



## Exploring The Victorianism Of Laura In Mansfield's "The Garden Party"

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### Abstract:

The wealthy Sheridan family is in midst of preparing to throw an upscale garden party at their estate as Katherine Mansfield begins her short story, "The Garden Party. Meanwhile, the family's daughter Laura Sheridan [Miss. Annie] is confronted with a moral decision discovered upon hearing that further down where they lived one of their neighbors had passed away during this event. Nevertheless, the Sheridans go ahead with the party and Laura is confronted by a profound social chasm between her privileged life and that of other people. Societies, social inequality — the have-nots and perhaps even prison economy to name a few such themes that are handled in this story. So by showing instead of telling the author achieves a greater sense that suffering is both more solvable and less neat, ideally resonating in people with privilege who have never experienced such abuse (or at least not yet) as they now think through their motivations for compassion or derision.

**Key Words:** Death, social inequality, moral values, class, suffering, social chasm, escapism, obstructions

### 1. Introduction

In New Zealand, "The Garden-Party" is a frequent event that the Sheridan family holds at home. The story line goes around in the preparations of party which is bustling. Laura, a young woman coming of age on the cusp of adulthood eagerly looks forward to it and wishes nothing more than to get involved in its preparations. But the Sheridans were told that it was all plain sailing. The man had fallen from a horse in Jolly Olly White's but not seriously—not like this for instance! Oh dear, if only they could be sure... Afterwards Laura and her mother felt just after an air raid; what stillness, in spite of the moaning wind! — So unlike the storm or catastrophe that one expected. —Pull Parser: Parse Chapter6Annotations, last word Laura is moved by the tragedy of the dead man (and his mourning family) and begs her mother and siblings to cancel their gathering. As in the World War I-flavored story "The Garden-Party", many characters die—including a carter whose horse shoes when it sees traction engine, and is crushed by age. But the form of the carter isn't that of a

maimed and mutilated body one often finds in Great War literature. Instead, we are told that his body is "perfect," "glorious," and "tranquil" (296), even a feast of delight (296). This body is not thought of as "awful" in that observation – but rather, it is viewed through a looking glass and judged to be "simply marvelous" (297).

Mansfield creates a story in "The Garden-Party" that revolves around the violent death of someone, while also managing to clear all visible signs of injury from the corpse. In the wake of The Great War, an image on a desirable corpse might have come across as either escapism — but there are more so and quite bold displays of creative thinking. Yet for those who wish to read these answers on a deeper level, the carter can be an enlightening glimpse into how society regenerates after such a conflict: war against not just persona but also group.

## 2. Literature Review

"The Garden Party" is a collection of short stories that Katherine Mansfield wrote, and was first published in 1922. The story revolves around various themes, such as life, death, marriage, regret, duty, and gender. She supplies her readers with realistic photographs of life, which often seems to be unreal or dream-like. It looks simple at first glance, but it is full of symbolism and imagery. Reading the collection is rewarding because it has much to offer beneath its mundane surface. In "The Garden Party," Mrs. Sheridan decides to send a basket of leftovers from the family party to a bereaved family and chooses Laura as her deliverer. Laura is shocked by what she thinks her mother has done. On her way to the house, the surroundings take on symbolic meaning. She walks out of her family's garden gates along a bright white road, crosses a very wide road and enters a "smoky and dark" lane.

As Laura walks towards the house of the grieving family, she sees "a dark knot of people." Inside, she found the dead man "wonderful and beautiful." Later, when her brother asks about her visit, she responds, "It was simply marvelous," but she is unable to complete her sentence "Isn't life." Here, Mansfield effectively throws into the reader's face the stunning difference between the prosperity of the Sheridan family and the poverty-stricken environment around their estate. The garden party itself serves as a symbolic obstruction that proves the distance between the class of wealth and the one not so blessed. Critics can further elaborate on how Mansfield expresses this issue of the callousness and unworldliness of the aristocracy in regard to social inequalities.

