønning comments that in Katherine Mansfield's New Zealand stories, in “Prelude” in particular, descriptions are used to portray a new scene; it is as if one is at the theatre: “The curtain goes up and we see a stage set with characters who speak and act”<sup>160</sup>. The description offers the setting for the events into which one enters, and sometimes the description may actually sound like the stage setting in a theatrical piece, as in the beginning of “At the Bay”: “Very early morning. The sun was not yet risen, and the whole of Crescent Bay was hidden under a white sea-mist. The big bush-covered hills at the back were smothered” (p. 205).

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<sup>160</sup> Anne Holden Rønning, “Katherine Mansfield, British or New Zealander—The Influence of Setting on Narrative Structure and Theme,” in *The Fine Instrument*, ed. Paulette Michel and Michel Dupuis (Sydney: Dungaroo Press, 1989), p. 129.

René Godenne points out that “in each instance the unprepared reader enters ex abrupto into a particular situation about which he knows little or nothing about the characters before the chosen moment.”<sup>161</sup> Gunsteren remarks that the expository descriptions of the characters are omitted and the characters' nature is revealed through dialogue, free indirect discourse and action. “Unless they are moulded into a narrative focus, revealing their own thoughts, many characters are described from the outside only.”<sup>162</sup> Here is an example of this from “At the Bay”: “The pale blue bow on the top of Mrs. Stubbs's fair frizzy hair quivered. She arched her plump neck. What a neck she had! It was bright pink where it began and then it changed to warm apricot, and then it faded to the colour of a brown egg and then to a deep creamy” (p. 231). Similarly, the Trout boys, the Burnells' children's cousins, are described from the outside or through customary action:

Pip was tall for his age, with lank black hair and a white face, but Rags was very small and so thin that when he was undressed his shoulder blades stuck out like two little wings. They had a mongrel dog with pale blue eyes and a long tail turned up at the end who followed them everywhere; he was called Snooker. They spent half their time combing and brushing Snooker and dosing him with various awful mixtures concocted by Pip, and kept secretly by him in a broken jug covered with an old kettle lid” (p. 41).

Gunsteren mentions the in medias res beginnings, which often also contain a description, particularly the ones in Mansfield beginning with “and ( . . . )” as in the beginning of “The Garden Party”: “And after all the weather was ideal” (p. 245). According to Gunsteren, such

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<sup>161</sup> Godenne, p. 109.

<sup>162</sup> Gunsteren, p. 150.



device reflects the Literary Impressionist fragmentary view of life as a sequence of impressions made up of discontinuous units of experience (p. 148).

In his The Narrative Modes – Techniques of the Short Story Helmut Bonheim studies the descriptions in the short stories from the twentieth century and finds out that 38% of the surveyed stories begin with descriptions (a percentage similar to that obtained from the material prior to 1900).<sup>163</sup> However, he finds out that even if the movement is not away from descriptions, in the twentieth century short stories it is used in a special way, namely that descriptions do not occur as a block of several paragraphs in the beginning of a story but on word or phrase level. He also discovers that in the twentieth century short stories descriptions are used to sketch city-scapes and interiors more than landscapes. He states that “in the contemporary short story the relevance of the description to what follows is less obvious than it was in Poe or Hawthorne.” However, he concludes that “one can still find stories of the 'poetic' kind which seem to include description for its own sake,” and uses an extract from Virginia Woolf’s “Kew Gardens” as an example.<sup>164</sup>

Hamon mentions characters who do not see, speak or work adequately as a textual motivation for a description. In such cases the characters' perception is limited or the narrator only describes through a limited scope of knowledge or vision. Hamon comments that this type of description offers the most 'natural' way of inserting an ideological competence (pp. 154 – 55). Echoing this, Gunsteren mentions that the Impressionist ideology is apparent in the seemingly inaccurate descriptions: “The personal impression of any experience is of greater importance to the Impressionist than any accurate description of reality” (p. 182). Such a use of

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<sup>163</sup> Helmut Bonheim, The Narrative Modes – Techniques of the Short Story (Cambridge: Brewer, 1982), p. 94.

