

# Painful ambivalence: A Marxist feminist analysis of moral anxiety and gendered class consciousness in “The Garden Party”

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## ABSTRACT

*Through the utilization of Marxist feminist literary theory, the current article analyzes Catherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" to examine the interconnected themes of class consciousness, gender, and social injustice. With a specific focus on the protagonist, Laura Sheridan, and her gradually evolving awareness of class, the article examines the narrative's suburban New Zealand setting and the social hierarchy between the affluent Sheridans and their less fortunate neighbors. The luxurious garden party serves as a poignant reminder of the upper class's disconnection from society and their condescending attitudes towards individuals of lower status. In addition to this, the article delves into gender and its effects on the characters' experiences and expectations. Its objective is to gain an understanding of the social realities of the time through the theoretical lens of Marxist feminism and address the pressing concerns of that era. Specifically, the article examines how Laura's representation of class consciousness reflects the societal power dynamics of the time, how the intersection of gender and class influences Laura's mixed feelings about the class system in her social environment, and how "The Garden Party" demonstrates the impact of class and gender on social hierarchies and power structures in the early twentieth century. The article draws attention to the pressing social concerns of the time. It demonstrates how the theoretical lens of Marxist feminism can aid in understanding the social realities of the past.*

**Keywords:** class consciousness, gender, Marxist feminism, fiction, short story, symbolism, ambivalence, social context.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Catherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" explores complex interrelationships between class consciousness, gender, and social injustice. The story delves into the various and frequently

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conflicting ways in which these themes interact and impact the characters' lives. To acquire an in-depth analysis of how the story reflects the social realities of its era, this research article analyzes the story utilizing the theoretical framework of Marxist feminism (Eagleton, 2003; Hooks, 2000; Marx, 1999). The analytical focus is on the portrayal of class consciousness, gender, and social injustice in the narrative and how these themes interconnect with each other and reveal more significant societal issues. The investigation is mainly concentrated on Laura Sheridan, the protagonist of the story, and her experiences in dealing with her evolving class consciousness. This introductory section provides a summary of the plot and the primary characters and outlines the utilization of Marxist feminist literary theory in the analysis. This research aims to enhance the understanding of the intersections of class, gender, and social injustice in literature and their reflection in society through the story's central character, Laura.

Catherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" was initially published in 1922 and is set in a suburban area of New Zealand. The narrative's plot centers on the planning, hosting, and consequences of the Sheridan family's titular garden party. Laura Sheridan, the eldest daughter of the Sheridan family, is the protagonist and is tasked with organizing the party. Symbolism is used to convey profound messages and themes, and the narrative is written in a realistic style that emphasizes the inner emotions and thoughts of the characters. The story depicts the social hierarchy that exists between the wealthy Sheridans and their less privileged neighbors who work for them (Bashir et al., 2019; Vieco, 2020). The luxurious nature of the garden party highlights the upper class's disconnection from the rest of society, representing their insincerity and shallowness.

Furthermore, it demonstrates the privileges that the upper class enjoys and how they perceive those of lower status. Another significant theme explored in the narrative is gender and its impact on the characters' experiences and expectations (Donovan, 2014). The story portrays Laura's struggle to balance her desire to participate in the party, societal gender norms, and her evolving awareness of her neighbors' misfortune and tragic end.

The objective of analyzing the themes of class consciousness, gender, and social injustice in "The Garden Party" is to understand the social realities of the time through the theoretical lens of Marxist feminism. Marxist feminist literary theory is a multifaceted method that integrates the critical principles of feminist theory and Marxist theory, which examine the gendered dimensions of social interactions and the economic and political systems that constitute society (Barrett, 2014). Applying this theoretical framework is instrumental in deconstructing the intricacies of power and oppression that permeate the narrative of "The Garden Party" and provides an in-depth insight into the complex interplay of class consciousness, gender, and social injustice. Furthermore, this approach elucidates the broader societal problems reflected in the story, thereby shedding light on the pressing concerns of the time (Ferguson, 2016). Examining the narrative through this theoretical framework will illuminate the connections between these themes and their reflections on more significant societal problems. Ultimately, this research contributes to understanding the intersections of class, gender, and social injustice in literature and their impact

on society. Specifically, this research article aims to address the following research questions, which are critical to understanding the text's theoretical and socio-cultural significance:

1. How does Laura's representation of class consciousness in "The Garden Party" reflect the societal power dynamics of the time?
2. How does the intersection of gender and class shape Laura's ambivalence towards the class system in her social context?
3. In what ways does "The Garden Party" illustrate the impact of class and gender on social hierarchies and power structures in the early twentieth century?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Catherine Mansfield is regarded as one of the most important short story writers of the 20th century. Several literary elements, including modernism, symbolism, and gender, have been extensively studied and analyzed in research studies of her work. Her stream-of-consciousness technique, which allows for a thorough understanding of the characters' thoughts and emotions, has been the focus of much research on her literary production. Through this modernist technique, Mansfield explores the inner lives of her characters. This unique method of writing, often characterized by its fragmented and disjointed nature, captures the protagonist's raw and unrefined inner thoughts, exposing their deepest desires, fears, and memories. This technique adds a new depth to Mansfield's stories, allowing readers to immerse themselves in her characters' consciousness, experiencing their thoughts and emotions in real-time. Kaplan (2019), for instance, investigates the connection between Mansfield's contribution to modernist literature and her challenges as a female author during modernist experimentation with literary techniques, including stream-of-consciousness. According to Kaplan, the stream of consciousness in Mansfield's fiction is enigmatic and perplexing, blurring the lines between objective reality and subjective perception and pushing the boundaries of conventional storytelling. This narrative style technique offers a distinctive insight into the characters' inner turmoil and quest for inner peace.

Another recurring theme in the works of Mansfield focuses on the female gender and its socio-cultural realization in the early 20th century. Her characters, often women, are at the mercy of a patriarchal society that denies them the opportunity to be their true selves, instead forcing them into prescribed gender roles. Mansfield's use of free indirect discourse, shifting perspectives, and stream of consciousness allows her to delve deep into the experiences of her female characters, exposing the inner turmoil and struggles they face as they navigate the complexities of gender and social norms.

Vieco (2020) argues that Mansfield's portrayal of women in her stories challenges traditional gender roles and emphasizes the struggles of women in the predominantly patriarchal society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Characters like Laura Sheridan critique and

challenge social expectations around feminine gender and the character's struggle to meet societal norms around gender and power relations. Vieco further argues that social conventions, class consciousness, and the prevalent archetype of domestic femininity that dates back to Victorian times indoctrinate bourgeois women like Laura Sheridan, forcing them into specific schematic gendered roles. According to Khan et al. (2022), her writing style captures the fragmented, disjointed nature of this experience, reflecting the confusion and uncertainty her characters face as they try to reconcile their true human selves with the expectations placed upon them. With her signature style and a sharp eye for detail, Mansfield's works remain a poignant exploration of gender and societal norms, offering a nuanced and perplexing glimpse into the complexities of human experience.

The use of symbolism in the fictional writings of Katherine Mansfield serves multiple functions and highlights various themes in her work. Mansfield was a master of the subtle but powerful use of symbolism, and her works are replete with complex and intricate symbols that add layers of meaning to her stories. In her novels and short stories, symbols reinforce themes, such as the theme of gender and social norms, which is a recurring theme in her work. For example, in "The Garden Party," the garden party itself can be seen as a symbol of the superficiality and emptiness of the upper-class lifestyle and the disconnection between the privileged and the working class (Trotter, 2013). Symbols also enhance the emotional impact of Mansfield's stories, adding depth and nuance to the experiences of her characters. For instance, in "Miss Brill," the fur stole that Miss Brill wears symbolizes her loneliness and longing for connection, and its gradual transformation throughout the story reinforces the central theme of isolation and disconnection (Pracha, 2016).

