

Katherine Mansfield: “The Garden Party” and “Marriage à la Mode”

Jennifer E. Dunn

Both “The Garden Party” and “Marriage à la Mode” were included in Mansfield’s third collection of short stories, *The Garden Party* (1922). This collection was also the last of Mansfield’s books published in her lifetime. Like other modernist short fiction, such as Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914) and Woolf’s *Monday or Tuesday* (1919), Mansfield’s stories center on the transitory, ephemeral nature of experience as conveyed through epiphany, symbols, and impressions, although they have a quality that is all Mansfield’s own. Like Woolf, Mansfield may be labeled a practitioner of the plotless short story. Her texts shift the reader’s focus from traditional, action-oriented plot to feelings and seemingly minor events, generating meaning through the myriad of symbols and their suggested associations. Yet, in Mansfield’s stories, that which is small and fleeting is always deliberately and skillfully intertwined with larger themes: with issues of class and gender, with the nature of art and the consciousness of the artist, and with the difference between innocence and experience. While certain themes, tones, and tropes persist across her work, and may be traced to her influences in Chekhov, Wilde, and post-impressionist painting, “Mansfield, like other writers, cannot be confined to any single formula” (Nathan 1993: 96). A notable characteristic of her writing is the way it resists monological readings and generalizations, even as it neatly epitomizes the modernist aesthetic. Mansfield’s resistance to unifying interpretations and labels is apparent when considering her work as a whole – her narrators are men and women of many ages and backgrounds, her subject matter is various, and her tone ranges from satire and irony to pathos and sentimentality – but is all the more striking when considering a single given text. As Head argues, the modernist short story works against critical approaches that seek to assimilate its ambiguities and gaps to a single, unifying interpretation. If the modernist short story often turns on moments of awakening, or what Joyce called epiphanies, then for Mansfield these moments do not necessarily offer a fixed and clear conclusion, but are “a point where different impulses converge and conflict” (Head 1992: 110).

“The Garden Party”

The title story of *The Garden Party and Other Stories* is one of Mansfield's most famous and frequently anthologized works (along with “Prelude” and “Bliss”). The story begins *in media res* as Mrs. Sheridan and her daughters Meg, Jose, and Laura prepare for a summer garden party: “And after all the weather was ideal. They could not have had a more perfect day for a garden-party if they had ordered it” (Mansfield 2001: 245). Mrs. Sheridan has exempted herself from the preparations, and Laura, the youngest daughter and “artistic one” in the family (246), is sent to direct the workmen erecting a marquee in the garden. There, she revels in the beauty of the morning and the workmen's friendliness, dismissing “these absurd class distinctions” and imagining herself to be “just like a work-girl” (247–8). Her sense of euphoria is heightened by the deliveries of pink canna lilies and dozens of “beautifully light and feathery” cream puffs (252). She is momentarily diverted from these small joys by the news that a carter from the cottages across the road has been killed in an accident. Her desire to cancel the party out of respect for the dead is ridiculed by Mrs. Sheridan and Jose, and Laura is swiftly distracted from the accident when her mother loans her a beautiful hat with a black velvet ribbon and golden daisies. The party proceeds as planned, and Laura enjoys herself as the guests compliment her newly grown-up and fashionable appearance. As evening approaches and the party ends, Laura is sent to the carter's cottage with the party's leftovers. There, she comes face to face with the “sleeping” corpse of the young man, and is profoundly moved by the “wonderful, beautiful” vision he presents, though at the same time she sobs and asks the man's family to “forgive” her extravagant hat. When she meets her brother Laurie on the road, he seems to understand her inexpressible emotions: “‘Isn't life,’ she stammered, ‘isn't life’ – ,” to which Laurie responds, “*Isn't it, darling?*” (261).

