

## **Laura's Lessons in Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party"**

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### **Abstract**

*In her short story "The Garden Party," Katherine Mansfield concentrates on the conventional but false education given to an upper-class girl child named Laura in order to explore, or rather refute, the Victorian socio-moral values which restrained women by means of influencing their way of looking at life. The education in question that by design avoids initiating Laura to the realities of life, such as poverty and death presented as experiences lived by people outside Laura's privileged social class, leaves her unprepared to face these facts, rendering her confused and inconsistent.*

**Key Words:** Katherine Mansfield, "The Garden Party," Victorian values, a girl child's education, class, poverty, death.

### **1. Introduction**

Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923) may have defined the short story she penned as merely "a cry" against corruption (qtd. in Wattie, 1989, p. 149), but "The Garden Party" (1922) is in truth a pointed social satire, or, if the term is appropriate, a "short story *à thèse*" designed to refute the Victorian socio-moral values which figured prominently in Britain for the most part of the nineteenth century and managed to maintain their validity during the early twentieth century. It does so through an emphasis on an upper-class girl child's education. The short story has so many things to say about this education that, although heretofore chosen as the subject of an extensive body of scholarly publications, it still seems to be open to further exploration. On these grounds, this article too undertakes to interpret "The Garden Party" and approaches its subject from a psychosocial perspective, dealing with various elements of conventional Victorian education, together with their adverse effects on the protagonist's psychology. The position set forth here is that out of touch with reality, or to be more precise, the tragedy endured by those who do not belong to the privileged upper class, the education in question is simply false, as a result of which the protagonist deprived of such knowledge cannot help feeling estranged from her own social circle as well as unable to integrate with others outside that circle when confronted with poverty and death, the harsh facts of life. The sole consequence of the girl's education is, apparently, to make her lose the sense of security and feeling of certainty as to the soundness of the present socio-moral system, in addition to her identity and place in society, condemning her to live in an unstable world, in an unstable state of mind.

### **2. The Protagonist's Position in "The Garden Party"**

It all begins in an optimistic mood, though, with a scene of conspicuous consumption abundant with "good things to eat, lovely things to wear, wonderful expensive flowers to enjoy" (Fullbrook, 1986, p. 118) while the affluent Sheridans are making the final the preparations for a garden party to be thrown that afternoon in their beautiful house imposingly situated on a hill. Notwithstanding, one should be careful not be misled by this grand opening and the deceptive title. The work of fiction here under consideration concentrates on, and only on, Laura, one of the four offspring of the Sheridan family, and as with all the other occurrences constituting the action, the garden party assumes significance only in relation to Laura. Laura is the overriding presence in "The Garden Party." She features as the central character, the narrator,<sup>1</sup> and the reflector, namely the central consciousness in it, as Mansfield constantly "goes in and out of her [character's mind]" (McRae, 2000, p. viii) and portrays the external objective world the way it appears in Laura's very private, subjective world.

### **3. Victorian Women's Education with Reference to the Protagonist**

To enter the consciousness of her subject enables the writer to mirror, before anything else, the great amount of importance Laura attaches to the preparations for the party.

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<sup>1</sup> The style the narrator uses to unfold the events is *free indirect speech* which Almén (2003) defines as "a hybrid method" of representation that brings together "elements of scene and summary" (p. 9); "summary," as argued by Gérard Genette, being the account given in the narrator's own words without quotations, and "scene," the direct presentation by the narrator of the characters' words and actions as mainly seen in drama (Almén, 2003, p. 8).

The said preparations, in Magalaner's (1971) phrase, Laura's "first grown-up affair" (p. 111), matter incredibly seeing that they create the "opportunity" for her to translate the theoretical education she has been given by her elders into action. Victorian women, as a general rule, had to learn and practice "to give orders to servants [. . .]; to be excellent at nurturing children and at social arts like arranging flowers, giving parties, and choosing hats, and were supposed to go through a *little* education: music, literature and languages – just to make them accomplished ladies" (Séllei, 1996, p. 54). Accordingly, Laura, designated as a *girl* child, the signifier having an ideologically charged meaning, has been subjected to a process the objective of which is to change her into a "'perfect wife, perfect mother and perfect housekeeper' – the three requirements to make an ideal woman" (Séllei, 1996, p. 54).