<sup>164</sup> Bonheim, p. 95.

description is apparent particularly in the descriptions presented from a child's view-point, as in the earlier quoted detail of Kezia watching the “Chinese” Lottie through the yellow window pane. Often in Mansfield, the limited scope of vision or perception of a character as portrayed in the description, can be understood to question the prevailing norms and, thus, the description operates as an ideological comment.

For instance, in “The Garden Party,” Laura's ideas of the little cottages across the road from the Sheridans and the description of the “mean dwellings” with “poverty-stricken” smoke coming out of their chimneys from her view-point echo the undisputed value judgments imposed on the children by adults:

A broad road ran between. True, they were far too near. They were the greatest possible eyesore and they had no right to be in the neighbourhood at all. They were little mean dwellings painted a chocolate brown. In the garden patches there was nothing but cabbage stalks, sick hens and tomato cans. The very smoke coming out of their chimneys was poverty-stricken. Little rags and shreds of smoke, so unlike the great silvery plumes that uncurled from the Sheridans' chimneys. (p. 254)

In broad terms, Hamon's theory in relation to the textual motivation of the description is satisfactory, yet lacks the room for variation in terms of descriptions lacking an obvious observing character Mansfield's texts are abundant with. The demarcating system also is a problematic notion for not all descriptions in Mansfield have clear markers between the narration and the description or even separate elements giving the descriptions a particular sense of plausibility. The sequences of the text are too discontinuous to even require logical

elements introducing and concluding a description. Hamon comments that such passages as well as descriptions constitute an empty thematics. However, if such passages are absent, or the descriptions or the passages leading to the descriptions proclaim, for instance, the Impressionist view of life, and, thus, function as more than mere chinking in the text, the “emptiness” is disputable.

#### 4.2.2. The internal functioning of the description

Hamon points out that descriptions set up lexical and stylistic expectations with the notions of inclusion, resemblance and contiguity playing an important role (p. 158). The introduction of the topic of garden sets up certain expectations in terms of lexical expansion, whereas a list of flower names can be condensed into the term garden. “A description organizes the persistence in memory of a single sign by means of a plurality of different signs” (p. 159).

Hamon calls descriptions the lexicographical consciousness of fiction. This latent lexical paradigm is, for instance, recognisable in “Prelude” in the passage in which Kezia (the character C) inspects (F = the verb of the type look/ speak/ act) the house from which her family is moving out, which acts as the introductory theme (IT) of the description and also offers the vocabulary (V) for the predicative expansion (PE, either qualificative or functional) required in Hamon's formula of a description C + F + IT (V + PEq/PEf). In the beginning of “Prelude” many relevant characters are introduced (Kezia, Lottie, their mother Linda, their grandmother, their aunt Linda, their old neighbour Mrs. Samuel Josephs with her children) as well as many of the paraphernalia to do with moving houses scattered and lying about the lawn. The setting and the milieu are introduced as well. Inside the house many sub-themes are introduced: a predicative expansion of all the things in the old house inspected by Kezia, such

as the kitchen window-sill with a gritty yellow soap and a piece of flannel stained blue, the fire-place full of rubbish with a hair-tidy among it, the drawing-room with a pulled-down Venetian blind and a blue-bottle knocking against the ceiling etc. (p. 14).

Hamon parallels the sequence IT -> V -> PE with the sequence *entry -> definition -> examples and cross-references* of a dictionary article and emphasises “the fascination felt by all descriptive writers for the dictionary” (p. 160). However, in terms of an Impressionist point of view, the precision and exactness of a dictionary article seem alien to an approach laden with fleeting impressions.

In the passage in “Prelude” with Kezia inspecting the house, the gloss on the kitchen has the predicative expansion of yellow soap, a piece of flannel, window-sill, the fire-place, the hair tidy and the servant girl. The gloss on the drawing room has the Venetian blind, the garden bush seen through the blind, the blue-bottle fly knocking against the ceiling and the carpet tacks with red fluff. The dining room has the window panes with coloured glass, through which Kezia sees the blue lawn, the blue arum lilies, the yellow lawn, the yellow lilies, the “Chinese” Lottie wearing a pinafore, tables and chairs. Kezia's mother's and father's room has a pill box and the servant girl's room the predicative expansion of a stay button, beads and a long needle (pp. 14 – 15).

