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The garden as a liminal space: Women's ideological becoming in Catherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party"

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Abstract

This research article investigates the symbolic importance of the garden in Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party," particularly as it represents feminine spaces, liminality, and ideological becoming. Employing close textual analysis and feminist literary theory, it charts the garden's role as a complex symbol that reflects and contests traditional gender roles and broader cultural norms. Arguing for the garden as an ideological site of transformation for protagonist Laura Sheridan, this paper examines her passage from the naive innocence of girlhood to an awakened awareness of the social inequalities and moral complexities that surround her. The paper illustrates, through a detailed study of the text, how the garden in "The Garden Party" is, by turns, a reflection and a refraction of Victorian femininity, domesticity, and class distinction.

Keywords: Gender roles, Victorian society, Liminal space, Ideological becoming, Female sexuality, Social norms, Conventional space, Domesticity, Identity, Social class.



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Introduction

In literature, gardens are often portrayed as symbolic spaces to represent the domestic, interior environments associated with traditional female values and, as is frequently the case, the transgressive, liminal space offering female characters the opportunity for creativity and agency. In Frances Hodgson Burnett's 1911 novel *The Secret Garden* and Katherine Mansfield's 1922 short story "The Garden Party," gardens play seminal roles that enrich our understanding of gendered spaces, societal expectations, and each protagonist's intellectual and aesthetic maturation. In *The Secret Garden*, Mary Lennox, born to wealthy British parents in colonial India, is left abandoned on her uncle's spacious English estate after her parents and household servants fall victim to an outbreak of cholera. Housekeeper Mrs. Medlock is instructed to keep Mary from "bothering" her uncle, who travels extensively, which leaves Mary to her own devices until she is befriended by an assortment of characters, including Colin Craven, the 10-year-old son of her recluse uncle's brother. Aided and abetted by this band of young, able-bodied co-conspirators, Mary discovers a long-neglected, walled garden, which the children restore to its former beauty and vitality. The garden serves as a figurative vehicle for the children's awakening, as they are transformed through their interactions with the fertile earth and nascent greenery, as narrator Mary instructs: "If you look the right way, you can see that the whole world is a garden." Analogously, the garden in "The Garden Party" serves as a distinct space that carries complex gendered symbolism and is crucial in understanding the Victorian gendered norms.

In "The Garden Party," the symbolic significance of the garden can be examined fruitfully through a feminist lens. With the protagonist Laura Sheridan, the garden serves as a traditional space tied to middle-class activities and values—as a leisurely place, a site of social interaction, and a place of appreciation for beauty—reflecting a certain way of life. It, however, also stands as a liminal space that confounds traditional and modern notions of femininity and sexuality. In the garden, as she relates to it, Laura's experiences allow a sense of freedom, conform to, and at times defy her own social stereotypes, delving into the complex ways that social identity is formed. In this regard, in this investigation of the symbolic significance of gardens in "The Garden Party," the garden emerges as a feminine safe space, providing shelter and freedom for the expression of gendered identities.

Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp, born in 1888 in Wellington, New Zealand, was a revolutionary figure in modernist literature. She wrote under her pen name Katherine Mansfield. Her early life was characterized by a strong desire for independence and a profound interest in literature, prompting her to begin writing at a young age (Woods, 2007). At nineteen, Mansfield left New Zealand for the United Kingdom, where she sought to further her literary ambitions. In London, she became associated with the Bloomsbury Group, a collective of writers, artists, and intellectuals who significantly influenced modernist thought and culture (Martin, 2018). Through her association with such a diverse group of creative writers, her writing style and thematic concerns began to take shape. Despite her relatively small literary output, her short stories would become celebrated for their groundbreaking narrative techniques, as well as their psychological depth and their exploration of various themes, including "identity, gender, and human relationships" (Bennett, 2004). An innovative author, Mansfield's work would go on to be lauded for its originality and its significant contribution to the evolution of the modern short story. She died at the age of 34 due to complications from tuberculosis.

The current article investigates the symbolic role of the garden in "The Garden Party," specifically as a representation of femininity and women's experiences. Indeed, gardens in literature frequently

serve as more than simply backdrops to the action; rather, they become active participants in the narrative, reflecting and even shaping the psychological and emotional landscape of the characters. By closely reading the presentation and symbolism of the garden, we hope to show the way the natural environment has been used by Mansfield to engage with and challenge cultural norms and constraints regarding womanhood and the Victorian sense of propriety and proper female behavior. In unpacking the symbolic complexity of the garden, we hope to explore the intricate intersections between women, nature, and culture to offer new insights into the ways literature embodies and shapes understandings of gender roles and gendered identity. The current article, therefore, addresses the following specific research questions:

RQ1: What symbolic significance does the garden hold for the female characters in "The Garden Party"?