To express the same thing differently, she has been in the process of forming a self, or what Burgan (1994) calls "a usable identity" (p. 34), and little by little that self has been moulded into the socially prescribed shape. This type of education, bolstering the patriarchal ideological system outright, has a long history. In all probability, her mother went through the same stages which conditioned her to think like men, identify with their world view, not only accept but also internalize their values, and buttress the system that legitimates the interests of the dominant group. Now it is Laura's turn to grow into an emasculated woman whose subjectivity, shaped by the forces in society, is a collective phenomenon instead of being specific to herself. She must, in the mind of those driven by the same social outlook and customs, follow in her mother's footsteps which ultimately has the effect of protecting patriarchy, whether everyone realizes it or not.

#### **4. The Mother-daughter Relationship Reinforcing Victorian Education**

Perhaps contrary to expectation, the tenets of the aforementioned education, since facilitated by a psychological factor that contributes to one's construction of a self-image, may not always be too difficult to abide by. The daughter may even volunteer to adhere to the confines of bourgeois traditions and conformity owing to her natural or innate inclination to be a copy of her mother, which can be accounted for with reference to "the mirror stage in identity formation [that] designates the mother's face as the child's first reflection" (Burgan, 1994, p. 34). "When the average girl studies her face in the mirror," writes D.W. Winnicott, "she is reassuring herself that the mother-image is there and that the mother can see her and that the other is *en rapport* with her" (qtd. in Burgan, 1994, p. 34). Just to look like her mother, the daughter resorts to role-playing, a theme which, according to Smith (2000), occurs over and over again in Mansfield's writings. At the beginning of "The Garden Party," Laura essays to imitate her role model, or, to use the term in social psychology, her "significant other," who is a woman conceded a position in the household by the one/s in real control of the affairs, a strategy to integrate an oppositional or potentially oppositional individual into the system so that she would raise no objection to the preservation of the status quo. Laura makes an attempt to arrange things by giving a few directions to the people around whom she felt she could reasonably assume would love obeying.

Nevertheless, while trying to exercise the restricted authority descending from her mother, she loses face. Her first words to a group of workmen commissioned to put up a marquee in the garden are "Good morning" (p. 124), but this simple greeting, as she mimics "her mother's voice" (p. 124), sounds "so fearfully affected that she [is] ashamed" (p. 124). Why exactly this emotion overcomes her is an explicit ellipsis omitting a detail in the narrative series, and denied that piece of information known to no one other than the narrator, the reader is justified to hold the opinion that she must be ashamed at sounding unconvincing. Much the same as many of Mansfield's other female characters who are, in Cooke's (2008) point of view, nothing but ventriloquists articulating "the restrictive ideological mores of their social climate or the authority figures in their lives" (p. 85), Laura, in this scene, speaks with someone else's voice. However, her talents in ventriloquism, as she herself too recognizes on the instant, have distinct limits. What is worse, even if she had been a talented "ventriloquist," nobody would have cared about her anyway. The ironic truth is that while assigned to control the affair, Laura is not needed there. The workmen already know where to erect the marquee, namely "somewhere where it'll give you a bang slap in the eye" (p. 124), and therefore neither pay attention to her suggestions nor treat her as a matron (Fullbrook, 1986). Giving directions to the wrong people in the wrong way, Laura talks as if in the absence of a human target although her enunciation actually has an addressee. Reduced to an idle onlooker, she realizes that her "power" over servants in the home is superfluous, or rather a sham, which leaves her feeling slighted and wounded.