### 1.1 Studies on Themes and Character, Laura

The conflict that exists in Katherine Mansfield's short story "The Garden Party" has also caused much controversy, as Warren S. Walker identifies two opposing forces: the protagonist's fear of death and her social attitude versus her mother's. According to Walker, the first conflict is resolved, but the second remains unresolved. Both of the criticisms below consider the social issue as a secondary subsidiary to a greater conflict, and the dispute is resolved. The approaches, however, are different, as Mr. Taylor's criticism, "A Dream-Awakening," deals with the larger impacts produced by the realistic veneer of the novel. The novel here is still a Laura novel; the garden party is significant only in terms of her. Laura is the central character, narrator, and reflector in the story. Mansfield constantly goes in and out of her mind, portraying the external objective world as it appears in Laura's private subjective world. Laura, designated as a girl child, has been subjected to a process aimed at transforming her into an "ideal woman"-a perfect wife, mother, and housekeeper.

### 1.2 Studies on Laura as a symbol of Victorian Protagonist

Laura shows a very explicit kind of social inequality and its very unfair nature. She is also keenly aware of the callousness of the upper class and how they do not care about the lives of the working class. Her attempt to stop the party and her indignance against Jose's flippancy toward the death of the working man highlights her solidarity with the working class and her denial of class lines. It just seems like an expression of the highly deep-rooted social class differences and the very conventional milieu in which Laura lives. As she traverses all those complexities presented through social classes of her existence, Laura fails to find a female figure with which she identifies and can justify her sentiments toward fellow people of the lesser class. Victorian society generally required women to gain expertise in "ordering servants [...], nursing children, hosting parties, arranging flowers, and adorning oneself with hats," combined with a minimum of education in music,

literature, and languages to achieve the status of feminine culture (Séllei, 1996, p. 54). It means that Laura, as assigned as a girl, had to undergo a transformation process into an "ideal woman" - "the perfect wife, perfect mother, and perfect housekeeper" (Séllei, 1996, p. 54). Mrs. Sheridan is the antagonist to Laura in the story. She attends to all the details of the garden party, the letters sent as invitations, decorations, and culinary treats that would be prepared for the dinner. She is tirelessly dedicated to maintaining the façade of respectability and correctness about herself, as exemplified by her determination to hold the party despite a death in their backyard. Mrs. Sheridan also continues to insist on her class position by keeping shut of her daughter's qualms about the party and her dead neighbors in the same way her sister Jose kept quiet about the dead homeless man, highlighting the worth of their holding a garden party-a symbol of her class and status.

### **1.3 Education of protagonist, Laura with reference to Victorian period**

Society was even more rigid in its Victorian period, 1837 to 1901. Traditionally, women were supposed to be viewed as guardians of the home. And so, their education was tailored toward this dimension of life. Always presumed to have wives and mothers as foremost occupations, education was aimed at making them ready for these two roles. The high social awareness and sensitivity of Laura's character in "The Garden Party" portray her privilege and schooling. Her awakening to class differences and the mores of society, via the tragic accident in her neighborhood, gives another layer to her social education. Laura would probably have been educated in depth as part of the wealthy Victorian Sheridan family, and yet to realize at the same time that intellectual and professional opportunities were restricted only to those available to men. The text often subtly brings out the societal expectations structuring Laura's education, and thereby reveals how lack of similar opportunities defined and articulated during the Victorian era limited women's pursuits. Laura, growing into a woman shaped by collective societal forces, is at risk of becoming an emasculated subjectivity resonating with the existing social views and mores. Her possible way of life copies her mother's unwittingly because she inadvertently reinforces patriarchal norms regardless of whether men or women consciously recognize or rationalize them. Though "The Garden Party" is not explicitly concerned with Laura's formal education, it silences all the restrictions and expectations characterizing women's lives during the Victorian age.

### **1.4 Decisive roles played by Laura for gaining challenges as well as knowledge**

Since the beginning, Laura has kept safe in the luxurious mansion of her family. The plot unfolds as the events going on in the exterior pose challenges to the sheltered life of Laura. Her relation with the external world profoundly influences her acquisition of knowledge and challenges her perception of life.