In terms of the typology of five different types of descriptions Hamon emphasises that the typology is abstract, sub-types do exist, descriptions are not normally homogeneous and several types are generally mixed in one description (p. 166). Keeping this in mind, when studying the descriptions in the chosen short-stories by Mansfield, one can reach some rough guidelines about the prevalent types of descriptions in Mansfield's text.

The type 1, which has a pedagogical air about it, is close to a dictionary article with highly specialised, technical terminology and low readability, does not match Mansfield's

descriptions with ordinary vocabulary. Instead, type 2 with lexicon that is easily identifiable yet combined with poetic metaphorical predicates that have a low predictability, matches Mansfield's descriptions. As in "At the Bay" with a tree paralleled with a bird: "The manuka tree, bent by the southerly winds, was like a bird on one leg stretching out a wing" (p. 242) or as in "Prelude," a neighbour likened to a kitchen cloth: "Mrs. Samuel Josephs, like a huge warm black silk tea-cosy, enveloped her" (p. 12). In "Prelude" the flora and fauna comparison is again used when describing "feathery cream flowers" or paths "with tree roots spanned across them like the marks of big fowls' feet" (p. 32). The aloe in the garden is paralleled with birds as well: "High above them, as though becalmed in the air, and yet holding so fast to the earth it grew from, it might have had claws instead of roots" (p. 34).

The type 3 of descriptions with a certain amount of unreadability to be interpreted differently by different readers is not clearly present in Mansfield's short stories, for the used lexicon is relatively easy to understand. Some vocabulary to do with plants or animals native to New Zealand is, however, strange to some readers (manuka, karaka, morepork, tui, pawa etc.). In the type 4 of descriptions the author accepts maximal readability and uses stereotyped clichés, yet is alien to Mansfield's short stories with a certain novelty factor present in the descriptions.

However, Hamon points out that the type 5 of descriptions particularly employs vocabulary associated with the five senses using ordinary gloss, and is the technique of impressionism. This type of descriptions is indeed prevalent in Mansfield's texts. However, many of the instances in which the five senses are in a key position, occur in narration and the descriptive element is often present within the narration in the form of adjectives, as in many of the following examples.

In the opening description of “At the Bay” alone descriptions involving feel, smell, hearing and seeing are present. In “Prelude” there is a scent of flowers in the room: “The room smelled of lilies; there were two big jars of arums in the fire-place”(p. 51). In “At the Bay” the smells of nature are mentioned: “The breeze of the morning lifted in the bush and the smell of leaves and wet black earth mingled with the sharp smell of the sea” (p. 207).

Descriptions employing the sense of sight are abundant in Mansfield's short stories, as in the description of the two types of smoke coming out of the chimneys of the dwellings of people of different social classes, or Kezia inspecting the family's old house, or Linda studying the garden, or the many instances of people seen in mirrors or through the windows. This description in “At the Bay” paints an impressionist scene with a myriad of colours:

The sun had set. In the western sky there were great masses of crushed-up rose-coloured clouds. Broad beams of light shone through the clouds and beyond them as if they would cover the whole sky. Overhead the blue faded; it turned a pale gold, and the bush outlined against it gleamed dark and brilliant like metal. (p. 238)

Gunsteren recognises the usage of colour in Mansfield and stresses that colour, as well as touch, smell, hearing and taste, has been defined as “a way in which a consciousness is affected by an object and as a property of the object itself.”<sup>165</sup> The importance of the described experiences can be understood when perceiving them in the light of Literary Impressionism. As

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<sup>165</sup> Gunsteren, p. 54.

