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A Short Analysis of Katherine Mansfield's 'The Garden Party'

'The Garden Party' (1920) is probably Katherine Mansfield's best-known and best-loved story. She never wrote a full-length novel, but – taking her cue from such innovators as Anton Chekhov – made the short story form her own. A brief introduction to the story's plot, themes, and language will, we hope, help to demonstrate why the story has become a classic example of modernist literature.

'The Garden Party': summary.

A few words by way of plot summary first. As its title suggests, 'The Garden Party' centres on the annual garden party held by the Sheridan family at their home, in New Zealand (the country where Mansfield had been born in 1888, though she later moved to England).

The Sheridans are well-off – upper-middle-class we might say – as is suggested by the very idea of the 'garden party' itself. One of the Sheridan children, Laura – a young woman on the cusp of adulthood – is looking forward to the party and is keen to become involved in the preparations.

However, while the Sheridans are preparing for their party, news arrives that a working-class man who lives in the poorer part of the village has been tragically killed when his horse reared up and threw him from his cart.

Laura, filled with sympathy for the dead man and his family, pleads with her mother and siblings to cancel their garden party in light of the tragedy. How can they hold a garden party, with music and guests and laughter, when a family nearby are in mourning for the death of their husband and

father?

Laura finds that the rest of her family are not so sympathetic: they assume the man was drunk (revealing their class prejudice) and that that type of person doesn't expect sacrifices from the likes of them. (As the narrator comments, ventriloquising Laura's thoughts, these 'absurd class distinctions' have a lot to answer for.)

Laura gives up trying to persuade her family to cancel the party, and retires to her bedroom to get ready before the guests arrive. Here she catches sight of herself in her mirror, all dressed up and wearing an elegant and fashionable black hat with a decorative gold pin, and decides that maybe, maybe her mother was right and it would be silly and wrong to cancel the party. She decides to go ahead and attend the party, and return to thinking about the recent tragedy afterwards.

The garden party itself is treated in the space of a few short paragraphs. After the guests have left, Mrs Sheridan, Laura's mother, suggests that her daughter take the leftover food from the party round to the family of the man who died. Laura does so, and finds the poor family ('poor' is a loaded word here) in mourning, and the dead man laid out in one of the rooms.

She is encouraged to go in and see him (a bit weird, that), and when she does she is overcome with an odd feeling – not of sadness, or of despair, but of ... happiness. Joy. Release. Contentment. She leaves the house, finding that her brother Laurie has come to look for her.

As they walk back home together, Laura tries to put into words how she feels. Her experience at the house of the dead man was 'marvellous'. She cries, but whether they are tears of joy or sadness remains unstated. The story ends with Laura trying to convey to her brother how she feels about life, but finds she cannot think of the words.

'The Garden Party': analysis.

A simple yet complex story, this. As that summary suggests, the plot is straightforward, but the meaning – as with much modernist literature – remains elusive and open to question.

Why does Laura change her mind about the party when she spies herself in the mirror, dressed up in her party outfit and her nice new hat? Such a moment is what James Joyce, another modernist writer, called the 'epiphany' – an almost spiritual moment of consciousness, a little revelation in a character's life that alters their perception of the world and their self-knowledge. (Yet another modernist writer, Virginia Woolf, called such experiences 'moments of being'.)

Laura seems to gain an awareness of herself in the world at this moment, to see herself as others see her, and to desire, almost for the first time, to be admired, talked about, and desired by other people at the party.

This moment might be compared with a similar moment in James Joyce's famous modernist story, 'The Dead', in which the solipsistic Gabriel Conroy catches sight of himself in the mirror and begins to realise how he appears to those around him. From this, later revelations flow – such as the realisation that he barely knows his own wife.

But where Gabriel Conroy's epiphany takes him from selfishness to a more generous empathy with others, Laura's epiphany seems to work almost in reverse, making her realise that she doesn't have to worry about what others think about her and her family so much, and that she – Laura Sheridan – is a person who has a right to live, to feel things, to enjoy herself, to be admired for her beauty.

Such a moment might also be compared with the closing lines of the story, when Laura has the surprising response to the sight of the dead man: why does she feel almost elated, almost ecstatically happy, by the experience of coming face-to-face with death? There are no simple answers to this, but one way to suggest persuasive solutions to this is to look at how such a moment interacts with earlier moments in the story.

Laura is a young woman who is earlier described as 'the artistic one' of the family, who enjoys the little freedoms she can find in life – such as eating outdoors – and thus has a longing to be free. At the same time, she is aware that once people enter adulthood their lives tend to harden into routine, their personalities concretising into particular roles: wife, mother, cook, maid, and so on. Her mother exemplifies this, with the way she makes snap decisions and bosses around the servants. Death, the body of the dead man seems to promise, will provide release and freedom from the constrictions of adult life.

But there are other ways of responding to such a moment. The death of the man is also a very real, visceral experience: it takes place 'out there', in the real world, rather than in the sheltered world the Sheridans inhabit, and in which Laura has been brought up. Ironically, confronting death has given Laura an awareness of the realness of life: what it is really like out there beyond the somewhat limited confines of her house and garden.

Here the symbolism of the garden takes on a new meaning: like the paradise that was the Garden of Eden, the sheltered world of the Sheridan household is blown open when Laura comes into the possession of forbidden knowledge: knowledge of death, of the realities of life.

But unlike the biblical narrative which treats this as a bad thing, Mansfield's story ends on a more ambivalent note, suggesting that coming into such knowledge may be liberating. It is perhaps significant, as one final word of analysis, to point out that the story was written just after the First World War – an event that had changed the way of life for people living in such country houses. Never such innocence again, as Philip Larkin put it.

The tragic death of an ordinary man cut off in his prime of life will also form the backdrop to the ending of Virginia Woolf's great modernist novel, *Mrs Dalloway*, when war veteran Septimus Smith, suffering from shell-shock and post-traumatic stress disorder, will choose to end his life rather than go on living with the demons and nightmares that plague him.

News of Smith's death – his name pointing up his ordinariness – reaches the title character at her party, and Clarissa Dalloway's response to the

young man's death is similarly complex. What Mansfield does only very obliquely, Woolf makes explicit – war has changed our very attitudes to death. To borrow from another poet, Dylan Thomas, after the first death, there is no other.

The author of this article, Dr Oliver Tearle, is a literary critic and lecturer in English at Loughborough University. He is the author of, among others, *The Secret Library: A Book-Lovers' Journey Through Curiosities of History and The Great War, The Waste Land and the Modernist Long Poem*.

Image (top): Katherine Mansfield, author unknown, Wikimedia Commons. Image (bottom): A garden party given by Governor Rawson for the Officers of the American Fleet at Cranbrook, Sydney, 1908; author unknown; Wikimedia Commons.

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