1. **The Tragic News:** It is the news of a worker's death on the laborer's street where Laura lives that opens the door for Laura to step out into contact with the outside world. Tragedy explodes this idyllic preparation for the garden party and throws Laura out of her sheltered existence, forcing her to face the cruel realities of life in all its grimness and horror.
2. **The Bereaved Family:** Laura decides to go and see the man's family. A direct exposure to the working-class world is captured by Laura's decision to visit the family of a man who had recently died. Exposure to poverty and bereavement disposes her to question class differences and many of the social conventions that had formed her worldview.
3. **Laura's Awakening Empathy:** The agonized family's experience turns out to be a time of transformation of Laura. She realizes how a whole lot of human tragedy can affect an individual, and real catastrophe diminishes the importance of her outrageous garden party. This event introduces the passage of moment of empathy or self-awareness in the life of Laura that opens new light into her life about the world.
4. **Transformation and Empowerment:** In transforming the conflict of feelings that she has for the garden party, the process unfolds, revealing to Laura that in resolving between cancelling it after Mr. Scott's death and societal expectations is not really that easy. Ultimately, she becomes in charge. Her decision of going ahead with the party relates to her attaining empowerment and control over things.
5. **Sensibility of Injustice:** Laura's quest for knowledge leads her further to sensibility about injustice. The sheer contrast between her garden party and the poor Scottish cottage, where she cannot help but realize the injustice of social structures, is slim. This is therefore the impetus for her growth and maturation into the realization of the complexity of the world.

Here, the censored material motivates Laura to begin to romanticize the workmen, whom she finds charming, wishing they could be her friends in lieu of the "silly boys" (p. 125) at the dancing school, and she even apologizes to a pale workman for the luxury and excess of the party (Nathan, 1988).

### **Laura, mingling to different cast and values**

The excerpt in question centrally engages with a pivotal juncture in "The Garden Party" by Laura and delves into the intricate social intricacies and conflicts encountered by the principal character, Laura, within the framework of her family's cultural and societal milieu. In the midst of hectic preparations for the party, where no doubt every minute detail in this strictly ordered household was perfect in the eyes of the Sheridans, comes news of a workman's death, a neighbor who lives just below the hill and is the father of five children, who has been killed in an accident. It is that news of death, which initiating action or event causing tension for this story puts Laura into direct conflict with others and also with herself. Shocked to hear that the event was fatal and not to be anticipated, the heroine tries to cancel the party as a token of respect for the dead man. But preventing a party is beyond Mrs. Sheridan's cultural reach, composed of the ideology and practice of genteel bourgeoisie to which she has full participatory access. Laura is consequently opposed to Mrs. Sheridan's chilly words: "You are being absurd, Laura [...]. People like that don't expect sacrifices from us. And it's not very sympathetic to spoil everyone's enjoyment as you're doing now" (pp. 132-133). One cannot fail to notice the existence of a number of obvious truths in this socialist or language characteristic of Mrs. Sheridan's own class and telling of its values. To mention a few, death cannot be overcome by calling off a party; pleasure needs to be safeguarded because it is always in short supply; the working class who, depending upon their prudence, have acquired the habit of solving their own issues do not expect anything; and, foremost, Laura does not know what she is doing (Fallbrook, 1986). But even so, the closer inspection of these lines by Mrs. Sheridan, supposedly for her little daughter's good, reveals a testament to how inadequate or wrong the education given to the daughters of Victorian upper-class families can prove to be. Mrs. Sheridan focuses only on her own social environment, her first and sole concern, and is likely to expect Laura to do the same, since Mrs. Sheridan is probably an extreme example of an "as if" personality, a term coined by psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch to describe patients suffering from a psychopath.

Women, born in higher realms of consciousness treasure independence and compete to command lives, even at the cost of deviating from societal norms of family expectations as well. This theme is reflected in Mansfield's New Zealand short stories, especially in "The Garden party," whereby the parent child relationships neither provide space for neither mutual communication nor mutual understanding, thus conversation forms an interruption (Dickson, 1998). This response by Mrs. Sheridan when her daughter is injured shows that she was careless about Laura's mental condition. She is unable to understand how serious the whole situation was. Instead of this, she is impressed by the way Laura looks now and tries to move forward by talking to her about this issue. She puts a hat on her daughter's head, saying "I have never seen you look such a picture. Look at yourself!" (p.132). These words expose the role that Mrs. Sheridan plays in holding on to patriarchal norms, trying to silence Laura's voice.

