

Sheridans' attitudes towards the death of a carter in Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party"

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Abstract

Katherine Mansfield's short story "The Garden Party" portrays the scenario in which different members of upper-middle class Sheridan family express varied attitudes hearing the news of the death of a poor carter, the nearly neighbour. Among the Sheridans, Laura is the most sympathetic one who becomes emotional at that situation. Class, being the main difference between the two neighbouring families – the Sheridans and the Scotts, majority of the Sheridans do not feel the sympathy for the dead man. The aim of this paper is to focus on the Sheridans to present their attitudes towards the dead carter and to identify their varied levels of perceptions about the harsh reality of life.

Keywords: Katherine Mansfield, "The Garden Party", Sheridans, attitudes, poverty, death

Introduction

"The Garden Party" is one of the best-known short stories by Katherine Mansfield, a successful female writer of the literary history of 20th century (Huang and Feng 71). In Mansfield's "The Garden Party", two classes have been shown: one is the upper-middle class Sheridan family who maintained Victorian socio-moral values and the other is the lower class Scott family. In spite of living near to each other, the two families are divided with varieties of social classes, principles etc. The Sheridans plan to arrange a party in their attractive garden. The protagonist of this story, Laura, a pretty daughter of this family plays the central role to decorate the whole party this time. While arranging the garden party, they hear the news of an accidental death of Mr. Scott, the carter. Except Laura, the Sheridan family does not bother about this news. Laura thinks about cancelling the party while other members are totally opposite to her. The story reveals the characters' varied reactions and attitudes towards the Scott family. This paper aims at identifying the vivid attitudes and perceptions towards the death of Mr. Scott, the poor carter. The study also identifies the levels of their perceptions about the hard realities of life – poverty and death through the members of the Sheridans.

Literature Review

Several researches have been conducted on both the thematic and stylistic issues of Mansfield's "The Garden Party". This paper will focus on the attitudes of upper-middle class Sheridan family towards the death of a poor carter. Related studies will be discussed here.

Hubert Zapf (1985) [8] explored his study to show that Laura links the two different worlds in her 'transcendent' experience (p.44). Laura is easy-going, sensitive and sympathetic. Atkinson (2006) [2] claimed in his study, "we cannot be sure whether Laura has been permanently changed or not" (p.54). Here, it is clear that Laura wants to break the class boundary; but her family may not allow her. In the story, it has been seen that she likes one of the workers' personality. She is the only member who wants to cancel the party because of the death news. Zeng Jiaying

(2010) [4] demonstrated, "in the very end of the story, the impact from the death scene changes to a true understanding of death and life because of the innocence and virgin of Laura". Here, Zeng indicated that Laura understands something important for life.

Kaya (2011) [6] depicted, "Laura is, in the end, in a more precarious situation than ever before, which one can with good reason attribute to the conventional Victorian education that limits her vision to . . . lulling her to continue her existence happily but negligent of the truths of life" (p.61). Kaya made this study on Laura's learning from the upper-middle class she belongs to. Laura cannot come out of the Victorian morals she has learned before. Kaya also expressed, "To make matters far worse, to alternate between the two different settings when unready, as well as between moments of joy and contact with poverty, ugliness, and death, afflict Laura's soul, causing her to change into an uncertain, inconsistent, and vulnerable adult who does not know what to think, how to feel, or where to belong" (p.61). Kaya elaborated the crisis which the growing girl, Laura, faces. Olsson (2016) [7] presented, "Laura, and her experiences of events that are made insignificant by the rest of the narrative" (p.1). Olsson focused on how Laura's activities have been observed throughout the story.

Alam (2017) [1] portrayed "the argument over the settlement of either continuation or discontinuation of the party" (p.54). This study also presents the conflict upon celebrating the party. Huang and Feng (2020) [3] claimed, "Mrs. Sheridan, is very self-concerned and hypocritical, and our main character Laura has special traits concerning her upbringing: loving, caring, innocent, and friendly, and does not have a prejudice on the class differences" (p.84). In this research made by Huang and Feng, Laura's personality has been contrasted to that of her mother. Huang and Feng also notified "the upper-middle class' enjoyment and indifference" in their study (p.84). The present study will demonstrate on how various members of the Sheridans show attitudes towards the death of the carter and how much they have perceived about the realities of life.

Analysis

The prominent short story writer Katherine Mansfield presented two different classes through "The Garden party". The writer also clarifies the characters from different perspectives to show both the inner mind and the outward expressions. The Sheridans belong to the upper-middle class which is prestigious also. They can afford arranging the garden parties. From the beginning of the story, the readers have a festive mood. All are happy in the Sheridan family to celebrate the party on a nice day. The use of words like hats, roses, arum lilies, canna lilies signifies the aristocracy of them.

The members of the Sheridans live in a dreamy world where they have parties along with the arrangement of marquee, band, lovely flowers and delicious foods like sandwich, pastry etc. The garden party is an example of luxury. On the other hand, Scotts lead a poverty-stricken life and they confront with the harsh realities of life which Sheridans cannot even imagine. However, when they hear the news of the accidental death of the neighbour, Mr. Scott, they express varied reactions. Among the Sheridans, Laura is the most sensitive one. She wants to cancel the garden party immediately. In Laura's voice, "however are we going to stop everything?" (p.6) But Jose does not feel the same like Laura. Rather, she becomes astonished and considers Laura as "absurd" and "extravagant" (p.7).

