



Narrative Perspective and Subtle Irony: A Re-Examination of Social Critique in Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party"

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Abstract

Katherine Mansfield stands as a monumental figure in twentieth-century English literature, her fiction characterized by modernist experimentation and keen psychological insights. "The Garden Party" is among her most acclaimed works, regularly studied for its themes and characterizations, yet its narrative perspective and the nuanced interplay of focalization and covert progression are often overlooked. This paper explores how Mansfield's adept narrative choices—ranging from panoramic descriptions to intensely personal observations—generate a contrapuntal effect of objective reporting and understated irony. Through this, the story exposes the self-interested mentality of the upper-middle class, prompting readers to reconsider both class dynamics and the potential for personal transformation. This analysis employs extensive quotation from the original novella and retains all cited references.

1. Introduction

"The Garden Party" remains one of Katherine Mansfield's most pivotal and celebrated short stories, repeatedly praised for its mastery of narrative stance and innovative deployment of free indirect speech. As the narrative unfolds, Laura Sheridan, daughter of a prosperous family, is swept up in preparations for a lavish garden party. The sudden announcement of a nearby worker's death shakes Laura's innocence. Her initial impulse is to halt the festivities, but her mother, Mrs. Sheridan, dismisses her concerns. Laura ultimately acquiesces, only to encounter a transformative moment when she visits the bereaved family. Mansfield's command of perspective, switching between omniscient narration and the intimate lens of Laura's consciousness, grants the tale both atmospheric charm and psychological depth.

2. Literature Overview

Scholars have long scrutinized "The Garden Party" from multiple vantage points; but narrative technique has often received less thorough discussion compared to motifs of class and maturity. As early as 1957, Warren S. Walker argued that the story "often leaves readers with a feeling of dissatisfaction, a vague sense that the story somehow does not realize its potential," locating the main issue in a "dual nature" of conflict, partly resolved (Walker, 1957, p. 354). Contrarily, Robert Murray Davis claimed that the key to unity lies in perceiving the conflict "within Laura alone," and that such an approach "restores Laura to her proper place as a character with whom the reader sympathizes" (Davis, 1964, p. 61).

This diversity of interpretation underscores ongoing debates regarding the story's position on class and emotional growth. Wang Ye (2010) posits that transcending class prejudices is achievable through "throwing away the middle-class prejudice and show[ing] love to surpass

the differences between the classes,” whereas Atkinson (2006) is less optimistic, noting Laura’s “middle-class tendency to aestheticize the unfamiliar and thereby neutralize it” (p. 54). Kaya (2011) goes so far as to see Laura’s future as “uncertain, inconsistent and vulnerable” (p. 61) due to the constraining influence of her family’s “conventional but false education” (p. 54).

Other critics draw connections with broader artistic and social contexts: Darrohn (1998) ties the story’s undercurrents to postwar anxieties, observing “Mansfield’s painful ambivalence produced by a war that magnified the desire for radical social change even as it enacted—to a terrifying extreme—what the loss of hegemony could entail” (p. 539). Linguistic and psychoanalytic studies (Severn 2009; Qin 2017; Zhu 2007) have illuminated Mansfield’s use of “stream of consciousness,” “impressionistic color,” and “psychic time.” Narratological perspectives, such as the typology of focalization (Shen, 2018), and the innovative concept of “covert progression” (Shen, 2015, 2019), suggest that beneath the surface plot, a subtle ironic counter-narrative is detectable, intensifying the story’s societal critique.

3. Analysis of Narrative Technique in “The Garden Party”

Shifting Viewpoints: Omniscience and Internal Perspective

Mansfield deftly alternates between a wide-angle, omniscient narrative camera and segments grounded in Laura’s internal point of view. This blend of perspectives undergirds both the story’s descriptive brilliance and its capacity for psychological portraiture.