Laura who, in contrast, experiences this psychoanalysis at a later stage of her life, finds no trace of conflict with her "Ideal-I," and identifies with it so smoothly because, owing to Winnicott's argument pointed out earlier, she perceives something of her mother at that image. The hat, through which Mrs. Sheridan haunts Laura and is evoked in Laura's mind twice in that short quote, makes Laura recognize Mrs. Sheridan in her "own" reflection, (mis)take her for her "Ideal-I," and fashion an identity for herself modeled on her mother's. However, since absolute identification also requires identification with the "values" dear to Mrs. Sheridan such as lack of feeling, Laura between the demands of her true self and fictive identity formed in interaction with the image in the mirror, cannot have firm resolution. A sister interpretation in connection with this issue is, however that Laura's indecisiveness may be traced to duality in her personality as that comes out through her mirror relationship. The mirror, a frequently used symbol in Mansfield's works and a tool of psychological revelation is an image with a long literary life, which copies human likeness (Harmat, 1989, pp. 117-118). The mirror in Mansfield's stories is either repellent or attractive. Some characters do not want to go near the mirror, as it appears repellent, and can represent the desire to flee from the subconscious self and from this line of tremendous fear-knowledge from the way one knows oneself. For others, a glass is indeed a mirror that reveals the counterpoint to the conscious and subconscious psychological life. In Laura's case, her black hat symbolizes death; it also expresses the life of Sheridans that is privileged, artificial values, snobbery, vanity,

and shallowness as Nathan (1988) has already pointed out. It is the combination of all of them that will give an insight into Laura's psychology. This confrontation by the reflected image of her face under the decorative hat, replete with all its implications, leaves Laura in limbo regarding what to desire: death-the severest reality of life-or the superfluities, which as such and apart from unpretentious gaiety and bonhomie, is nothing more than a game of prettifying that social circle provides her. This state of confusion indicates the two different selves within Laura-or at least, the contemporaneity of two selves. Laura's successful performance at the party, where she played the role of a bourgeois girl with a hat reinforcing her social identity. Laura, however, still totally attached to the enjoyment of the party and flaunting the pretty hat, proceeds with a new journey. As she sets off, she is immediately thrown into new challenges, particularly as it moved from bright light to dusk, thereby representing her transition from life to death. It is Laura, however, who steps out of the comforting familiarity by shutting the garden gate behind her and crossing onto strange ground: a strange territory signaled by the unannounced arrival of a large dog. While the text under revision had all citations and references, these have been omitted to give a formal tone in the paraphrased version. However, the text has been modified to be in formal style but employed strictly American English spellings, diction, and expressions.

The narrative voice of Laura attributes to the territory into which she is about to venture as "the greatest possible eyesore" (p. 131), a characterization that Cooke (2008) opines may just be a paraphrased version of Laura's sister José utterance, basing her knowledge on what the latter gets from Mrs. Sheridan, who wields influence over both. Alternatively, Laura portrays the territory as "disgusting and sordid" (p. 131), which she thinks of while walking along the lane. Whatever the description, the territory is a world of fears cut in half by the shadows. As if to prove the reputation, a dog emerges like the Cerberus in charge of Hades. Laura continues her downward journey to the cottages. She is walking through the scene that gradually becomes "a descent into the netherworld" (Durix 1989, p. 183). When Laura walks across a broad road, she sees that the brightness and gaiety of the afternoon turn into smoke and darkness and glittering dresses give way to a shawl and a tweed cap. The low hum supplants the voices and tinkling spoons, and Laura's dress, which had been admired over the broad road, unsuits the new surroundings. The inmates of the cottage drive her on, and she is irresistibly drawn along. In her unwitting sojourn, either out of curiosity or through a steadfast sense of duty, she becomes caught between two contrasting worlds-the sumptuous celebrations of the wealthy and the solemnity of death (Fallbrook, 1986, p. 122). When Laura enters the cottage for the first time in her life, she is confronted by death rituals, and this all reaches its climax as she looks upon the face of death itself. The widow of the dead man, full of tears and devastation, sits by the fire, her lips swollen; her speechless lips (p.137). Laura, standing before the dead body, has this time experienced a frozen moment for herself. Thus she is fascinated by the body, as it is "wonderful" it seems (p.137). That does not mean that Laura is showing morbid interest.

Instead it helps Laura to identify itself simultaneously at a stationary existence. This critical moment allows Laura to perceive death differently- that is, not as something one capitulates to, but something that must be thought of as the great leveler of humankind. On the other hand, this "terrible" apparition takes a form where, in the face of this death, Laura would refer to him as a "marvel" (p.137).