Gunsteren puts it: “It is only the direct experience that counts—everything beyond the direct sensations or impressions of the characters is eliminated: what cannot be sensed does not exist for the Impressionist.”<sup>166</sup>

In terms of the sense of hearing, there are many instances of whistling being heard, a dog barking, birds singing, sheep bleating. In “At the Bay” Linda rests in the hammock in the garden with Jonathan in the grass beside her:

The voices of children cried from the other gardens. A fisherman's light cart shook along the sandy road, and from far away they heard a dog barking; it was muffled as though the dog had its head in a sack. If you listened you could just hear the soft swish of the sea at full tide sweeping the pebbles. The sun was sinking. (p. 236)

In “Prelude” Kezia presses her fingers against the window: “She liked the feeling of the cold shining glass against her hot palms, and she liked to watch the funny white tops that came on her fingers when she pressed them hard against the pane” (p. 15) This extract involves both the senses of touch and sight. As she sits on a cart next to the storeman, she touches his sleeve and feels the texture of the cloth: “Then she put her finger out and stroked his sleeve; it felt hairy” (p. 17).

On his way home in a buggy, Stanley Burnell helps himself to cherries: “They were delicious, so plump and cold, without a spot or a bruise on them” (p. 35). Again, this extract involves several senses in it: the taste, the touch and the sight. In “The Garden Party” the

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<sup>166</sup> Gunsteren, p. 54.

children have cream puffs: “( . . . ) Jose and Laura were licking their fingers with that absorbed inward look that only comes from whipped cream” (p. 252). The sight is supposed to convey what the characters feel via their sense of taste.

Gunsteren points out that in Literary Impressionism, the narrator “depicts the outer world not as it is, but as it appears, via the senses rather than the intellect.”<sup>167</sup> This matches Hamon's ideas about the type 5 of descriptions with an emphasis on the senses that brings about “a highly personalized appearance” to the descriptions, as Hamon calls it (p. 166).

Hamon's manner of giving such a central role to the lexical elements of the description and studying the descriptions as if they are only lexical taxonomies, seems very reductive. Descriptions are more than mere word lists. An in-depth study of descriptions cannot occur on the lexical level alone but the textual discourse and the different tools employed on the discourse level have to be taken into account as well. Descriptions have many different functions they fulfill in the text: in addition to often being symbolic or metaphorical, they also contribute towards spacing the action in time or space. In this sense, Hamon's theory fails to communicate the essence of the description on a level above the taxonomies.

#### 4.2.3. The role of the description in the context

When regarding the overall function of a description in a text, Hamon points out, echoing Genette, that the description is the point where the narrative stops and is suspended, yet also acts as the point where the narrative is preserved. With the aid of the description the setting sharpens or is confirmed, the characters are revealed as a bundle of significant features, or the

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<sup>167</sup> Gunsteren, p. 152.



description may offer an indication of what is going to happen and, for instance, communicates the information about the future of the characters (p. 168).

Hamon mentions that a description functions as a highly organised semantic network, and, thus has impact on the readability of the narrative. He uses an example of Zola with metonymical relations of different parts of a plant, and, on the other hand, the metaphorical human/ non-human assimilations (p. 167). Similarly, in Mansfield, as in the example of the manuka tree resembling a bird or tree roots resembling birds' toes, the nature assimilations are employed.

In "Prelude," Linda looks at the aloe, the aloe leaves, the long sharp thorns--all forming a metonymical network (p. 53). "She particularly liked the long sharp thorns. . . . Nobody would dare to come near the ship or to follow after. 'Not even my Newfoundland dog,' thought she, 'that I'm so fond of in the daytime'" (p. 53). She likens her husband Stanley with a dog, employing metaphorical human/ non-human assimilations. "If only he wouldn't jump at her so, and bark so loudly, and watch her with such eager, loving eyes, " Linda carries on the metonymical network of a dog with barking, jumping at someone or eager, loving eyes (p. 54). Such metonymical and metaphorical relationships form a network throughout the short story keeping the otherwise fragmentary narrative together. This fragmentary nature of narration is in keeping with Literary Impressionism, according to which, as Gunsteren emphasises, reality itself consists of fragments of separately perceived impressions (p. 64).

