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## Hidden in Full View: A Subliminal Reading of *The Garden Party* by Katherine Mansfield

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### ABSTRACT

Despite the numerous and often contradictory readings *The Garden Party* has stimulated down the years, the story has two key modernist concerns which remain under-explored. The first is sexuality and sexual awakening and their conscious and unconscious manifestations in everyday life—a theme that is explicitly foregrounded in some of Mansfield's other stories. The second is the trauma of death. Although the heroine's encounter with a corpse is widely regarded as a pivotal moment in the story, death itself and the interplay within the text between life and death have received limited attention to date. This essay examines the text through the lens of psychoanalytical theory and in relation to the traumatic war which had ended four years before the publication of the story. Through a subliminal reading of the imagery throughout the story, it uncovers the subconscious forces so skilfully evoked within the heroine herself who is the conscious unconsciousness at the core of the text.

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**AQ5**

Although widely regarded as an exemplary short story, *The Garden Party* is also notable for the number of contradictory readings it has stimulated down the years. The story's continuing attraction to commentators lies, no doubt, in its multi-dimensional fecundity which invites approaches from many different angles and at many different levels. Indeed, a single satisfactory reading of the piece may well be beyond reach and I would suggest that is possibly how Mansfield intended it to be.

Despite the amount of critical attention *The Garden Party* has received, there are two dimensions of human existence which were urgent concerns of the post-war period but which both, nevertheless, remain under-explored in relation to their significance within the story. The first is sexuality and sexual awakening and their conscious and unconscious manifestations in everyday life—a theme that is explicitly foregrounded in some of Mansfield's other stories. The second is the trauma of death. Although the heroine's encounter with a dead carter is widely recognised to be a pivotal part of the story, death itself and the interplay between it and life have received limited attention in commentaries to date. This is particularly curious when considered in the context of the devastating war which had ended only four years prior to the story's publication. This essay seeks to shed light on *The Garden Party* with particular reference to these two quintessentially modernist themes.

One of the reasons that the significance of sexuality and death and how they interconnect has not been given the attention it warrants in relation to *The Garden Party* may be because the structure of the story appears to invite readers to focus on its *process*, on what *happens* to its central protagonist, Laura. As a consequence, critics have often prioritised consideration of the signifiers which endorse specific schematic readings of the story's denouement.

Although Mansfield is ranked amongst the modernist writers who challenged the contemporary literary conventions of plot and sequential development, many interpretations of *The Garden Party* rely on precisely the kind of logical denouement which modernism often sought to subvert. In “Mrs Sheridan’s Masterstroke: Liminality in Katherine Mansfield’s *The Garden Party*”, Atkinson, for example, reads the text as a relatively straightforward “rite of passage”, which he interprets through an anthropological framework of initiation rites.<sup>1</sup> The logic of the process of initiation is painstakingly developed in his article but Atkinson ultimately undermines his sequential reading by acknowledging that “the narrative voice does not validate [the heroine’s] conclusions”.<sup>2</sup>

An earlier sequentially determinist reading of the story was provided by Walker in “The Unresolved Conflict in *The Garden Party*”, which suggests that the story concerns “the most common form of character development, [...]: the process of growing up”.<sup>3</sup> Walker postulates that the story presents two conflicts: the first being Laura’s “fear of and [eventual] acceptance of death” and the second being “the clash of social attitudes” between the protagonist and her mother.<sup>4</sup> According to Walker, the story resolves first of these conflicts by demonstrating that at its close, “Laura is indeed more mature than she is at the opening”.<sup>5</sup>

The second conflict, Walker argues, remains unresolved—a consequence he ascribes to the structural “difficulty” within the story. He suggests that, despite its strength and beauty, the narrative leaves the reader dissatisfied, with “a vague sense that the story does not realize its potential”.<sup>6</sup> However, Walker’s limiting class-based framework for reading *The Garden Party* does not allow room for what I will suggest are the subliminal “meanings” of the story to be heard.

Mansfield herself may have unwittingly encouraged these types of sequential or logical readings of *The Garden Party* through her oft-quoted comment about the story which, on the surface, appears to suggest a relatively formulaic reading of its content:

And yes, that is what I tried to convey in *The Garden Party*. The diversity of life and how we try to fit in everything, Death included. That is bewildering for a person of Laura’s age. She feels things ought to happen differently. First one then and then another. But life isn’t like that. We haven’t the ordering of it. Laura says, “But all these things must not happen at once.” And life answers, “Why not? How are they divided from each other?” And they *do* all happen, it is inevitable. And it seems to me there is beauty in that inevitability.<sup>7</sup>

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**AQ6** <sup>1</sup>Atkinson, 53.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>3</sup>Walker, 354.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 354.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>Kleine, 360.