In addition, symbols serve to illustrate the central conflict of Mansfield's stories, often highlighting the tension between societal norms and individual desires. For example, in "The Fly," the fly that the narrator encounters in his office can be seen as a symbol of the fleetingness of life, the futility of his work, and the crushing weight of societal expectations. With symbolism, Mansfield illuminates her characters' psychological and emotional struggles and voices the complexities of human experience (Drewery, 2011). Using symbolism in Katherine Mansfield's fictional writings is integral to her artistic vision, serving multiple functions and adding layers of meaning to her stories. Through her intricate and subtle use of symbols, Mansfield enhances the emotional impact of her stories, highlights central themes and conflicts, and gives voice to marginalized characters in society.

Several researchers have used a Marxist perspective to analyze Catherine Mansfield's literary works, concentrating on how capitalist social structures shape the lives of the characters and how they navigate and resist these restraints (Ahmad, 2019; Bashir et al., 2019; Kiziltaş, 2014; Kuch, 2021). These analyses offer points of view about the historical, social issues and the more universal societal issues that the stories reflect. These interpretations of Mansfield's writings emphasize how oppressive social structures thwart people's aspirations for freedom and autonomy. According to

Kuch (2021), the works of Catherine Mansfield, as interpreted by Marxists, demonstrate how individuals can still confront oppressive structures and protest injustice. Mansfield's characters, often women, face a range of issues related to gender, including restrictions on their education and career choices, unequal treatment in personal relationships, and societal expectations of appearance, behavior, and motherhood. Through these characters, Mansfield highlights how gender norms limit women's self-expression and hinder their personal growth and development (Kiziltaş, 2014).

When Mansfield's works are analyzed through the lens of Marxist feminist literary theory, it becomes evident that the intersections of class, gender, and economic systems play a significant role in shaping women's experiences. This critical framework allows for a deeper understanding of how Mansfield's works challenge the values of capitalism and patriarchal power structures and reflects the class struggle and power dynamics between the upper and lower classes. Moreover, the Marxist perspective provides a valuable tool for examining how Mansfield's works depict the exploitation of women and how gender and class inequalities reinforce each other through intersecting power dynamics and oppressive social norms. For example, Kaplan's (2019) analysis of Mansfield's "The Garden Party" and other stories explores the impact of characters' class consciousness on their perceptions of the world and their interactions with others. This analysis illuminates how the characters' class consciousness serves as a barrier that prevents them from recognizing the consequences of their actions and understanding the realities of the working class. As a result, the story exposes the hollowness and superficiality of the upper class and highlights the vast disparities in wealth and privilege between the different social classes. Through Marxist feminist literary theory, we better understand the societal power dynamics that shape the characters' lives in Mansfield's works and how these dynamics reflect broader societal issues.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The present article uses close textual reading as an analytical method, which involves meticulously examining and interpreting a literary work by closely scrutinizing its language and structure to uncover underlying themes and meanings (Smith, 2016). This method is widely used in literary research. It involves reading the text multiple times, identifying patterns and themes, and establishing connections between various passages while examining how particular words, phrases, and symbols are used (Federico, 2015). Incorporating knowledge of the text's cultural and historical context, the researcher develops a thesis or argument based on their analysis and supported by evidence from the text and their interpretation. Finally, the researcher uses this justification or thesis to draw conclusions from the text and establish connections to broader literary, cultural, or historical contexts. This method provides a detailed exploration of the text's nuances and complexities, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the literary work (Culler, 2010).

The current article employs Marxist feminism as a theoretical framework to analyze characters and themes concerning gender and class. Marxist feminist theory is a critical approach that combines the tenets of Marxism, which emphasizes how economic and material conditions shape social relations (Marx, 1999; Marx et al., 2002), with feminism, which examines how gender influences these relations (Donovan, 2014; Holmstrom, 2002). This approach critiques literary works from the perspective of how they reinforce or challenge patriarchal structures of power and how they represent the experiences of women and other marginalized groups concerning class and economic systems. Furthermore, it examines how literature can function as a means of social change and how literary texts can reflect and critique capitalist societies (Eagleton, 2003). The Marxist feminist literary approach argues that patriarchal power structures are deeply embedded in capitalist societies and that literature can reflect and reinforce these structures. This view regards literary texts not merely as artistic creations but also as social and historical documents that can reveal how these structures have shaped and continue to shape the experiences of women and other marginalized groups (Hooks, 2000).