Hamon mentions that descriptions communicate information about the future of the characters. In a short story with the emphasis on presenting fragmentary episodes, this kind of causality on a narrative level brought about by descriptions seems less obvious. However, in some of Katherine Mansfield's short stories, the descriptions have been interpreted to predict what is going to happen to the characters. For instance, some Symbolist readings of Mansfield's

“Bliss” have seen the description of the pear tree as a prediction of the protagonist's, Bertha's life. The pear tree standing in the far end of the garden is described as being “in fullest richest bloom; it stood perfect” (p. 96). Helen E. Nebeker points out that pear trees are by nature bisexual containing both female and male organs of propagation, which she also mentions as the sense of “perfect” botanically. However, sometimes the male organs ripen too early for the self-fertilisation to occur. Such trees in full bloom are, thus, beautiful but non-functional.<sup>168</sup>

Bertha, however, is not sterile, for she has a child, even though she may be unable to love her child in a motherly way and, thus, can be interpreted as emotionally sterile. However, Nebeker sees that the indication of the bi-sexual pear tree points elsewhere, and sees that it points towards Bertha's latent homosexuality and the way Bertha is drawn towards Pearl, a female guest at Bertha's party, who also admires the tree with Bertha. Nebeker also sees signs of homosexuality in the womb-phallus symbols scattered around the story as well as the colour imagery in the story. Incidentally, Pearl has an affair with Bertha's husband and, according to Nebeker, the whole short story ends in irony when Bertha ponders on what she and Pearl have shared, possibly meaning the homosexual connection, when what they have shared is, in fact, her husband.<sup>169</sup>

Being able to distinguish networks of possible symbolism in the descriptions, and being able to interpret them in the manner Nebeker, for instance, has done, speak of the role of the descriptions supporting the narrative. As Hamon claims, when descriptions communicate information about the future of the characters, they organise the narrative (p. 168). That is what the pear tree themes can be seen doing in “Bliss”. Hamon also points out that the key elements

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<sup>168</sup> Helen E. Nebeker, “The Pear Tree: The Sexual Implications in Katherine Mansfield's ‘Bliss,’” *Modern Fiction Studies*, 18, No. 4 (1972/1973), p. 546.

<sup>169</sup> Nebeker, p. 547.

of the narrative are also stored in the descriptions (p. 168). The plausibility function has certainly been fulfilled if the characters in the story are interpreted as if living a life beyond the realm of the text.

In “The Garden Party” Laura wears “a black hat trimmed with gold daisies.”<sup>170</sup> Robert Murray Davis interprets that the blackness represents death, suffering and division of humanity while the gold life and light. Daisies in the hat are socially less impressive than roses and arum lilies also mentioned in the story, yet, according to Davis, symbolise maturing as Laura's own process, not accepting her mother's values imposed on her.<sup>171</sup> Thus, the description of the hat, along with all the other hats mentioned in the short story, can be seen to add unity to the narration in the short story.

Hamon recognises certain stylistic processes, which function as signs of the descriptions and promote the semantic circulation between the human and the non-human. As the first type of these processes, he mentions metaphors which are either anthropomorphic, zoomorphic or reifying. He gives a character's animal name from Zola as an example. Hamon also sees that the usage of anaphors or of connectors ('like,' 'similar to,' 'resembled,' 'seemed,' 'a sort of') reinforces both the internal cohesion of the description and its ties with the whole narration.<sup>172</sup>

James W. Gargano, for instance, has commented that in Mansfield's “Miss Brill,” the main character Miss Brill has been named after a flatfish. “‘Miss Brill’ is the story of a woman who, while seeming to see everything, sees nothing. She, like the flatfish, has a ‘blind side’ and

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<sup>170</sup> Mansfield, Collected, p. 256.

<sup>171</sup> Robert Murray Davis, “The Unity of ‘The Garden Party,’” Studies in Short Fiction, 2, No. 1 (1964), p. 65.

<sup>172</sup> Hamon, “What is description”, p. 168.

a singular ability to see things from a strangely interesting but incomplete point of view.”<sup>173</sup> The main character's name can be seen to invoke certain expectations of the perceptive qualities of the person.