#### **5. The Protagonist's Contact with the Outside World Leading to Knowledge**

##### **5.1 Self-knowledge**

On the other hand, no matter how discouraging it may look at first sight, this experience paves the way for Laura to gain new insights into people low on the social scale and to get in touch with her true self, her unlearned essence which is not a product of society. Her “effort to use the ‘proper’ voice in talking to the workmen [, in reality,] goes against something that she knows internally is right” (Kobler, 1990, p. 80). One of the workmen, with his “easy” (p. 124) and “friendly” (p. 124) smile, helps Laura discover her “natural self” (Kobler, 1990, p. 80) that must have been until then repressed or censored, aware or unaware, by her education. The congeniality she sees in the workmen, also reflected through the language they use – as underlined by Nathan (1988), they democratically call each other “matey” (p. 42) – pushes the thus-far hidden self to the surface. The censored material, which has always been there and not without effect on Laura’s consciousness, here motivates her 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).

## **5.2 Knowledge of Social Classes**

As soon as she opens up to the external world, Laura puts aside the *a priori* knowledge she acquired on class distinctions, stops looking around from a perspective quite likely not her own, and tries to form and put into practice her own set of social values, though at significant cost to her sense of certainty and belonging. Being a sensitive girl still in her formative years, her feelings fluctuate; so does the value she assigns to the external world and objects. For one thing, whereas early in the day she considers it necessary to hide the piece of bread and butter she takes to the lawn “in a moment of reckless joy at the beauty, excitement, and promise of the day [. . .] fearing to be thought childish” (Daly, 1994, p. 91), she now sees the very same bread and butter in her hand in a different light, taking “a big bite” (p. 125) of it in front of the workmen as a rebellious manifestation that she “despise[s] stupid conventions” (p. 125). Not only that, soon thereafter she embarks on a quest for a new role imagining herself as a “work-girl” (p. 125) and builds up fanciful hopes of a better world free of “absurd class distinctions” (p. 125). To be more accurate, thanks to an increasing fellow-feeling, based more on direct first-hand observation than reciprocal action, she becomes dejected, the confirmation of which may be found in Freud’s (1992) claim that “a happy person never fantasies [. . .]. The motive forces of fantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single fantasy is the fulfilment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality” (p. 38). She yearns to bridge the divide between these subordinates and herself, and dreaming, makes an effort to somewhat change the established fact that theirs is a class-conscious society.

## **6. The Protagonist in a Bind between Different Social Classes and Sets of Values**

Whether she bridges the said divide at this point in the story remains open to question. That later on in the course of the action she succeeds in getting much closer to the people she sympathizes with is, then again, crystal clear. During the hectic preparations for the party, every single detail of which no doubt delights the Sheridans, the news reaches them that a workman, a nearby resident dwelling just below the hill and the father of five children, has been killed in an accident. This news of death is the initiating action or the event that triggers tension in “The Garden Party,” and it puts Laura in a state of conflict with others as well as with herself. Hearing about the fatal event she could not anticipate, the startled protagonist tries to cancel the party as a sign of respect for the dead man, but to stop a party is outside Mrs. Sheridan’s cultural repertoire, made up of the ideology and practices of genteel bourgeoisie to which she has full participatory access. Laura is hence countered by Mrs. Sheridan’s cold 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 deny the existence of several axiomatic truths in this sociolect or language peculiar to Mrs. Sheridan’s own social class and telling of its values. To be more specific, death cannot be conquered by cancelling a party; pleasure deserves protection for it is rarely found; the workers who are, as the case may be, accustomed to sorting out their problems on their own have no expectations; and above all, Laura does not know what she is doing (Fullbrook, 1986). But even so, on closer inspection, what Mrs. Sheridan states in these lines, supposedly for Laura’s own good, turns out to be a testimony to how inadequate or incorrect the education given to the daughters of Victorian upper-class families can be. Mrs. Sheridan concentrates exclusively on her own social circle, her first and only priority, expecting Laura to do the same, for Mrs. Sheridan is most probably an extreme case of an “as if” personality, a term coined by psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch to denote patients suffering from a psychological pathology. People like Mrs. Sheridan in real life, as mentioned in Roazen (1983), lack a character of their own and imitate others since they cannot subsist on their shadow personalities.