In a more nuanced reading of the story, Kleine suggests that Mansfield's statement is a little misleading and that her "artistic intention is even more complex than her statement would indicate."<sup>8</sup> He argues that critics who subordinate the heroine of *The Garden Party* to her discovery alone fail to grasp the story's true focal point, the heroine herself.<sup>9</sup> Along with Kleine, I would contend that many commentators have failed to deliver a satisfactory reading of the text because they concentrate on the meanings of events in the narrative at the expense of its protagonist, whose burgeoning consciousness is the story's primary concern.

Gray moves beyond Kleine in postulating that Mansfield's narrative technique intentionally subverts the reader's expectations in order to create awareness of the unknowability of human experience.<sup>10</sup> She evidences this with reference to *The Garden Party* by suggesting that the story's narrative arc leads the reader to seek and expect an understanding of what has happened to Laura and why. Instead of this, she argues, the reader is left questioning what has brought Laura to her final status and indeed what that status is.<sup>11</sup>

My proposed reading of *The Garden Party* is aligned with Kleine, Gray and others who have sought to honour the story's apparent ambiguities instead of attempting to encompass them in a coherent explication. Rather than awaiting the ultimate Rosetta stone for their decipherment, in line with Seal, I believe the elusive meanings within the story evidence Mansfield's deliberate problematisation of reality and truth.

Within such an approach to the text, I would suggest there is room for, and value in, further exploration of subliminal or psychoanalytical perspectives. This is not to suggest that psychoanalytical theories can somehow rationalise Laura's experiences, but rather that a more subliminal reading of the story can shine light into Laura herself, the conscious unconsciousness at the core of the text. This again, echoes Seal, who notes that:

There were a number of factors which encouraged Mansfield's experimentation with new ways of writing: the rise of the psychoanalytic movement, the shock waves created by the Great War and the general questioning and challenging by artistic movements in all spheres of expression.<sup>12</sup>

Unlike her friend and rival Virginia Woolf, who claimed not to have read any of the works of Sigmund Freud until 1939, (and this despite her husband being one of his earliest translators), Mansfield is known to have read Freud avidly during the immediate pre-war years. She was close friends with D. H. Lawrence (whose 1913 novel *Sons and Lovers* was heavily influenced by Freud's theories) and she and her husband, John Middleton Murry, talked extensively with Lawrence about Freud and his theories. During 1914, along with other friends, they had weekly discussions on the "new science" of the unconscious.<sup>13</sup>

This is not to suggest that Mansfield accepted Freud's theories, or Lawrence's interpretation of them, uncritically. She had lively discussions with Lawrence about Freud and was, apparently, always ready to highlight the points on which she disagreed. In a letter to a friend in 1916, for example, she wrote: "I shall never see sex in trees, sex in running

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 361.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 371.

<sup>10</sup>Gray, 80.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 82.

<sup>12</sup>Seal, n.p.

<sup>13</sup>Jones, 227.



brooks, sex in stones and sex in everything. The number of things that are really phallic, from fountain pens onwards!”<sup>14</sup>

The point is rather to note that the spread of psychoanalytical theories provided, for the first time, a conceptual framework for writers to explore female sexuality. As a writer, Mansfield evolved in a milieu that was highly sensitised to Freud’s theories of sexuality and the unconscious. Her own bisexuality and the complexity of her intimate relationship with Middleton Murry render it unlikely (as her letters and diaries testify) that she would not dedicate significant thought and attention to this aspect of human existence. And, in so doing, that she would not be influenced (consciously or unconsciously) by psychoanalytical perspectives. It seems appropriate therefore to consider how our understanding of *The Garden Party*, a story about an adolescent girl’s encounter with death, can be enhanced by considering the subliminal or subconscious energy of its symbolism. This complements Seal’s reading of Mansfield who notes that she “used symbolism to give the reader insights into the psychological state of her characters.”<sup>15</sup>

Let us start with a consideration of hats. The first hat to appear in the story is that of one of the workmen who initially intimidate Laura and who she then becomes attracted to. Following her timid approach to the men, one particular workman “knocked back his straw hat” (198) and confidently smiles at her. The second hats are those of her brother and father, which are being domestically brushed in readiness to go to the office. The third is the “sweet hat” her mother commands Laura’s friend, Kitty, to wear to the party.