The qualities associated with the flatfish can be seen to create a network of relations in the story. For instance, the beloved fur necklet Miss Brill wears has “sad little eyes,” referring to the visual capacities again. (p. 331) At a concert Miss Brill had overheard an Englishman's argument with his wife on the wife's reluctance to wear spectacles. Miss Brill also observes that the regular concert attendants are somewhat odd, and stare “as though they'd just come from dark little rooms or even—even cupboards! (p. 334) The theme of vision is repeated again. Towards the end of the short story Miss Brill overhears a giggling girl compare Miss Brill's fur to a fried whiting—another fish species the family of which is allied to the flatfish. (p. 335)

As far as the above-mentioned connectors are concerned, they are abundant in Mansfield's short stories. As earlier mentioned, in “Prelude” Mrs. Samuel Josephs is “like a huge warm black silk tea-cosy” (p. 12). “You look like a big fat turkey,” Linda says to her husband (p. 25) In “At the Bay” “Harry Kember was like a man walking in his sleep” (p. 218) while his wife “looked ( . . . ) like a horrible caricature of her husband” (p. 220). “He is like a weed,” Linda thinks of Jonathan after noticing how “his black hair was speckled all over with silver, like the breast plumage of a black fowl” (p. 239). The usage of metaphors is abundant, often introducing human/ non-human themes and connecting the characters with their background.

In the description of the house “a strange beautiful excitement seemed to stream from the house in quivering ripples” and Kezia “seemed to come flying through the air to her feet” (p.

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<sup>173</sup> James W. Gargano, “Mansfield's 'Miss Brill,’” The Explicator, 19, No. 2 (1960), article 10, n.p.

18). In the garden in the aloe “the curving leaves seemed to be hiding something; the blind stem cut into the air as if no wind could ever shake it” (p. 34). Such expressions with an air of uncertainty are also in keeping with Literary Impressionism. Gunsteren recognises that “reality in 'Prelude' only exists as momentarily perceived by the characters, as it seems to them at a particular moment ( . . . ) Characters in 'Prelude' have a solipsistic, momentary, fragmentary view of reality” (p. 151).

Gunsteren also points out that Mansfield uses small seemingly casual details that give fragmentary scenes a sense of unity. “These apparently casual details not only give the story a cinematic quality but establish a pattern of internal reference that creates unity in a basically fragmentary Impressionistic story” (p. 147). This resembles Hamon's theory on how descriptions organise the narrative (p. 168).

Another stylistic process that functions as a sign of a description, according to Hamon, is making the lexicons, lists and vocabularies more dynamic and anthropomorphic via the usage of durative or pronominal forms, for instance (p.168). Using durative or pronominal forms may be more of a feature in French, as in Hamon's examples. In Mansfield, however, inanimate things are portrayed as if they are active in “Prelude” in the following manner, sometimes even using durative forms, as in the following example, when portraying the breeze (“dropping”) and the creek (“running,” “hiding,” “spilling”):

A breeze blew over the garden, dropping dew and dropping petals, shivered over the drenched paddocks, and was lost in the sombre bush. In the sky some tiny stars floated for a moment and then they were gone—they were dissolved like bubbles. And plain to be heard in the early quiet was the sound of the creek in the paddock running over the brown stones, running in and out of the sandy hollows,

hiding under the clumps of dark berry bushes, spilling into a swamp of yellow water flowers and cresses. (p. 24)

One more stylistic process that, according to Hamon, functions as a sign of the description is using some marks of narration that normally mimic time (“then,” “before,” “soon” etc.) instead of expressions that are used for location (“in front of,” “behind,” “above” etc.) (p. 169). In the beginning of Mansfield's “At the Bay” it is as if the narrator leads one to a morning stroll through New Zealand landscape. Time markers are employed to pace the reading process as if one really was along having a morning stroll (italics mine when marking the time indicators):

*Then* something immense came into view; an enormous shock-haired giant with his arms stretched out. It was the big gum tree outside Mrs. Stubbs's shop ( . . . )  
And *now* big spots of light gleamed in the mist ( . . . ) *Now* the leaping, glittering sea was so bright it made one's eyes ache to look at it. (p. 206)

Again, here the emphasis is on the lexical or grammatical markers (such as durative form).