They need to belong to a social group, the importance of which, one can assume, urges them to seek intense relationships. They show love and understanding to those around; nonetheless, there is still one thing missing: while giving the impression that their emotional life is rich, these people are in essence devoid of “true warmth or inner feeling,” the most outstanding symptom by which this disease hard to diagnose is identified (Roazen, 1983, p. 687). Mrs. Sheridan, typical of Mansfield’s characters who “launch themselves into the highest enthusiasms, with wild superlatives, enthusiastically enjoying life [. . .]” (McRae, 2000, p. viii) with their peers, therefore sounds and is starkly uninterested when it comes to sharing miseries. Yet Laura is different. In contrast to Mrs. Sheridan seeming to be without a sense of self beneath the socio-moral structure she inhabits, Laura seems to have one but to be unaware of it until the significant local event awakens it. The news of death fills her heart with emptiness and despair. Actually, as Wagenknecht (1996) states, “it is only Laura who perceives the heartlessness of going on with the plans for the party after the workman has been killed” (p. 26), and under these circumstances, a disruption between the two generations of women becomes inevitable.

Perhaps one can, as Paul (1999) does, compare Laura’s split with her mother to the discussion Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), puts forth addressing “the movement from imperialism to an awareness of imperialism (and resistance to it)” (p. 61). Paul (1999) contends that a similar change is observable in the lives of the women who move from “the idea of reproductive inevitability to the idea of reproductive choice” (p. 61). Women as such attain a deeper level of consciousness or social awareness, value the idea of choice, and struggle to take control of their lives, regardless of the fact that this state of mind, alongside way of conduct, sets them apart from the substantial majority of the rest of society including their very family. Perhaps that is why in Mansfield’s New Zealand short stories like “The Garden Party,”

[a]lthough the characters are presented in the setting of family relationships, the [. . .] parent-child relationships provide little opportunity for communication and understanding. In fact, communication or conversation between characters is in the nature of an intrusion or interruption. (Dickson, 1998, p. 11)

Mrs. Sheridan, whose reply is a clear example that she has a blind spot about Laura’s emotional state, does not forgo disturbing her daughter as her ensuing behavior illustrates. Once she learns that the location of the accident was not their garden, she no longer takes the state of affairs seriously (Dickson, 1998). In an attempt to trivialize the gravity of the event and divert Laura’s attention from it, she “pop[s]” (p. 132) an elegant hat on Laura’s head, at the same time holding up a hand-mirror in front of her face, and says: “I have never seen you look such a picture. Look at yourself!” (p. 132). These are indeed highly revealing words; they betray the fact that Mrs. Sheridan as a woman, dispossessed of the right to express herself in Victorian society, is in the service of patriarchy and, consequently, trying to mute, or at least partially silence her daughter. And silence follows, though in all likelihood not the kind of silence Mrs. Sheridan had in mind or strove for. Laura no longer harps on the issue, but on the other hand, she does not seem to be willing to consort with her mother, either. She simply quits the room in order to seek comfort in her private inner world, leaving Mrs. Sheridan there with the mirror.

Laura thus escapes a mirror, but her encounter with yet another one, as a critical test, discloses whether her feelings are permanent or transitory, if not genuine or false. Shortly after she enters the supposedly safe confines of her own room, she looks into the mirror there by accident and catches sight of a “charming girl” (p. 133) “in her black hat trimmed with gold daisies and a long black velvet ribbon” (p. 133). And as her stream of consciousness – “Never had she dreamed she could look like that. Is mother right? she thought. And now she hoped that her mother was right” (p. 133) – evidences, Laura is enchanted by her own reflection, her face framed by the lovely hat. So much so that she all of a sudden remembers her own community and her place in it, the unease bothering her for some time being relieved (Durix, 1989). She still does remember the dead man, but only in a nebulous manner. Now “it all seem[s] blurred, unreal, like a picture in the newspaper” (p. 133); that is to say, it all seems distanced and distorted by Laura.