The fourth and most significant hat is the one given to Laura by her mother at a pivotal point in the in the story’s denouement. At the moment when Laura is convinced the party cannot go ahead because of the death of a carter who lives nearby, her mother distracts her by placing on her head a “black hat trimmed with gold daisies, and a long black ribbon” (205). This hat transforms her into a “charming girl”, deemed “stunning” by her brother and it serves to distract her from the death of the carter. The importance of this hat is reiterated towards the end of the story when Laura says, of all things, “Forgive my hat,”

(210) to the man’s corpse.

In “The Unresolved Conflict in *The Garden Party*” Walker argues that the hat given to Laura by her mother, along with the other hats that appear in the story, are used functionally to represent the “whole social milieu” of the family’s class.<sup>16</sup> Along with other commentators, Walker limits the significance of hats in the story to the role they play in demarking societal positioning. Viewed through a more psychoanalytical lens, I would suggest that the hats play a more subtle and subliminal role—in evoking Laura’s burgeoning sexuality.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1899, Freud analyses the role of a hat in the dream of a young woman who consulted him. He goes on to discuss hats more generally as sexual symbols, citing a variety of examples, and concludes that, depending on context, a hat might represent either the male or the female genitals. In *The Garden Party* the black and gold hat transforms Laura into something she had not been before: “Never had she imagined she could look like that” (205). Although the reader is left guessing how she feels about the transformation, the hat signals Laura’s precipitation into the

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Seal, n.p.

<sup>16</sup>Walker, 357.

sexual realm which has already been foreshadowed in descriptions of the events leading up to the moment it was placed on her head.

Those events include encounters with flowers, plants and food, symbols used in some of Mansfield's other stories to evoke repressed sexuality and/or sexual awakening. In *Bliss* for example, which has been cited for its exposition of female sexuality,<sup>17</sup> the heroine, Bertha, gradually becomes conscious of what she finally recognises to be sexual desire. Prior to this realisation, she finds an outlet for her feelings in arranging the fruit that has been delivered for a party to be held that evening. The description of the fruit is loving and sensual:<sup>18</sup>

There were tangerines and apples stained with strawberry pink. Some yellow pears, smooth as silk, some white grapes covered with a silver bloom and a big cluster of purple ones.<sup>19</sup>

Likewise, in *The Garden Party* the descriptions of food, and also of flowers, are vividly sensual, if not to say overtly sexual. The lilies her mother has ordered for the party are "big, pink flowers, wide open, radiant, almost frighteningly alive on bright crimson stems" (200). When Laura sees them she lets out "a little moan" and feels as if they were "in her fingers, on her lips, growing in her breast." The fear the flowers induce ("almost frighteningly alive") echoes the sexual fear expressed in *Bliss*, whose heroine's experiences are similarly described as "almost unbearable."<sup>20</sup>

Later, Laura's burgeoning sexuality is revealed again in relation to the cream puffs delivered for the party, which, rather than delicious, looked "very attractive". The idea of eating them at that time of day "made one shudder". However, giving in to the temptation, Laura and her sister end by licking their fingers "with that absorbed inward look that only comes from whipped cream" (203) (or does it?).

As the story moves to the description of the lane where the dead carter lived, we are told that Laura's family were forbidden to go there because of the "revolting language" (204) and "what they might catch" (204). However, the children who are now "grown up" (204) go there on their prowls, despite it being "sordid and disgusting" (204). They go with a "shudder" (204) but "one must go everywhere" (204) so "through they went" (204). Read subliminally, this passage evokes a fear of sex and its consequences ("what they might catch") but also the inevitability of the transition into sexuality ("one must go everywhere"). Mansfield's humiliating experience of pregnancy outside wedlock and the consternation it caused in her life provide noteworthy biographical context to the sexual fear evoked in this passage.<sup>21</sup>

After the party is over and Laura, against her better judgement, is instructed by her mother to carry a basket of left-overs to the carter's family, there is a curious stop-start in the story's subliminal denouement. Laura has shut the garden gates, she feels the experience of the party, its "kisses, voices, tinkling spoons, laughter [...] were somehow *inside* her" (208, my emphasis). She has "no room for anything else". However, despite the fact that the garden party itself is over, the experiences of the day are far from complete, a fact that Laura senses intuitively. She is "terribly nervous" as she approaches the cottage

<sup>17</sup>Seal.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Mansfield, 70.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Jones, 103.

and though she tries to resist, she is propelled inevitably through “the passage” and into the presence of the dead carter.