Utilizing Marxist literary theory to analyze Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" offers several advantages. First, it allows for examining how class and economic systems affect the characters within the story. As the story takes place in an affluent household, the characters' class status significantly influences their lives and behavior. Second, Marxist literary theory uncovers the story's reflection and reinforcement of capitalist values and ideologies, including the characters' materialistic focus, lack of empathy for the working class, and self-absorption. These principles represent capitalist individualism and consumerism (Marx, 1999). Third, the theory critiques the story's reinforcement of patriarchal power structures. For example, the character Laura is constrained by traditional gender roles and societal expectations of femininity, pressured to prioritize others' needs over her own, and discouraged from challenging the status quo. Finally, Marxist literary theory highlights the story's portrayal of the class struggle and the divide between the wealthy and the working class, demonstrated through the contrast between the rich characters' luxurious lives and the poverty and hardships faced by the working-class community.

The current article focuses on the protagonist, Laura, who embodies traditional Victorian femininity and its associated power dynamics while also exploring the effects of economic class distinctions on individuals within society. Laura's ambivalence toward the gender and class systems in the story highlights the intricate relationship between identity, social status, and individual choice in a conservative social context. By analyzing the story through Marxist literary theory, the article aims to reveal how class, gender, and economic systems intersect and shape women's experiences, challenging patriarchal power structures and capitalist values. Ultimately, this approach emphasizes the importance of understanding how social structures of class, race, and gender intersect and shape literary representation and its potential role as a tool for social change.

#### **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

In "The Garden Party" by Catherine Mansfield, Laura undergoes a significant transformation as she develops a heightened sense of class consciousness and a concomitant awakening of her sexuality. Laura symbolizes the conflicts and contradictions arising from the intersections of class, gender, and social injustice. She is a complex and dynamic character who struggles with her role as a gendered member of the upper-class Sheridan family. Throughout the story, she is presented as a young woman torn between her desire to be a part of the privileged world of her family and her growing sense of discomfort with the superficiality and emptiness of their lifestyle.

One of the critical elements of Laura's character is her ambivalence towards the societal norms and class distinctions that shape her life. On the one hand, she is deeply invested in the traditions and expectations of her family and social class. She is eager to participate in the grand garden party, the story's centerpiece. On the other hand, she is deeply troubled by the social and economic inequality she sees around her and is increasingly uncomfortable with the superficiality of her world. Laura, as a member of the upper-class Sheridan family, is seen attempting to mimic her mother's voice and mannerisms while talking to a lower-class member but feels ashamed for doing so: "“Good morning," she said, copying her mother's voice. But that sounded so fearfully affected that she was ashamed and stammered like a little girl, "Oh—er—have you come—is it about the marquee?”" (Mansfield, 2006, p. 251, all subsequent citations refer to this edition of "The Garden Party"). The fact that she stammers like a little girl further emphasizes her discomfort and lack of confidence in her class identity. The way she speaks to the working men who have come to set up the marquee for the garden party in this affected manner highlights the power dynamics at play. As a member of the upper class, Laura holds a certain level of authority and privilege over the working men, which is reflected in how she speaks to them. This also reinforces the class distinctions in the society depicted in the story.

Additionally, "copying her mother's voice" implies that Laura is still young and not fully formed in her class identity. This also implies that she is still trying to internalize societal norms and expectations placed on women of her class, further emphasizing the gendered aspect of her class identity. Laura's gender further complicates this ambivalence, as she is repeatedly shown to be caught between the traditional expectations of femininity and the expectations of her class. For example, when first introduced in the story, she is described as "busy" and "fluttering" as she helps her mother prepare for the party. This characterization reinforces traditional gender roles. However, as the story progresses, she begins to question these expectations and becomes increasingly assertive in her desire to understand those outside her class's lives.