The explanation of the remarkable turnabout at issue may be sought in the psychic relationship emergent between the subject and its reflection which is reminiscent of, but not the same as, Jacques Lacan’s contention of “the mirror stage” in his *Écrits* (1966). Lacan portrays the infant in a strained relationship with its image in the mirror called the “Ideal-I” as it is, unlike its physical body the infant perceives as fragmented and weak, invulnerable and complete and therefore what the infant struggles to turn into. Laura who, by way of contrast, undergoes this psychoanalytic experience in a later phase of her life, does not show any trace of tension with her “Ideal-I” and easily identifies with it because, in compliance with Winnicott’s argument noted earlier, she sees something of her mother in that image.

The hat, via which Mrs. Sheridan haunts Laura and is conjured up in Laura's mind twice in that short quote, makes Laura recognize Mrs. Sheridan in her "own" reflection, (mis)take it for her "Ideal-I," and fabricate an identity for herself modeled on her mother's. Yet, since absolute identification also necessitates identification with the "values" dear to Mrs. Sheridan such as want of feeling, Laura, inbetween the demands of her true self and fictive identity formed in interaction with the image in the mirror, cannot have steadfast determination. Besides, a related, if dissimilar, interpretation would be that Laura's indecisive frame of mind may have its source in a duality in her character exposed through her relationship with the mirror. The mirror, one of Mansfield's most repeatedly employed means of psychological disclosure, "is a privileged image inherited from the remotest beginnings of literary evocation: a privilege obviously due to its specific power of duplicating the corporeal appearance of human beings" (Harmat, 1989, pp. 117-118). In Mansfield's works, Harmat (1989) argues, the mirror is responded to in two different ways: it evokes either repulsion or attraction.

Some characters are particular about avoiding the mirror finding it repellent, which points to their desire to escape from their subliminal or deeper selves and fear of attaining self-knowledge, while for some others, again embodying two independent or unconnected selves, the mirror serves as "a revealer of the counterpoint of a conscious and subconscious psychological life in each individual" (Harmat, 1989, p. 120). As for Laura's case, the hat is black suggesting death; however, it also bears artificial gold daisies redolent of the Sheridans' privileged life style and artificial values, in addition to, as Nathan (1988) states, their snobbery, vanity, and shallowness. This hodgepodge of different inferable meanings should be the key to an understanding of Laura's psychology because, subsequent to her confrontation with the reflected image of her face under the decorative hat replete with contrasting connotations, Laura begins to waver, probably more than she should, between thinking about death, the cruelest reality of life, and the vain luxuries the social circle she belongs to provides her with, hereby giving a clue as to her split selves or, to say the least, the synchronous existence of two different selves.

But before long, one of these selves, or her "Ideal-I," gets the upper hand, making Laura choose to marginalize somber thoughts, the exact opposite of her former attitude, and wander about cheerfully throughout the party in a state of complete indifference which is, to quote Wattie (1989), "a manifestation of corruption" (p. 152). Then again, with the interference of the other self, or her true self, she cannot help empathizing with the workmen's miserable families and thereupon manages to dissolve the "corruption" in her, although this amounts to saying that her internal conflict has not been resolved yet. When the party comes to an end, Mrs. Sheridan, as if to display her particular conception of charity, decides to dispatch Laura to the dead man's cottage with the leftover food, a highly suggestive act that needs to be expounded. To begin with, it can be deemed an expression of some sort of womanly sympathy for others which characterizes Mrs. Sheridan, who so far has appeared to be a model student and an example to her daughter, as exceptional. On account of her simultaneous affirmation and denial of the practices of her class that shuns contact with those of the lower layer – an illustration of disavowal, to use the term in Freudian psychoanalysis – she all of a sudden becomes constructed as both entirely typical and unique at the same time, in other words, as erratic, a characteristic she has in common with Laura.