Laura’s encounter with the carter’s corpse is inextricably linked to her sexual awakening which, as outlined above, has been signalled throughout the text. The titular garden party was planned (and billed) as the main event of the story. However, despite the meticulous preparations (which constitute the majority of the piece) and despite Laura’s highly sensualised anticipation, the party proves to be a false climax. Although, when it is over, Laura shuts the gates and believes she has room for nothing else, it is the encounter with the dead man that proves to be her epiphany. The link between the corpse and Laura’s burgeoning sexuality is made explicit when she pathetically implores it to forgive her hat, the symbol of her transition to womanhood. What Laura makes of her epiphany and where it leaves her, is profoundly ambiguous and I shall now consider this encounter with death in the context of the war and its impact on Mansfield’s writing.

In her closely argued article “Blown to bits! Katherine Mansfield’s *The Garden Party* and The Great War”, which considers the influence of World War I on the author and her story, Darrohn notes the peculiar failure of previous critics to “read [the story] in relation to the war”.<sup>22</sup> This failure is doubly curious in light of the abundance of biographical materials which testify to the devastating impact the war had on Mansfield personally.

Like many of her contemporaries, Mansfield experienced direct personal tragedy in the war through the loss of her only brother, Leslie “Chummie” Beauchamp. At the age of twenty-one, he was killed whilst giving a hand grenade demonstration when a defective grenade blew up in his hand.<sup>23</sup> Mansfield was very close to her brother, who was reported to have a strong feminine side to his personality and a similar delicate sensibility to his sister.<sup>24</sup> In 1915, when Mansfield was living in St Johns Wood with Middleton Murry, her brother was based in Aldershot where he was training to be an instructor. During the short time they were geographically close prior to his death, they were often in each other’s company.<sup>25</sup>

Mansfield’s letters and diaries provide plentiful evidence of the profound impact the death of her brother had on her. Quotes from her diaries indicating she felt “just as much dead as he is” and vivid descriptions of dreams featuring his decimated body testify to the visceral nature of her mourning.<sup>26</sup> Notwithstanding the lack of reference to the war in the literary criticism of her work, one biographer went as far as to call her grief for the loss of her brother “pathological”.<sup>27</sup>

It is also interesting to consider Mansfield’s response to *Night and Day*, the second novel by Virginia Woolf, which was published in 1919, one year after the war ended and three years before the publication of *The Garden Party*. Mansfield’s review of *Night and Day* in the journal *Athenaeum*, which was edited by her husband, condemned the novel for containing what she called “a lie in the soul” because it failed to refer to the war or to recognise what it had meant for fiction.<sup>28</sup> Given the cost to their friendship

<sup>22</sup>Darrohn, 514.

<sup>23</sup>Jones, 248.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 249.

<sup>26</sup>Darrohn, 515.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 516.

<sup>28</sup>Middleton Murry.

of such public criticism of Woolf, it seems even less likely that Mansfield herself would have written a story about death in 1922 that did not take account (either implicitly or explicitly) of the war and its consequences.

275 Darrohn's exposition of *The Garden Party* in relation to World War I focuses primarily on the implications the war had for class and gender distinctions. She compares her own contribution with the one "notable exception" to the failure of other critics to read the story in relation to the war. This was provided by Gilbert and Gubar who point to *The Garden Party*, amongst other stories, as evidence in twentieth-century literature of the female writer's ascendancy over dead men.<sup>29</sup> Darrohn, on the other hand, suggests that  
280 whilst in *The Garden Party* Mansfield attempts to imagine a moment when class and gender divisions cease to matter, "ultimately she cannot sustain this hopeful vision".<sup>30</sup>

Whilst this solitary pair of war-contextualised readings of the story offer valuable perspectives aligned with the post-war crises of gender and class identities, I would suggest that the death of the carter in *The Garden Party* and its impact on the story's protagonist can also be helpfully viewed through a more subliminal, or quasi-psychoanalytical lens. Such an approach (re)directs the reader's eye to the centre of the story, to Laura herself. She, a child in the process of becoming a woman, knows little about the world beyond her garden, let alone about the horrors of war. Nonetheless, it is through Laura that Mansfield, writing in the wake of her own personal bereavement and for a society  
285 traumatised by war, has chosen to articulate the encounter with death.