Although Laura is initially uncomfortable and nervous when she meets the working men who have come to set up the marquee for the garden party, as she becomes more relaxed and friendly, she begins to see the working men as friendly and kind, in contrast to her privileged background. This is highlighted by her observation of the workmen's smiles, which she interprets as "cheerful" and "friendly":

His smile was so easy, so friendly, that Laura recovered. What lovely eyes he had, small but such a dark blue! Moreover, now she looked at the others; they were smiling too. "Cheer up; we will not bite," their smile seemed to say. How charming the workers were! (p. 251)

The narrative voice in the passage aligns with the perception of Laura, who finds the working class as kind and friendly people, and the way Laura looks at them through the lens of her upper-class privilege. This passage suggests that when people from different class backgrounds meet, they can have different perspectives of each other. However, it also implies that class distinctions and societal expectations still affect their interactions. As her interactions with the working men challenge her preconceptions and make her question the societal structures that separate people based on their class and gender, Laura begins to see them as more human and relatable, noticing small details such as the tall man's enjoyment of the smell of lavender.

Laura's musings about wanting to have workmen as friends instead of the "silly boys" she typically socializes with highlight the societal expectations placed on her as a gendered member of the upper class: "Oh, how extraordinarily nice workmen were, she thought. Why couldn't she have workmen for her friends rather than the silly boys she danced with and who came to Sunday night supper?" (p. 252). The expectation for her to only associate with those of a similar social class and status is reinforced, and she is not encouraged to form genuine connections with those of different class backgrounds. The passage also highlights the difference in lifestyle and access to luxuries between the working class and the upper class, as evident by the fact that the working men have time to appreciate the smell of lavender. At the same time, Laura is busy preparing for the garden party.

Laura's growing class consciousness is also linked to her awakening sexuality as she begins challenging the restrictive gender roles and expectations imposed on her by society. Throughout the story, Laura experiences a transformation as she grapples with her sexual desires and the societal anticipations placed upon her as a young woman. The story reflects the tensions and complexities of adolescence and how societal norms shape and constrain individuals' experiences of sexuality. Mansfield portrays the nuances of Laura's journey, highlighting the tensions between individual desire and societal constraints and the interplay between class consciousness and sexuality. Through Laura's transformation, the story sheds light on the experiences of young women navigating the complexities of sexuality and class in early 20th-century society. The narrative portrays Laura's growing sexual awareness which can be seen symbolically in the vivid description of pink canna lilies and her highly sensuous response to the flowers:

Nothing but lilies—canna lilies, big pink flowers, wide open, radiant, almost frighteningly alive on bright crimson stems. "O-oh, Sadie!" said Laura, and the sound was like a little moan. She crouched down as if to warm herself at that blaze of lilies; she felt they were in her fingers, on her lips, growing in her breast. (p. 253)



This description of the lilies symbolizes Laura's budding adolescence and sexual consciousness as concomitant with her growing class consciousness. The lilies, with their big pink flowers that are wide open and radiant, represent the emergence of Laura's sexuality. Pink is often associated with femininity, and the blooming of the flowers can be seen as a metaphor for her sexual awakening. The phrase "almost frighteningly alive" suggests that Laura is both excited and scared by these new feelings. Her crouching down as if to "warm herself" at the flowers growing in her breast further emphasizes that she is experiencing a new, powerful sensation. The lilies can also be seen as a symbol of the power of nature and the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth, which is also related to Laura's awakening as she attempts to reconcile her affluent upper-class life with misery, poverty, and death around their house.

Laura's sister Jose is preoccupied with the planning and execution of the titular garden party, which serves as a symbol of the superficiality and emptiness of the upper class. She is also portrayed as being dismissive of the working-class neighbors and their struggles, exemplifying the disconnection and lack of empathy that often arises from a privilege. Her character serves as a foil to the protagonist Laura, whose moral qualms about the party and its disregard for the death of a neighbor contrast with her sister's single-minded focus on the event:

Oh, Laura!" Jose began to be seriously annoyed. "If you stop a band playing whenever someone has an accident, you will lead a very strenuous life. I am every bit as sorry about it as you. I feel just as sympathetic." Her eyes hardened. She looked at her sister just as she used to when they were little and fighting. "You will not bring a drunken workman back to life by being sentimental," she said softly. "Drunk! Who said he was drunk?" Laura turned furiously to Jose. She said, just as they had used to say on those occasions, "I am going straight up to tell Mother."  
(p. 258)

Jose's reaction to Laura's suggestion to stop the garden party due to the death of a poor working man in the neighborhood illustrates the disregard and lack of empathy the upper class holds towards the working class. She dismisses Laura's concern and calls her "extravagant" for suggesting canceling the garden party, showing how she views the life of a working-class person as insignificant. She also refers to the deceased man as "drunk," a stereotype often dehumanizing and demonizing the working class. Jose's dismissive attitude and assumption that the man was drunk reflects the upper class's tendency to stereotype and dehumanize the working class. On the contrary, Laura's empathy and willingness to put the needs of the working class before her pleasure is a challenge to this attitude and the class distinctions it reinforces. This interaction also highlights the gendered dynamics at play, as Laura is portrayed as more sensitive and empathetic than her sister, reflecting societal expectations of women to be more nurturing and caring. Further, the phrase "I'm going straight up to tell mother" also highlights the family's power dynamics and the upper class's patriarchal nature. Laura, as a woman, is not given any agency in decision-making, and she has to resort to telling her mother to have her voice heard.

On the other hand, Laura's reaction shows her awareness of class distinctions and their injustice. She recognizes the insensitivity of the upper class and their disregard for the lives of working-class people. Her attempt to stop the party and her anger towards Jose's dismissive attitude towards the death of the working man shows her solidarity with the working class and her rejection of class distinctions. This highlights the internalized class distinctions and societal norms that Laura struggles to come to terms with. As she grapples with the class-based realities of her life, Laura fails to see any female gender role model for herself that she could identify with and reassure herself about the justification of her feelings towards members of the lower classes.

As another foil character to Laura, her mother, Mrs. Sheridan, is depicted as highly concerned with the details of the garden party, including the invitations, decorations, and food. She is also shown to be deeply invested in maintaining the appearance of propriety and respectability, as seen in her insistence that the party goes ahead despite a death in their immediate neighborhood. Mrs. Sheridan asserts her position as an upper-class member when her daughter Laura expresses discomfort about the party and the neighbors' death. Laura's mother, like her sister Jose, is dismissive of Laura's concerns about the poor man who has died and instead focuses on the importance of maintaining the garden party, which serves as a symbol of the family's wealth and status:

To Laura's astonishment, her mother behaved just like Jose; it was harder to bear because she seemed amused. She refused to take Laura seriously. "But, my dear child, use your common sense. It is only by accident that we have heard of it. If someone had died there normally—and I cannot understand how they keep alive in those poky little holes—we should still be having our party, shouldn't we?" Laura had to say "yes" to that, but she felt it was all wrong. (p. 258)

Laura finds her mother's response even more unbearable than Jose's because she treats her concerns about the death of a neighbor as the musing of an innocent child. Laura is denied a voice in the family as she dominates her opinions. Mrs. Sheridan symbolizes the superficiality of the upper class and their detachment from the reality of life. She is portrayed as someone primarily concerned with maintaining the appearance of propriety and respectability rather than genuinely understanding and empathizing with the struggles and difficulties of those outside her social class. The mother's comment that she "cannot understand how they keep alive in those poky little holes" further reinforces the idea that the upper class is detached from the reality of the poor and their struggles. This detachment allows them to continue with their luxurious lifestyles without feeling remorse or any sense of responsibility towards the less fortunate. The mother's comment also reinforces a capitalist idea that the poor are responsible for their conditions, and it is not the responsibility of the upper class to help them. This highlights how the capitalist system perpetuates the oppression of the working class by the ruling class and how the ruling class is often unable to see the reality of the lives of those beneath them because they are so entrenched in their privilege.