“The Garden Party” is a plotless short story: there is little action, and the conflicts raised are not resolved by a neat and conclusive ending. The story's meaning seems to rest on Laura's conversation with her brother, although it is not clear what she means by her question about life, or what Laurie's answer signifies. Critical readings have focused on the nature of Laura's unexplained epiphany, often interpreting Laura's trip to the cottage as an awakening of social conscience that separates her from her frivolous and privileged family, or as an initiation, via the encounter with death, into adulthood. Laura's visit to the cottage has also been interpreted as the flowering of her “artistic” sensibilities into a broader vision of the nature of life itself:

Gifted in vision, she is qualified, both because of and in spite of her youth, to discover what her mother and sister have always known, yet never known. The true subject of “The Garden Party,” then, is not only the ultimate reality we perceive but, equally, the way an artistic one perceives it. (Kleine 1963: 371)

These readings draw on Mansfield's own comments that the story explores "the diversity of life and how we try to fit in everything, Death included" (Murry 1928: 196). But because the text upholds any and all of these interpretations, Head's argument for the *disunifying* function of the modernist epiphany becomes relevant here: "There is usually no simple 'solution' to the ambiguities of the characterization, but rather a denial of a solution" (1992: 110). As Nownes points out, the story, beginning "in midpassage" and ending with a question, "defies traditional notions of an ordered, unified text" (1993–4: 50). Approaching the story's ending as a "denial of a solution" shifts the focus from an attempt to stabilize the meaning of Laura's question and Laurie's answer to a more productive exploration of Laura's "ambiguity of characterization." More recently, Zivley (1995) and Atkinson (2006) have acknowledged that there are other, less positive, meanings suggested by Mansfield's ending, and they argue that Laura's so-called epiphany marks her assimilation into, rather than a break from, a problematic social order epitomized by her mother. Reading the story in this way, we see how Mansfield's ironic narrative voice, free indirect discourse, and ever-shifting symbolic meanings emphasize the frightening double-sidedness of life and of artistic vision, rather than their "wonderful, beautiful" unity or comforting totality.

From the very beginning of the story, Mansfield establishes a series of dichotomies that differentiate Laura from her family, only to undermine them. Laura is attentive to the natural beauty of the garden and laments that the marquee will obscure the "silent splendour" of the karaka trees (Mansfield 2001: 247), in contrast to the Sheridans' "attempt to 'methodize' nature and bring it under control" in the same way the weather itself is "ordered," "reduced to a matter of commercial transaction" (Magalaner 1971: 113). The Sheridan world is one built on affluence, materialism, and artifice, symbolized in Mrs Sheridan's self-indulgent order of too many cannalilies and Jose's contrived performance of the song, "This Life is Weary": the sad tune is followed by her "brilliant, dreadfully unsympathetic smile" (Mansfield 2001: 251). Laura's spontaneous delight in the natural and her instinctive sympathy for the carter seem out of place in this household, although it is important to note that Laura also poses and imitates. She tries to look "severe and even a little bit shortsighted" like her mother when she approaches the workmen (246), and repeats her mother *verbatim* when speaking to a friend on the telephone. When Mrs Sheridan places her hat on Laura's head, she passes on "the Sheridan heritage of snobbery, restricted social views, narrowness of vision – the garden party syndrome" (Magalaner 1971: 116–17). Laura is so astonished by her "charming" reflection that she forgets all about the carter's death (Mansfield 2001: 256). Thus, almost immediately we see Laura oscillating between the natural and the contrived, and the profound and the superficial, even in her well-meaning but pretended affinity with the workmen in the garden.

This pattern continues when Laura enters the carter's cottage, and destabilizes any suggestion that the visit allows Laura to fully transcend "the garden party syndrome." Mansfield's use of free indirect discourse is important here. As Laura