Stop the garden-party? My dear Laura, don't be so absurd. Of course we can't do anything of that kind. Nobody expects us to. Don't be so extravagant (p.7).

In her heart, Laura feels deeply about the dead man and his family members. Again, she protests saying, "But we can't possibly have a garden-party with a man dead just outside the front gate" (p.7). At least, she tries to stop the band saying, "And just think of what the band would sound like to that poor woman," (p.7). Jose also expresses that she is sympathetic too. But she does not see the necessity to stop the party for a lower class worker. Jose also addresses the carter as "drunken workman" (p.7).

In this story, Jose has been seen practicing a quite melancholic song for the garden party, the festival atmosphere.

"This Life is Wee-ary,
A Tear—a sigh.
A Love that Chan-ges,
This Life is Wee-ary,
A Tear—a sigh.
A Love that Chan-ges,
And then... Good-bye!

This Life is Wee-ary,
Hope comes to Die.
A Dream—a Wa-kening (pp.3-4).

But in practical sense, Jose does not have sympathy for the Scott family. She does not realize the real meaning of life, the harsh truth.

Being failed, Laura pleads to convince her mother, Mrs. Sheridan. But the mother gets relief hearing that the accident did not happen in the garden. Laura has a fellow-feeling for the neighbours and it is clear from her speech, The band and everybody arriving. They'd hear us, mother; they're nearly neighbours (p.8).

Like Jose, Mrs. Sheridan not only refuses the request of Laura but also thinks it unnecessary to stop the party and

makes a disdainful comment about the Scotts saying, "If someone had died there normally--and I can't understand how they keep alive in those poky little holes—we should still be having our party, shouldn't we" (p.8)?

Laura cannot but say "yes" in the answer with a pathetic heart. The party has been held and Laura somehow consoles herself that she will think about the matter after the party. She becomes quite confused whether she is extravagant or not? Whether her mother and sister are right or not? Though Laura becomes upset, soon she pretends to be happy and passes the day enjoying with the others. According to Sebnem Kaya (2011) [6], Laura gets "conventional but false education" (p.54) which hinders her to sympathise the others. When the party is over, Mr. Sheridan expresses a grief for the poor fellow. "I suppose you didn't hear of a beastly accident that happened to--day" (p.9)? He added, The chap was married too. Lived just below in the lane, leaves a wife and half a dozen kiddies, so they say (p.9).

Suddenly Mrs. Sheridan gets an idea to show sympathy to the poor family by sending the left-over foods and "arum lilies" as they might not have seen such kind of flowers. And she chooses Laura to send her to the Scotts' house. But later, Jose rejects the idea of sending flowers as Laura has worn a lace frock. Laura becomes speechless whether she is doing the right thing or not. However, she goes there with a basket full of foods. The home is solemn. And reaching there, Laura understands that her shiny party dress with the gorgeous hat looks awkward at that environment. All of them are mourning. Mrs. Scott has been described in this way, "Her face, puffed up, red, with swollen eyes and swollen lips, looked terrible" (p.11). The woman who has lost her husband recently is naturally shocked with a scattered mind. At that moment, Laura becomes thoughtful about life and death while she sees the dead body. Looking at the dead man's face, she thinks that he is sleeping peacefully and the things around him cannot touch him or his feelings. Seeing the dead man lying on the bed, Laura realizes the hard reality of life. The dead man seems to be very much happier than anyone present at that house. In the story, Mansfield narrates,

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....What did garden-parties and baskets and lace frocks matter to him? He was far from all those things. He is wonderful, beautiful. While they were laughing and while the band was playing, this marvel had come to the lane (pp.11-12).

Laura understands that the man is sleeping with tranquility. Nothing like this garden party and the other things bothers him. She feels sorrow for the man's family members and cannot control tears from her eyes. Laura's apology can be understood through her speech, "Forgive my hat" (p.12). The presence of the hat seems to her dishonouring for the dead man at that situation. It is also very clear that Laura realizes the absolute truth of life from this event as she tries to ask her brother Laurie something about life but cannot complete, "isn't life" (p.12). It has been seen that Laurie, the brother, has somewhat same sympathetic mind. He feels Laura's realization and says to her, "Isn't it, darling" (p. 12)? At the beginning of this story, Laura was so excited and her expression to her brother was, "Oh, I do love parties, don't you?" But at the end, only Laura realizes the reality of life. She gets the meaning of life though she cannot express clearly. She understands that there is also

another life or another truth – the death and eternity, outside of their dreamy house or dreamy world.

Conclusion

Mansfield has been creative and outstanding throughout the story with her skillful portrayal of the characters. The Sheridans enjoy the luxury of life and remain indifferent towards the underprivileged. Only the main character, Laura, becomes quite emotional and feels sympathy for the family. Laura's perception of the reality of life has made her distinct from the others.

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