Another hypothetical possibility is that – though thinking fit to send the wrong foodstuff, "sandwiches, cakes, puffs" (p. 134) reflective of Mrs. Sheridan's leisurely life, heedless of the fact that upon receiving these, the widow in grief, whose lack or level of income precludes her from feeding or ensuring a minimum standard of living for her orphaned children, will become hyperaware of how economically and hierarchically disadvantaged she is – Mrs. Sheridan might have set out to approximate her own aloof, unapproachable social stratum to that of the impoverished, at least on the symbolic level, in defiance of the strictly institutionalized notions of social stratification and distance. She knows that commensality is out of question for them, that they can never eat together while sharing food connotes more than it denotes, while offering and accepting food could turn into their language to communicate or reach one another across distances. Or, finally, Mrs. Sheridan may be sending Laura off to the poor cottage as a reward for the performance she made at the party, for successfully playing the part of the bourgeois girl with the hat, which asserts her social identity, so that she can reinforce Laura's behavior and condition her to give the "right" response next time, too. This way Mrs. Sheridan, the major influence on Laura, can change and control Laura's behavior, which is, so to speak, like teaching an animal to do tricks not part of its normal behavior. To charge her with taking away the food is, nevertheless, a downright mistake for, even though she previously did her best to erase the unfortunate event from Laura's mind, Mrs. Sheridan now reminds her of it, in place of letting the event fade into oblivion just when Laura started to enjoy forgetfulness after a painful transition period of obfuscation.

Laura, as a result, still prepossessed with the delights of the party (Fullbrook, 1986) and with the beautiful hat as previously on her head, sets off. Even so, this departure puts her in a position to cope with new challenges. Distinguishable from the bright weather during the party, it is now dusk, the time when light gives way to darkness which, metaphorically speaking, foreshadows the protagonist's imminent passage from the realm of life to the realm of death. Laura, who until this point in the short story had all but no experience outside the shelter offering her a kind of pseudo-paradise where she felt secure, closes the garden gate behind her to walk out of the surroundings she is accustomed to (Magalaner, 1971; Durix, 1989). But then, the beginning of her adventure on foreign ground is marked by a big dog which runs by her when least expected. This can be taken into consideration as a warning sign to the effect that the territory of the poor she is on the verge of entering cannot be identified merely as "the greatest possible eyesore" (p. 131), a definition given through Laura's narrative voice – but most probably, Cooke (2008) argues, is a repetition of Laura's sister Jose's words based upon what she learnt from Mrs. Sheridan who wields power over both girls – or "disgusting and sordid" (p. 131), as again Laura, while walking along the lane, once "thought" of it. It is a fear-inspiring world in shadows.

At any rate, after the dog, likened by Durix (1989) to Cerberus guarding Hades, Laura bounces back and continues her descent to the cottages lower down the hill which, with each step she takes, changes into "a descent into the netherworld" (Durix, 1989, p. 183). As she crosses a broad road, a concrete representation of the dividing line between two sets of people sharing nothing in common,

[t]he brightness and gaiety of the afternoon are replaced by smoke and darkness, the glittering dresses give way to shawls and tweed caps, a low hum is substituted to the voices and tinkling spoons, her own attire, so admired above the broad road becomes so totally unsuitable that Laura hesitates but is irresistibly drawn on, the inhabitants of the cottage driving her forward. (Durix, 1989, p. 183)

What she does not know, however, is that she is proceeding on her way, due to either curiosity or a strong commitment to duty, to be caught between two discontinuous experiences, "two social rituals – the celebrations of the rich family, and the solemnity of death" (Fullbrook, 1986, p. 122). The instant she enters the cottage, Laura, for the first time in her entire life, comes upon the ceremonies of death that culminate in the climactic moment when she beholds the countenance of death itself. She first sees the dead man's wife sitting by the fire like a wounded creature overwhelmed with grief. The mourning woman looks up at Laura with "swollen eyes" (p. 137), but numbed by the loss of a loved one, not a single word passes her "swollen lips" (p. 137). Her "puffed up, red" (p. 137) face leads Laura to think about how "terrible" (p. 137) she looks. The man who died in the prime of his years, on the other hand, is different. As Laura is standing before the corpse, the narrative – due to the effect of the repetition of the "o" sound – slows down as if time stops, predicating that let alone being annoyed or repelled, she is fascinated by the body and savoring this moment at some length.