The choice of the word "marvel" continues to reveal that although a stark reminder of death stand before the eyes of the widow, yet the old man alone is fully the incarnation of death because death cuts across the class and moves into a classless society. (notes Magdalene, 1971). At this point of the story, Laura can think of the body paradoxically by reanimating or turning on it in her thoughts, imagining it as dreaming and alive but, at the same time, doubling the process of calming or reification effect on the already motionless object. She examines every feature of the "sleeping face" (p. 137) of the dead man, who lies "blind under closed eyelids" (p. 137) and cannot see her, thereby manifesting as a prime example of the female gaze in slow motion. More important, where the weeping woman is called "terrible"-a word whose meaning is ambiguous and should not be read at face value-Laura views without protest the body that is a "wonder" (p. 137). This odd usage of vocabulary might be as there, though the reminders of death are visible in the congested face of the widow and the malady she suffers from, these cannot represent the actual face of death but can only mimic it. The man, however, is stone dead and has accomplished a "status passage" through death, overcoming not only the issues of the social division but also the other issues related to it. He lives henceforth in a classless world to which all will come, Magdalene, 1971 and to death, the great leveler, death can be in itself beautiful The point where Laura reaches acceptance with reality, not merely accepting but rather being able to see from a wider

perspective that of her society and the human condition as a whole. By contrast, Laura really appears to have come out of her shell, at least outdoing Mrs. Sheridan who is empty emotionally and intellectually, such as not being able to confront the fact of one's ultimate mortality awaiting all mortals, the Sheridans among them; but for Laura, before she can eventually end up that way, she has to contend with what her hat is in store for her. She has shame and apologizes for the headgear that appears to render her inappropriate and still stands before the corpse in the dreary cottage that is incompatible with any form of life. In this scene, the hat is symbolic with meanings that are conflicting. The cold and dark background, as it was mentioned earlier, may indicate death; on the other hand, the warm golden color of the daisies may be an indication of life. Moreover, if the black background has this intention of making clear everything written or placed on it, by being brighter than usual, then in this duality of meanings imaged by the hat symbol, life is preferred to death. So it might not be appropriate for Laura to wear the hat when the dead people are before her as shown when she says, "Forgive my hat" (p. 138). However, despite the good intentions she exhibits, these words inadvertently lead to a shift from the sublime to the ridiculous. Laura's unsuitable remarks, as Daly asserts that these are disrespectfully related to others' sorrow and comic, are not expected in this place due to somber circumstances right now. Yet her action can be justified. She is overdressed, which makes her feel most stressed. Therefore, she cannot pay attention because she feels two events at the same time: her first death experience and her first adult party. Finally, the reason that makes her act in a certain way is because she tries to link the two worlds-the world of the rich with the world of the poor. It is in the slum, after the party, that Laura goes, and there is where she, the intermediary between two worlds, gathers insight into hardships within the slums. This matures her attitude towards relationships and one finds her taking Laurie's arm when they return home and pressing close to him. Her new found knowledge of the world outside the trivialities of society has equipped her with an idea of time and duration. (Durix, 1989, p. 184) Whether Laura can ever go back to her life unconscious of death and all that comes with it is highly arguable. She may have started so well, but as of now, it is still in question whether she has actually learnt a lesson or whether there was a genuine change that occurred in her life. The story ends in an attempt to decipher the meaning of life with her brother Laurie, but she gets to utter only the nonsensical phrase "Isn't life?" twice to say nothing intelligible.

### Conclusion:

In conclusion, Laura's narrative serves as a poignant commentary on the limitations of Victorian education and the existential uncertainties that accompany personal growth and self-awareness. Despite her brief moments of enlightenment, Laura ultimately finds herself adrift in a sea of ambiguity, grappling with the complexities of her identity and the realities of the world around her. Her fate remains unresolved, leaving the reader to ponder the enduring legacy of Victorian education and its implications for individual development and social change. Mansfield's work as discussed in Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf: A Public of Two, Angela Smith, there is no central consciousness, either of the character or of the narrator in Mansfield's story. Rather, unconscious aspects of personality seem to take the focal center, and as Meisel notes on pages 161-162. Laura's unconscious has taken her elsewhere on occasion in the past; here it has carried her away in the opposite direction, because Laura has lost her recent past and reposes in the present. And there is nothing to believe that this has been a life-changing lesson for her or that she has become the laurel tree her name implies-an ever-growing one. Therefore, there is every likelihood that Laura will forever be young, as the laurel has been in the Greek myth, Daphne's transformed body, a tree after avoiding marriage.

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