descends upon the cottages, the omniscient narrative voice shifts to her perspective, but uses language more suggestive of Mrs Sheridan's views than Laura's sympathy. As the bright colors of the party fade with the sunlight, the cottages are portrayed as an underworld of "shadow" and "deep shade" (Mansfield 2001: 258–9), an underworld earlier described (again, perhaps from Laura's perspective) as "disgusting and sordid" and "far too near" the Sheridan house (254). When Laura meets two women in the cottage, they are described as monstrous and conniving. The widow with her swollen face is "terrible," while her companion is "sly" with an "oily" voice (260). These descriptions are at odds with Laura's interpretation of the corpse as "beautiful" and "peaceful," unless we consider her reaction as both a coping strategy and an extension of her earlier tendency to aestheticize her surroundings. The corpse presents for Laura "a blank screen" upon which she may project her *own* narrative or pleasing picture (Nownes 1993–4: 55). While her positive vision of life and death, and ensuing inability to articulate this vision, may be read in accordance with Mansfield's own comments about the diversity of life, "Death included," it can also be read as an upholding of the self-same class distinctions Laura earlier regards as "absurd."

As Magalaner points out, the reader – but also Laura – has been "prepared" for the story's final epiphany, which is foreshadowed in Jose's song, "This Life is Weary" (1971: 117). The lines "A Dream – a *Wa*-kening" refer both to Laura's "awakening" and to the carter's wake. Magalaner, like Nownes, reads Laura's initiation into adulthood as a refusal of her earlier generalizations and clichés, but there is equal evidence in the text that Laura's epiphany does not mark her departure from the social order represented by her family, but her initiation *into* and as *dictated by* that order, and specifically by her mother. There are clues earlier in the story that Laura's experience is fated or controlled by someone outside herself, especially when her mother's hat is forced upon her head. Significantly, Laura goes to the cottage unwillingly, under her mother's direction and wearing the hat. (Magalaner observes that "the reader quickly senses that the hands guiding the strings are the hands of the mother" (1971: 113).) As Nownes points out, the hat is doubly symbolic, its black color suggesting funereal garb, and its daisies symbolizing gaiety and festivity. Nownes argues that Laura's sobbed apology for the hat does not mark her knowledge of its inappropriateness, but her awareness of the inevitable "fact of class distinctions" (Nownes 1993–4: 56). Even as the facts of death and hardship sink into her consciousness, Laura chooses to excuse her genuine emotional reaction by recourse to etiquette. This is another pose, more akin to Mrs Sheridan's social codes than Laura's moral ones. As Atkinson has argued, Mrs Sheridan finds in the carter's death an object lesson for her daughter, a way

to move her daughter from a mildly rebellious adolescence to a young-womanhood that does not question the status quo. In short, Laura's own transformation is entirely conventional; the subversiveness of the story lies in its uncovering of Laura's middle-class tendency to aestheticise the unfamiliar and thereby neutralise it. (2006: 54)

In this way, not only are the uncomfortable facts of death and poverty assimilated into Laura's "beautiful" vision of the world, but, as Atkinson argues, she can banish her earlier "inconvenient sympathies for those who are less fortunate than herself" (59).

Finally, it is significant that Laurie, rather than Jose or Mrs Sheridan herself, goes to collect Laura from the underworld of the cottages. Laurie's presence at the end of the narrative, like Laura's revelation at the wake, can be read in a number of ways. We know that Laurie had been Laura's partner in childhood explorations of the poor neighborhood, and this, along with their similar names, establishes them as counterparts. Laurie's self-assured attitude marks him as one of the already initiated; like Jose, he has already grown into his adult role. When he meets Laura at the end of the story, it is the final marker of *her* initiation into *her* adulthood, even as she (perhaps) realizes how problematic that adulthood is. As Zivley points out, as a male, Laurie is comfortably integrated into middle-class manhood. Laura's speechlessness, and Laurie's ability to close her sentence and the entire story with his own knowing pronouncement and slightly patronizing use of "darling," mark the fact that men and women enter adulthood under very different terms. Zivley points out that when Laura "has experiences that transcend those of her family and society, she has no words or phrases with which to express those experiences – even to herself" (1995: 74). The conflict of the story, Zivley contends, is Laura's final isolation from her male counterpart and childhood companion, Laurie. Her brother's initiation into the adult world is an ascent into authority based on his male gender while, for Laura, initiation is merely an "extension from the powerless of childhood toward the powerlessness of womanhood and wifehood" (73). At the same time, neither Laura nor Laurie can explain their shared understanding, and Atkinson argues that "[w]e can see the non-exchange on life as Mansfield's sly representation of a class discourse that chooses not to inquire too closely into the inequalities and injustices of its power base" (Atkinson 2006: 60). Thus, in Mansfield's closing scene of awestruck awareness and emotional connection, we find an undercurrent of darkness and *disconnection* that can be read as an implicit acknowledgment of ineradicable power structures, an upholding of gender and class differences belied by the text's more explicit suggestions that Laura's narrative is one of transcendence and self-determination.