Yet, that she finds it "wonderful" (p. 137) does not necessarily mean that her interest is morbid. For a start, through the body can she feel once and for all that she, in the same manner as her mother, has the ability to sway something. At this precise stage in the text, Laura is empowered to muse on the body in paradoxical ways by resurrecting or activating it in her mind, imagining it to be dreaming, that is alive, and at the same time doubly pacifying or reifying the already stationary object scanning every feature of its "sleeping face" (p. 137) while the dead man, "blind under closed eyelids" (p. 137), cannot see her, which presumably introduces an illustrative instance of female gaze in slow motion. More importantly, unlike the mourning woman who is described as "terrible" – a word the reader should not take for granted supposing what it refers to is all clear because "terrible" assumes another meaning here – the body Laura sets eyes on with no denial or avoidance is a "marvel" (p. 137).

The reason for this unusual choice of diction may be that although the reminders of death are there evidently noticeable in the widow's congested face and in the malady she is stricken with, these cannot reflect the real face of death, but at best be a mimicry of it, while the man is stone dead and through death underwent a "status passage." Although he lacked the opportunity to have the sort of life people like Laura and her family cherish, the man, after the "bitter end," has transcended issues of social divisions. He is at present in a classless world to which everybody will sooner or later go (Magalaner, 1971), which finally makes death, the universal equalizer, conceivable as beautiful. This point where Laura forms a perception of death, instead of just accepting it, is worthwhile to highlight because it would not be erroneous to posit that one may consider it epiphanic. The newly acquired wisdom enables Laura to evaluate her society, in relation to the general condition of humanity, from a much wider perspective.

She now seems to be relatively more accomplished than she used to be, and even more than Mrs. Sheridan, who is not only emotionally but also intellectually sterile, without the awareness or courage to boldly confront the fact that all humanity, the Sheridans included, is doomed to suffer, or enjoy, death. But prior to death, Laura Sheridan has to suffer for the accessory on her head. In the somber atmosphere of the cottage incompatible with anything evocative of life, Laura, still in front of the dead man, feels mortified and apologizes for the hat which makes her look totally out of context. The hat, in this scene, develops into a symbol encompassing meanings related by opposition. Its cold dark background may be, as postulated earlier, tantamount to death, but the daisies' warm gold color is contrariwise permeated with life. Still more, the real *raison d'être* of the black background seems to make whatsoever is placed on it more eye-catching than it would normally be; hence, in this dichotomous pairing of meanings incorporated in the symbol of the hat, life is privileged over death. Maybe therefore finding it wrong to wear it in front of a dead body, Laura says: "Forgive my hat" (p. 138). Nevertheless, these words, however well-intentioned, are the occasion of a lapse from the sublime to the ridiculous. To be more accurate, while expected to say something appropriate for the present grave circumstances, something that expresses sympathy for other people, Laura talks through her hat, sounding not only disrespectful to others' sorrow but also, as Daly (1994) very correctly argues, comic and childish.

Nonetheless, Laura is forgivable in many ways, despite the sudden drop of intensity her disappointing remark brings about in the story. She is, first, overstressed for being overdressed. Second, she must be drained of mental energy, thus finding it difficult to concentrate; after all, her "first corpse and adult party, two contradictory kinds of initiation, happen to Laura on the same day" (Smith, 2000, p. 124) sweeping away her clarity of thought and expression. Last and most significantly, she can be excused by reason of her apparent progress which is paired with the mission she carries out. By going to the taboo zone of the poor after the party, Laura, albeit clumsily, functions as an intermediary between the two opposing settings, momentarily connects the Sheridans' pseudo-paradise with its counter-world, becomes acquainted with the anguish of the people living in the depressing dwellings "just below" (pp. 130, 134), and experiences a turning point. As a consequence, when she goes back home, where indicators of prosperity exist in large quantity, and

meets Laurie [,] the reader realizes that her attitude to relationship has matured; if before the party she impulsively gives Laurie a small quick squeeze, now she takes his arm and presses up to him. She has had a glimpse of the afterlife which has given her a concept of duration and time outside the timeless frivolities of society circles. (Durix, 1989, p. 184)