Hamon concludes his article on the theory of description by referring to the hopeless project of imitating life with words: “The realist attitude is based on a linguistic illusion, the belief in the possibility of a language which is monopolized exclusively by its referential

function, a language in which signs would be the adequate analogues of things, a kind of codebook reproducing faithfully the discontinuity of reality.”<sup>174</sup>

Hamon criticises that most “realist” writers do not explore the possibilities of language that is transcribed from real speech, onomatopoeic or visual (as in calligrams). The writers use metaphorical language instead of “motivated” in the manner mentioned above or use language that is stylistically or artistically motivated rather than simply using language to convey information.<sup>175</sup> This is a very strange value judgement that denies the value of descriptive literary texts. All of a sudden the poets are lying imitators again!

However, descriptions are a fundamental element of literary texts with definite functions; otherwise authors simply would not include them in the text. Descriptions can introduce a fresh breath in the text, a relief from the heavy narration. Descriptions often provide a setting for a particular time and place, thus creating the setting for the narration, or simply creating the mood of the story. Descriptions often are aesthetic and entertaining. The motivation of conveying information cannot simply be seen as the only criteria for a justified description in the text, even if Hamon claims so above. Descriptions are the free spirits of the text, flexible and ready to bring the overall impact of the text to surprising directions. They can hardly be considered “servile maids.”

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<sup>174</sup> Hamon, “Introduction,” pp. 169–70.

<sup>175</sup> Hamon, “Introduction,” p. 170.

## 5. Conclusion

Hamon's task of forming a poetics of description is ambitious, and as shown above when applying it to Mansfield's short stories, it seems to offer a skeleton that is applicable and offers the basic elements to do with description. However, in terms of offering the flesh onto the bones let alone making space for the soul dwelling inside, the theory seems to be hollow, particularly with the derogatory attitude towards the artistic motivation of the texts.

When writing a text, an author judges what is functional in the text, and does not include elements that are futile or unmotivated. Descriptions can be symbolic or metaphorical, as mentioned above, yet they can also bring the reader to the correct time and place setting, or simply be aesthetically motivated, whatever the function the author chooses to give descriptions. If descriptions were perceived as pointless, they simply would not be used to such an extent. As the very nature of literary texts is to create a world of their own, not to mimic reality, poets, in my opinion, cannot and should not be called lying imitators, but artists managing the fine art of language.

Mikkonen criticises Hamon's theory of being functional only in lexical analysis yet not very applicable when trying to use it to analyse literary descriptions. Literary descriptions have many forms; it is simplistic to include descriptions of the type "the house has a red tile roof" as the only type of description while remarks that claim, hints offered by gaps in the text that call for interpretation, or appealing to generally accepted ideas all can function as descriptions yet would not pass as descriptions according to Hamon's theory. Mikkonen also concludes that even if the topic and subthemes are identified, it is not beneficial when



interpreting the text and its descriptive elements. According to him it is also debatable whether descriptions should be positioned on the linguistic or referential level of interpretation.<sup>176</sup>

Mikkonen also calls for including the literary traditions of description in research as well as the stylistic period of the text and the prevalent traditions of a particular era.<sup>177</sup> I agree that including the typical features of a stylistic period or the type of fiction in question (novel, short story etc.) is beneficial in recognising tendencies, as Gunsteren has done in an overall manner when studying Mansfield and Literary Impressionism.