Mrs. Sheridan's response to her daughter's objection to holding a party when their neighbor has died is to put the expensive hat on her head and reinforce her position as a member of an upper-class family: "'Darling!' Mrs. Sheridan got up and came over to her, carrying the hat. Before Laura could stop her, she had popped it on" (p. 255). This highlights how class distinctions are reinforced through material possessions, specifically Laura's hat. The hat is described as "sweet" and is associated with a specific day, indicating that it is a fashionable and expensive item. Later in the story, the mother specifically asks for this hat to be worn by Laura at their garden party: "Mrs. Sheridan's voice floated down the stairs. 'Tell her to wear that sweet hat she had on last Sunday'" (p. 254). The fact that Mrs. Sheridan specifically requests Laura to wear the hat at the garden party suggests that it symbolizes Sheridan's wealth and status and that they want to flaunt it to the guests. The hat also symbolizes the societal pressure on Laura to conform to upper-class expectations and reinforces the idea that material possessions are a means of reinforcing class distinctions.

The mother's emphasis on the importance of appearance, as demonstrated by her insistence that Laura wears a "sweet hat" and her comment about the hat being "made for you," further reinforces the idea that upper-class women are valued for their aesthetic appeal rather than for their moral character. Additionally, the fact that Laura's mother is dictating what she should wear further emphasizes how gender and class intersect, as Laura is expected to conform to societal expectations of upper-class femininity. Using the word "sweet" to describe the hat also implies a certain infantilization and objectification of Laura, as well as a focus on her appearance over her identity.

Later in the narrative, feeling her expensive black hat is out of place at the poor house of the dead man, Laura feels apologetic about the contrast between her opulent life and the poverty of the Scotts. She could only say: "Forgive my hat" (p. 259). The fact that Laura feels the need to apologize for her appearance and that the hat is described as a source of shame highlights the societal expectation that women from privileged backgrounds should not flaunt their wealth and privilege but rather be modest and humble. Further, Laura's encounter with the death of the poor Scott, who seems to be sleeping peacefully, highlights the contrast between the extravagance of the garden party and the harsh reality of poverty, death, and class differences. It also highlights Laura's consciousness of her privilege and her ambivalence towards it, her guilt, and her realization that there is a bigger picture than just the garden party and the class distinctions:

There lay a young man, fast asleep—sleeping so soundly, so profoundly, that he was far from them both. Oh, so remote, so peaceful. He was dreaming. His head was sunk into the pillow... He was given up on his dream. What did garden parties and baskets and lace frocks matter to him? He was far from all those things. He was terrific, beautiful. (p. 260)

Laura encounters the dead body of a poor Scotts man and is struck by the contrast between the lavishness of her own life and the poverty of the man's. The imagery used to describe the dead man, such as his peaceful sleep and remote beauty, highlights the disconnect between the lives of

the wealthy and the poor. The passage also suggests that while the wealthy are occupied with trivialities such as garden parties, the poor face a reality far removed from such concerns.

Laura experiences a profound sense of emotion and discomfort after encountering the man's dead body and leaving Scott's house. This encounter is a turning point in her development, as she is forced to confront the stark realities of life and death and the deep divide between the upper and lower classes. The experience is both unsettling and transformative, as Laura is suddenly confronted with a harsh reality at odds with her privileged upbringing. This encounter causes her to question her values, beliefs, and place in the world. She is overwhelmed by sadness, confusion, and emptiness as she grapples with these new emotions and experiences. As she encounters her brother after she rushes out of the Scotts' house, Laura feels speechless to describe and make sense of her experience inside the house:

Laurie put his arm around her shoulder. "Don't cry," he said in his warm, loving voice. "Was it awful?" "No," sobbed Laura. "It was simply marvelous. However, Laurie—" She stopped, she looked at her brother. "Isn't life," she stammered, "isn't life—" But she couldn't explain what life was. No matter. He quite understood. "Isn't it, darling?" said Laurie. (p. 261)