"Marriage à la Mode"

Although it is included in the same collection as "The Garden Party," "Marriage à la Mode" initially seems a very different and much simpler story. Mansfield again uses omniscient third-person narration interspersed with free indirect discourse, so that the narrator seems to be William, husband of Isabel and father to two young boys. William lives and works in London during the week, and as the story opens

he is preparing for a regular weekend visit to his family in the country. The opening dilemma – the question of gifts to bring to his children – is swiftly replaced with the larger problem of the “new” Isabel. As his train travels away from the city, William feels a “familiar dull gnawing in his breast” (Mansfield 2001: 310) and remembers the early days of his marriage in a cramped but cheerful house in the city. Mimicking his wife, he condemns his sentimentality, and we learn that Isabel has since been “rescued” from the tedium of domestic life by a new circle of friends. These include Moira Morrison, who calls Isabel “Titania,” Bobby Kane, Bill Hunt, and Dennis Green, all aspiring artists or writers. William dislikes these bohemian usurpers, and has a “horrible vision” of one of them stealing the fruit he has bought for his sons and “lapping up a slice [. . .] behind the nursery door” (310). Fears about the group’s parasitical nature are not unfounded: Moira and the men take advantage of Isabel’s impressionable nature, eating her food, littering her rooms, and spiriting her away from William. He spends a lonely weekend in the house while the rest of the group goes swimming, and even overhears them mocking him. He is granted one moment alone with Isabel just before he returns to London, when she dispatches him with a hurried kiss. Although these events seem to be the normal order of things, the weekend galvanizes William into writing a love letter to his wife. In the final scene of the story, we see Isabel reading this letter out to her friends, who laugh hysterically at William’s sentimentality. Momentarily, Isabel is horrified by their laughter and her own heartlessness. She retreats to the bedroom, where she decides to reply to William, but is finally drawn away again, “laughing in the new way” (321) as she rejoins the circle.

At first glance, “*Marriage à la Mode*” is a satirical send-up of what Magalaner calls “the flamboyant, articulate, utterly silly pseudo-bohemian” (1971: 86). Bobby, Bill, and Dennis are ridiculous characters who take themselves and their worthless “art” far too seriously. William’s nightmarish vision of one of them crouching in the nursery is fitting, since these young men are “playing at children and failing to carry off the pretense” (Magalaner 1971: 88). Moira, too, behaves like a little girl, whining and jumping as she wears “a bonnet like a huge strawberry” (Mansfield 2001: 314). The dichotomy in “*The Garden Party*” between the natural and the artificial is re-established here, as William’s memories of his own childhood and Isabel’s former freshness stand in stark contrast to the contrived play-acting of her new companions. The new Isabel, or “Titania,” is bewitched by this group’s fashionable posing, as seen in her rejection of all things traditional and “dreadfully sentimental” (309): she even discards the children’s toys in favor of more exotic items from Russia and Serbia. As Weaver points out, life with the new Isabel is entirely *à la mode*: “The couple has no last name, implying how far they have escaped from family and traditions, how free they are from the conventional” (1990: 30). Of course, since we see Isabel from William’s wounded perspective, it is her airs and antics, rather than William’s “dreadful sentimentality,” that seem ridiculous.