Panoramic Narration (Nonfocalization)

At several crucial junctures, the storyteller adopts an all-seeing vantage. The opening is illustrative:

“Windless, warm, the sky without a cloud. Only the blue was veiled with a haze of light gold, as it is sometimes in early summer. The gardener had been up since dawn, mowing the lawns and sweeping them, until the grass and the dark flat rosettes where the daisy plants had been seemed to shine. As for the roses, you could not help feeling they understood that roses are the only flowers that impress people at garden-parties; the only flowers that everybody is certain of knowing” (Mansfield, 2018, p. 216).

The narration here is panoramic, inviting readers to absorb the opulence and tranquility marking the Sheridan household. In sharp contrast, the “lane began, smoky and dark” (Mansfield, 2018, p. 230), revealing the grim poverty adjacent to the family’s comfort. The narrator’s objective eye exposes the “women ‘hurried by’, men ‘hung over’ and children ‘played in the doorway’,” and the “crab-like” shadows that “moved across the window.” This calculated juxtaposition accentuates class disparity and imparts a social subtext.

Character introduction receives similar treatment. Laura is caught in motion, “flew, still holding her piece of bread-and-butter” (Mansfield, 2018, p. 216); she “skimmed, over the lawn, up the path, up the steps, across the veranda, and into the porch” (ibid.), manifesting her animation and youthful innocence. Mrs. Sheridan, for her part, when informed of a death, “interrupted her,” relieved that it was “not in the garden... and took off the big hat and held it on her knees” (Mansfield, 2018, p. 226). Through such objective reporting, the narrator allows readers to witness both action and attitude without overt commentary.

Interior Focalization

Mansfield skillfully merges the omniscient voice with Laura’s sensitive interiority, employing free indirect speech to allow Laura’s subjectivity to bleed into the narration. The story’s initial sentences—“And after all...”—convey Laura’s relief and anticipation, “showing a ‘satisfied expectation that the first requirement for an exceptional day has been fulfilled’” (Sorkin, 1978, p. 439).

When Laura admires the karaka-trees, the narrative slips seamlessly into her perceptions:

"Then the karaka-trees would be hidden. And they were so lovely, with their broad, gleaming leaves, and their clusters of yellow fruit. They were like trees you imagined growing on a desert island, proud, solitary, lifting their leaves and fruits to the sun in a kind of silent splendour. Must they be hidden by a marquee?" (Mansfield, 2018, p. 218)

Words like "lovely," "gleaming," and "splendour" articulate Laura's perspective, making the reader privy to her emotional and aesthetic response to her environment. The narrative voice thus oscillates between the exterior view and the internal reverie of its protagonist.

Dynamic Transitions and Free Indirect Speech

Mansfield's great innovation lies in her transitions between perspectives, particularly via free indirect discourse. For example, as Laura interacts with the workmen, exclamations spill into the narrative without quotation:

"How very nice workmen were!" and "What a beautiful morning!" (Mansfield, 2018, p. 217). *"How many men that she knew would have done such a thing!" and "Oh, how extraordinarily nice workmen were"* (*ibid.*, p. 218).

Such passages allow readers to "hear" Laura's impressions directly, though they come filtered through the third-person narrator. Elsewhere—

"But the air! If you stopped to notice, was the air always like this? Little faint winds were playing chase, in at the tops of the windows, out at the doors.... She could have kissed it" (Mansfield, 2018, pp. 219-220).

Here, the character's sensory delight becomes momentarily universal, enveloping the reader. Throughout the story, then, nonfocalized segments build detailed environments and character portraits, while internal focalization immerses us in the emotional world of Laura, blurring the line between narrative observation and subjective monologue.

Covert Progression: Irony Beneath the Surface

Recent theoreticians (notably Shen Dan) have highlighted the device of covert progression: the subtle, parallel movement in a narrative that can either reinforce or undermine the overt plot. In "The Garden Party," this undercurrent is unmistakably ironic, illuminating the moral shortcomings of the upper-middle class while momentarily gesturing towards idealism through Laura's personal transformation.