Her statement "Isn't life, isn't life-" is an expression of her confusion and realization of the inequality and injustice in the society she lives in. Her brother, who is also from a privileged background, acknowledges her confusion but doesn't fully understand it, which further highlights the upper class's disconnection and lack of empathy toward the working class. This encounter with the poor Scotts' man's death and the contrast with her privilege has shaken Laura's understanding of the world, and she is trying to find ways to reconcile her privilege with the suffering of others.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The above analysis shows that Katherine Mansfield's literary art challenges social, ideological, and gender-based schematic structures in her contemporary society. However, she abstains from providing a clear resolution or conclusion to the events and themes presented in the story, leaving the ending open for interpretation. The ending thus raises many questions but leaves interpretations up to the reader. This is achieved using subtle hints, ambiguity, and the presentation of multiple perspectives. The story raises many questions about class, gender, and social injustice but does not offer clear answers. Instead, it invites the reader to contemplate the complexities of these issues and their impact on the characters and society. This open-ended nature of the story contributes to its enduring appeal and relevance, as it encourages the reader to draw conclusions and think critically about the themes presented. It also allows for multiple interpretations and makes the story relevant to different readers and cultures as they interpret it according to their contextual realities around gender, class, socio-economic divide, and individual feelings and emotions.

Barrett's (2014) argument regarding early twentieth-century English fiction highlights the trend toward plotless and open-ended narratives influenced by writers such as Anton Chekhov. This form of storytelling challenged traditional narrative structures and provided a more complex portrayal of social issues. D'hoker and Eggermont (2015) also emphasized the importance of the open-ended story form in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century fiction as it allowed for a nuanced exploration of class and gender ideologies. By denying straightforward plot structures and closure of narratives, authors were able to explore the complexities of social issues and present them in a more realistic and thought-provoking manner. This approach provided a fresh perspective on social issues, often ignored or marginalized in earlier literary works. In this way, the open-ended narrative form was essential for addressing social injustices and promoting critical thinking about societal norms and values.

Analysis of the current article also shows that the character of Laura Sheridan in "The Garden Party" represents the struggle to reconcile privilege with reality and the internalization of societal norms and class distinctions. Laura is a member of a well-to-do upper-class family. Throughout the story, Laura is a dutiful daughter eager to please her family and uphold their societal status. However, as the story progresses, it becomes evident that Laura struggles to reconcile her privileged upbringing with the reality of the world around her. As the eldest daughter, she is tasked with helping her mother plan and organize the garden party, an event designed to showcase the family's wealth and status. Laura is fully invested in the party, and her mother's approval is essential. However, she is also aware of the superficiality of the event and the disconnect between her family's upper-class lifestyle and their neighbors' poverty.

Laura's struggles to internalize class distinctions and societal norms form the story's central tension. Through her journey, Mansfield presents a nuanced and critical examination of how gender, class, and societal norms shape our experiences and interactions and how these forces can lead to feelings of isolation and disconnection. As Kaya (2011) notes in her analysis of gender roles in Mansfield's fiction, the female characters in the story are subject to the same class distinctions as the male characters but are also subject to gendered expectations and limitations. This exploration of gender-based stereotyping continues in contemporary Western and postcolonial fictional production (Khan et al., 2020). Kaya suggests that Laura's position as the eldest daughter and her involvement in planning the garden party reflect her mother's expectation that she will assume a domestic role in the family. This tension is only heightened when she encounters the dead body of the poor Scotts man, further emphasizing the class distinction and disparity in society. Through Laura's character, Mansfield critically examines how societal norms, class, and gender shape our experiences and interactions.

Further research could delve into the broader societal context of the story, specifically exploring the historical background and cultural norms surrounding class distinction and gender expectations in early 20th-century New Zealand, where the story is set. Examining Mansfield's writing style and themes could also be a valuable area of study and a comparative analysis with

other works of literature from the same period that deal with similar themes. Additionally, an investigation into Marxist feminist literary theory and its application to the study of works of fiction could deepen the understanding of the analysis presented in the current article by focusing on reclaiming agency for women in a patriarchal social setting (Khan et al., 2021). Moreover, it would be interesting to examine the impact of colonialism and imperialism on the development of class consciousness in the New Zealand context of the story and to explore the representation of indigenous peoples in works of literature from the same period.

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