As in “The Garden Party,” however, this story resists a unitary interpretation. On the surface, the text condemns Isabel’s heartlessness; even she can see, if only for a moment, that her new ways are “shallow, tinkling, vain” (Mansfield 2001: 320). But her ultimate suppression of this awareness, and the allusions throughout the story to daydreams and fantasy, suggest that this is a modern “Midsummer Night’s Dream” in which both husband and wife are spellbound by delusion. When William recalls their “poky” house in London, we are afforded a glimpse of Isabel’s deep unhappiness:

He hadn’t the remotest notion in those days that she really hated that inconvenient little house, that she thought the fat Nanny was ruining the babies, that she was desperately lonely, pining for new people and new music and pictures and so on. (Mansfield 2001: 313)

Tropes of stagnation recur when the old Isabel temporarily returns. Reading William’s letter, Isabel has a “stifled feeling” (319), and the “grave bedroom” that seems to admonish her conjures up the image of a tomb. Even as the text presents Isabel’s epiphany as a possible escape from life “à la mode,” the alternative on offer – a return to her former self – is even less attractive. Thus, even as the story generates sympathy for her husband, we see that “William is no Oberon” (Magalaner 1971: 90). If Isabel distracts herself from an unhappy marriage with silly escapades, William is equally in denial. Too much a “stranger” in his own family (Mansfield 2001: 312), he cannot regain Isabel’s respect and love. His retreat into daydreams about the past is tinged with a nostalgia and desperation that recalls the bohemians’ pointless and childish antics. He cannot even read his work papers, which seem to be divorce documents; the lines dissolve into ellipses as his mind wanders to the past.

This “marriage à la mode” is more tragic than it first seems, as it becomes apparent that the couple neither love nor really know one another. William is in love with a fantasy of the old Isabel, while she in turn pretends to be enamored of her bohemian friends. One of the group’s paintings cruelly satirizes the situation with its depiction of a man with “wobbly legs” offering a flower to a woman with “one very short arm and one very long, thin one” (Mansfield 2001: 315). The picture mocks the artist’s lack of talent, but also suggests Isabel’s two-sided personality (two different arms, or sides) and William’s inability to stand up for himself. Even William’s letter and Isabel’s epiphany cannot alter this new state of things. Under the story’s satirical, witty surface, we see profound suffering in their desperate but ultimately futile attempts to wake from a dream life that is really a nightmare.

The conclusions of “The Garden Party” and “Marriage à la Mode” illustrate Head’s assertions about the modernist short story’s disunifying epiphanies. Thus, both aesthetically and thematically, the two stories conform to Hanson’s definition of the short story as “a form of the margins” that lends itself to “the partial, the

incomplete, that which cannot be [. . .] entirely satisfactorily explained" (Hanson 1989: 2). Laura's new consciousness after viewing the carter's corpse, and Isabel's fleeting awareness of her own frivolity and heartlessness, also position both women on the margins: they are momentarily cast outside their social circles, cut off from brother or husband, and alienated even from themselves, since their previous sense of identity has been entirely undermined. This fits O'Connor's oft-repeated maxim that the short story is suited to outsiders (1963). But in both "The Garden Party" and "Marriage à la Mode," nothing is finally accomplished by the characters' moments of transcendence and alienation. Distance from the old reality does not necessarily yield a lasting perspective or more profound understanding. Rather, there is in Mansfield a sense of futility that accompanies epiphany, even as these moments contain the potential for recognizing the truth, profundity, chaos, or darkness of life. Too often, Mansfield's characters turn away from these uncomfortable visions, or the visions are reducible to something bleaker and more mundane: the upholding of "absurd class distinctions" in Laura's case, or another pose or delusion in Isabel's. Life's sparkling surface sometimes illuminates its darker, deeper underside, even if only to banish it again to the margins: love is reduced once more to sentimentality, trust is made into an object of ridicule, or an ugly death is conveniently reframed as a beautiful picture. In the same way, Mansfield's exposed techniques, self-conscious ironic voice, and deliberately foregrounded images are the surface of her texts, and these bright and brilliant flourishes of her art reveal, even as they undermine and dispel, glimpses of other meanings and darker possibilities.

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Editorial Offices

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The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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