This is presumptive evidence that Laura "will not so easily be able to go back to the dance of life" (Kobler, 1990, p. 78), or the kind of life bereft of death and the sentiments it arouses in the one who catches a glimpse of its "beauty." Nevertheless, at the close of the story, the reader is compelled to question the validity of his/her assumptions about Laura and to doubt whether it would be legitimate to argue that she has learned a lesson or changed in the real sense of the word, in spite of the fact that she made a good start. Towards the very end, Laura tries to puzzle out the meaning of life with the help of her brother Laurie, but the best she can do is to stammer to her "narratee," "'Isn't life,' [. . .] 'isn't life -'" (p. 138). She repeats the phrase twice and fails twice to convey a full verbal message, only achieving to keep the communication line open which is merely the "phatic [and not the primary] function" of language. Yet it stands to reason that these two short identical phrases allow the brother and sister to establish a silent or mental interior monologue the content of which is still another gap left up to the reader to fill, probably with the suggestion that what the tongue-tied girl derived from the event she participated in during the same evening, as Durix (1989) maintains, falls short of being "wholly conclusive" (p. 184).

Worse still, while they could have a long-term effect, her emotions from that day fade away by and by, as if to be abandoned in the past and replaced by her socially instilled conceptions which did not altogether cease to exist. It is as if her unconscious unexpectedly interferes to verify, to a certain extent, the general statement Meisel (2002) makes in his survey of Mansfield's narrative strategies discussed in *Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf: A Public of Two* by Angela Smith. "Mansfield's stories," Meisel (2002) writes, "have no privileged center of consciousness, whether that of character or of narrator. Indeed, they have no 'consciousness' as such at all, since the focus is on personality's 'unconscious' [. . .]" (pp. 161-162). Laura's unconscious, which once attracted her to the workmen, carries her away in the opposite direction. The recent past is forgotten in favor of the here-and-now, and she is engaged in her immediate situation. To be brief, there is no proof that the experience she lived could teach Laura a life-changing or permanent lesson (Kobler, 1990), or transform her into what is implied in her name: a growing laurel tree.

Laura is likely to remain forever young, that is the same or immutable, analogous to the laurel tree in the Greek myth, the transformed body of Daphne who turns into a tree so as not to become anyone's wife.

## 7. Conclusion

So the story reaches its conclusion without offering a clear-cut resolution. Whereas the reader, having witnessed Laura's transitions, hopes for a definite sense of an ending, Laura is, in the end, in a more precarious situation than ever before, which one can with good reason attribute to the conventional Victorian education that limits her vision to, in Magalaner's (1971) phrase, "a false Eden" (p. 117) lulling her to continue her existence happily but negligent of the truths of life. Only in the world outside, but within her line of sight, can she comprehend that nothing consists entirely of artificial delight; that sad and happy, ugly and beautiful coexist in life as inseparable halves of a whole; and that nothing, not even their extravagant house surrounded by appealing grounds falls beyond the reach of death. Only in the dark world outside, when not under the "tutelage" of her family, can she experience genuine enlightenment regarding the general human condition and the reality of social circles other than her own. Nevertheless, though seeming to have thrived on the brief experience she had that day and, in a sense, gained a toehold in both settings, it is still next to impossible for the reader to make optimistic predictions about Laura's future because once back at home, opulence and the teachings long engraved upon her mind, never to be forgotten, begin to outweigh the effect of the discoveries she has just made, and her interest in others with low social status soon trails off. To make matters far worse, to alternate between the two different settings when unready, as well as between moments of joy and contact with poverty, ugliness, and death, afflict Laura's soul, causing her to change into an uncertain, inconsistent, and vulnerable adult who does not know what to think, how to feel, or where to belong. Laura may no longer be a child; however, she is utterly traumatized.

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