The Story's Subtle Irony

From its outset, Mansfield's narrative is loaded with sly commentary. Mrs. Sheridan enlists her children in preparations, asserting Meg "could not possibly go and supervise the men" (Mansfield, 2018, p. 216). The force of "possibly" implicitly critiques Meg's lethargy—her "own routines are always important than setting up some marquees." By contrast, Laura "flew, still holding her piece of bread-and-butter," demonstrating her eagerness (*ibid.*).

Mansfield's irony deepens in the scene where Laura wonders if a workman's metaphor ("bang slap") is "quite respectful" (Mansfield, 2018, p. 217), raising questions about the appropriateness of her upbringing.

Mrs. Sheridan's motivations remain self-indulgent: she overwhelms Laura's efforts with a glut of flowers, having bought them "just because she wanted to have them," using the party as an excuse. Jose's performance at the piano—singing "This Life is Weary"—becomes a self-regarding display rather than an authentic expression:

"Jose became a performer. A good performer sinks into the melody and creates an atmosphere for others to sink in, but Jose is a performer who just wants everyone to praise her. She can make a mournful and enigmatical face but she does not feel so, and she can sing a tearful 'Goodbye' in a brilliant smile.... The separation between the song and the performer reveals

the indifference of people in the middle class. They are all about enjoying themselves and they show no feelings to 'the weary life.'"

When Laura suggests cancelling the party, Mrs. Sheridan's concern is not with the tragedy itself but whether it happened in the garden; ultimately, she is "emotionally unrelated to people from the lower classes.... Although this is the truth of the upper-middle class and Mansfield satirizes it in this story, it can only be a realistic fact for a long time. The truth from the covert progression will hinder the formation of the ideal world."

Juxtaposing Plot and Covert Irony

Shen (2019) contends that the plot's development—Laura's growth and attempt to bridge social boundaries—runs parallel to the covert progression, which "leads to an irony on the people in upper-middle class who are just concerned about their own profits and the enjoyment, and show no sympathy to people from classes lower than them." Mansfield's use of non-ironic, objective language to depict ironically selfish characters allows the story's satire to surface through contextual comparison, not direct denunciation.

Dual Implied Authors and Audiences

Following Shen's theory, "two implied authors and two kinds of target readers" are present: one guides readers through Laura's coming-of-age and potential for cross-class empathy; the other directs attention to "the self-enjoyment and indifference in the people of the upper-middle class," potentially provoking a more pessimistic reading. Laura's growth is symbolically significant: she glimpses, if only for a moment, a world not governed by social division.

This is crystallized in the story's culminating encounter with death:

"There lay a young man, fast asleep—sleeping so soundly, so deeply, that he was far, far away from them both. Oh, so remote, so peaceful. He was dreaming. Never wake him up again. His head was sunk in the pillow, his eyes were closed; they were blind under the closed eyelids. He was given up to his dream. What did garden-parties and baskets and lace frocks matter to him? He was far from all those things. He was wonderful, beautiful. While they were laughing and while the band was playing, this marvel had come to the lane. Happy... happy.... All is well, said that sleeping face. This is just as it should be. I am content" (Mansfield, 2018, p. 232).

Laura's ineffable recognition—unable to complete her thought, "Isn't life..."—suggests both the limits and the promise of individual awakening in the face of entrenched social structures.

Conclusion

A renewed investigation of narrative technique in "The Garden Party" reveals how Mansfield marries different forms of focalization with a subdued, pervasive irony that critiques the upper-middle class. Through a combination of panoramic observation and intensely personal internal vision, she constructs a story at once realistic and idealistic. The narrative's subtle undercurrents, embodied in covert progression, complicate readers' responses and expose layered possibilities: while Laura's insight gestures toward a more compassionate world, the persistent self-enclosure of her social milieu remains. Mansfield's artistry lies in her ability to hide sharp commentary within apparently objective narration, inviting readers to decode the ironies for themselves.

Comparative examination of Mansfield's other short stories may further illuminate how her mastery of narrative perspective shapes her ongoing inquiry into happiness, suffering, and the boundaries of empathy.

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