290 At the climax of *The Garden Party*, when, despite her attempts to avoid it, Laura is confronted with the corpse of the carter, the reader is taken unawares by the ethereal description of the dead man:

295 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. (209)

300 **AQ15** Laura's response to the carter's dead body, which is the climax of the story, is one of the most troubling aspects of *The Garden Party*. After the devastation of World War I, imagining such a beautiful corpse might, as Darrohn suggests, "seem either a grotesque act of escapism or a courageous feat of imagination".<sup>31</sup> Resisting "such simplistic reactions" Darrohn goes on to argue that the story is concerned primarily with the reintegration of physical bodies and social categories in a post-war context.<sup>32</sup> Beyond this social interpretation of the significance of the encounter, I would like to suggest again that a  
305 more subliminal reading takes us further into Laura, the heroine herself.

310 In 1920, two years before the publication of *The Garden Party*, Freud had published his first theoretical thoughts about what he termed the human "death drive" in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. His theories had emerged during work he had undertaken with traumatised soldiers returning from the war. A key observation had been that, contrary to the

<sup>29</sup>Gilbert and Gubar, 516.

<sup>30</sup>Darrohn, 516.

<sup>31</sup>Darrohn, 514.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

expectations of the “pleasure principle” (which was primarily sexual in Freud’s understanding), the traumatised men were compelled to repeatedly relive (often through dreams) their traumatic experiences. In his early attempts to make sense of what is now often known as post-traumatic stress disorder, Freud posited a potential opposition

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In her article about aestheticism and consumerism in the story, Shaup notes:

It is almost universally agreed upon that Laura aestheticizes Scott’s body in the moment of viewing, and many critics conclude that Laura’s aestheticizing action signals her inability to confront the harsh economic realities facing Scott’s surviving family.<sup>33</sup>

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Viewing Laura’s putative aestheticisation of the carter’s body through a more psychoanalytical lens, her response might be considered in the guise of a largely subconscious encounter between the basic human instincts towards life and death. The vivid language that has evoked Laura’s sexual awakening right up until the point where she is confronted by the dead man, now transfers onto him who, rather than entering and filling her being (as the party had done) eludes her entirely (“he was far, far away”). Laura’s insinuation that there is an element of choice in the situation (“Never wake him up again”) reinforces the sense that, at some (unconscious) level, human will is in operation. But the psychic encounter she has had remains a mystery to herself as she is unable to explain her subsequent feelings about life to her brother.

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Rather than rationalising her response as class affiliation or otherwise, the more subliminal reading I propose allows the encounter to speak for itself. Burgeoning life is confronted with death and some form of virtual consummation occurs (“It was simply marvellous!” she tells her brother). To read the story without appreciating the connection between Laura’s sexual awakening and her encounter with death, is, I believe, to ignore the subliminal energy at the core the text. Acknowledging this dimension to the story, moreover, remains within the school that views Mansfield’s writing as deliberately elusive or subversive. Something has happened but neither Laura nor the reader can be entirely sure what it is. As Gray suggests that:

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like Laura, we do recognize something, even understand something. We just cannot “tell” what it is without recourse to those “regulatory regimes” that promise meaning in the guise of already established categories.<sup>34</sup>

Whilst recognising that psychoanalytic perspectives could now perhaps also be regarded as “established categories”, I would suggest that they were very far from such at the time that Mansfield was writing. On the contrary, as Seal and others have indicated, they offered new, creative and liberating frameworks within which to explore female sexuality and other pressing concerns of human existence. Examining the subliminal imagery that Mansfield used to describe sexual awakening and death in *The Garden Party* through the lens of psychoanalytical theory and in relation to the war has, I believe, further revealed the potency of her writing. She has captured the energy of subconscious forces whilst evading the net of over-precision. Much like human consciousness itself, the meanings of her text remain hidden in full view.

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<sup>33</sup>Shaup, 222.

<sup>34</sup>Gray, 82.

## Disclosure statement

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