Hamon's poetics of description is based on narratological theories and, according to Viikari, functions only as a chinking for the traditional narratology. Viikari sees that a new comprehension of texts requires that the very starting points of narratology as well as the terminology are questioned and redefined. One starting point, according to Viikari, is code analysis, as in Barthes' *S/Z*, for it does not follow the master-servant preconception as the narratological theories. In Hamon's theory Viikari also sees the lack of the analysis of the relationship between the descriptive and narrative material, and suggests that Michael Riffaterre's approach, as in his *Fictional Truth*, offers the starting point of supplementing the narrative model with the diegetic aspect.<sup>178</sup>

Personally I find that Riffaterre's approach offers an excellent philosophical starting point for questioning the concept of reality within fiction, yet remains distant and not very applicable on a textual level. Riffaterre takes the concepts of reader and subtext into account, yet still carries on studying the texts on a metaphorical level. If the very preconception of every

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<sup>176</sup> Mikkonen, pp. 244–45.

<sup>177</sup> Mikkonen, p. 246.

<sup>178</sup> Viikari, pp. 76–77.

text is that they are metaphorical by nature, his approach still keeps on problematising this aspect yet does not offer tangible tools for the analysis of description.

Genette works on the concept of focalisation, and as Mikkonen points out, if focalisation functions as the relationship between imagined seeing, the seeing subject and the object seen, it is a parallel term with description and partially even overlapping.<sup>179</sup> Genette's concept of focalisation is not comprehensive, however, and does not, for instance, explain all aspects of Mansfield's texts as shown in the study by Minna Karvonen. In Mansfield's text, the point of view is based on two different categories: either thoughts and feelings or sensations and the focal point. Genette combines both categories as one focalisation category, and there is no distinction perceived between the above-mentioned categories.<sup>180</sup> However, simply judging descriptions in terms of conveying the information of "who sees?" is very reductive and reduces the role of the descriptions into simply giving information about the different focalisation categories.

In her master's thesis Anna Hakala studies the different narratological approaches and draws the conclusion that in terms of interpreting Mansfield's short stories, classical, structuralist and cognitive narratology all give parallel and complementary possibilities and respond to the classical question "how?" as well as the cognitive question "why?"<sup>181</sup> When studying Mansfield's texts, it is not sufficient to study the lexical paradigms and metaphorical and metonymical relations, for then one simply loses out the depth of descriptions. A more diverse picture can be formed when studying aspects such as focalisation or free indirect discourse

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<sup>179</sup> Mikkonen, pp. 250–51.

<sup>180</sup> Minna Karvonen, "Kuka kokee, mistä näkyy. Genetten fokalisaatiomallin ulottuvuuksia ja rajoja etsimässä," in *Karnevaali ja autiomaa*, ed. Anna Makkonen and Teemu Ikonen (Helsinki: Helsingin yliopiston yleisen kirjallisuustieteen, teatteritieteen ja estetiikan laitos, 1995), pp. 44–65.

<sup>181</sup> Anna Hakala, "Like two open cities: tajunnan kuvaus Katherine Mansfieldin novelleissa," Master's Thesis, University of Tampere 2005.

alongside with studying descriptions, yet even this approach does not give the descriptions the credit they deserve for performing, for instance, an aesthetic or pragmatic role in the text: descriptions can be merely entertaining or they may provide the setting for the text.

Another starting point when studying descriptions that might prove to be fruitful, is analysing descriptions from the point of view of the tradition of ekphrasis, as in Koelb's study on the topic, in which she recognises the urgency “to inscribe the unity of mind and place in experience” in literature.<sup>182</sup>

Angela Smith comments that a part of Katherine Mansfield's aesthetic was the belief that art must be savage. Katherine Mansfield herself lists this passion as follows:

The mind I love must still have wild places – a tangled orchard where dark damsons drop in the heavy grass, an overgrown little wood, the chance of a snake or two (real snakes), a pool that nobody's fathomed the depth of, and paths threaded with those little flowers planted by the wind.

It must have real hiding places, not artificial ones – not gazebos and mazes. And I have never met the cultivated mind that has not had its shrubbery. I loathe and detest shrubberies.<sup>183</sup>

Mansfield's objective was to write about tangled orchards and to take the reader to real hiding places full of descriptions!

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<sup>182</sup> Janice Hewlett Koelb, The Poetics of Description, p. 190.

<sup>183</sup> Margaret Scott (ed.), The Katherine Mansfield Notebooks (Lincoln: Lincoln Univ. Press, 1997), p. 163.

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