RQ2: How does the garden symbolize a paradoxical space of restrictions and opportunities for women in the Victorian era?

RQ3: What is the symbolic importance of the garden for the ideological becoming of Laura as a young woman growing up in a middle-class Victorian family?

Literature Review

Key recurring themes in literary analysis of Katherine Mansfield's short stories include the examination of how the lives of children as a whole and the lives of working-class children more specifically were marginalized by societal conditions and how, as a consequence, they suffered and were alienated (Banerjee, 2022; Gavin, 2012). In her examination of Mansfield's short story, Banerjee (2022) maintains that the "Life of Ma Parker" was a captivating depiction of the trials experienced by working-class children, such as those she experiences over her grandson Lennie's painful death. Indeed, Banerjee insists that the short story weaves with what she shows is Mansfield's larger triumphal theme on the disadvantaged experiences of such children as they were socially excluded, participated in humiliating child labor, were abysmally cared for by their parents, and slept in squalid residences. Through her stories, Mansfield not only delves into the psychological depth of these experiences but also provides a sociological critique of the societal structures that perpetuate such suffering.

Marxist-humanist themes in her short stories critique the exploitation of lower classes by bourgeois classes and emphasize the value of individual freedom in class-conscious societies. Oulanne (2021), for instance, examines how Katherine Mansfield's short stories delve into the exploitation of the lower classes by the bourgeois in the early 20th century's emerging consumer culture. It highlights Mansfield's representation of the relationship between material objects and human experiences which is indicative of an over-awareness of sensation and a mystification of the world of commodities which she inherits, albeit critically, from the intellectual climate of extreme modernism and the contemporary bourgeois ideology. Mansfield's stories are a response to psychological preoccupations and the organization of her historical moment (see Watson, 2022). The stories also draw upon the resources of contemporary Western society to analyze, negate, and offer alternative ideological positions.

Research studies have considered "The Garden Party" from the theoretical perspectives of postcoloniality, Marxism, and feminism, offering a range of interpretations regarding the role, prospects, and struggles of gendered identity in the Victorian period (Khan et al., 2023). Aretoulakis (2013) reads "The Garden Party" through a postcolonial lens, positioning Mansfield's work as part of a broader postcoloniality that, no longer merely chronological, suggests that the postcolonial is not an absolute but rather a shifting space that connects coloniality and its antitheses

in what Homi Bhabha calls "hybridity.". Instead of crossing the colonial, the anti-colonial, and the decolonial, the postcolonial occurs as a continuous process that gives rise to a "third space" in which traditional, binary oppositions become troubled. Against this backdrop, these contradictory moments where colonial and anti-colonial intersect also describe Mansfield's work effectively.

In terms of the narrative voice, her stories continually shift according to the particularities of the event before it, and of the person or persons within it. Day (2011) analyzes how ideological conflicts and power dynamics are influenced by the nuances of speech in Mansfield's fictional production. It explores Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of assimilating others' discourse in one's ideological becoming, focusing on characters like Laura Sheridan, whose evolving social awareness is a central theme in "The Garden Party". The article also examines the significance of voicelessness, particularly in the context of gender, class, and colonialism. It concludes by suggesting that the story's exploration of the resistance of writing to fully capture voices adds depth and complexity to its ethical and experiential dimensions. Analogously, as a coming-of-age narrative, "The Garden Party" has been the recipient of several analyses. Atkinson (2006), for example, argues that readers disagree on the lesson Laura Sheridan learns in "The Garden Party" but they agree she experiences a significant change. Some see it as her realization of social constraints, while others view it as a transition from experience to innocence. Some emphasize her artistic sensitivity, suggesting she triumphs over her family's lack of art appreciation. Others find the story inconclusive, suggesting it offers no clear moral. Overall, readers struggle to interpret a narrative that defies traditional understanding, mirroring Laura's attempt to find meaning in her experiences.

Women's leisure activities in the garden can serve as a source of empowerment and resistance. According to Raisborough and Bhatti (2007), in Victorian England, women used gardening as a means to challenge traditional gender roles. Gardens provide a space for self-expression, creativity, and autonomy. Women's engagement with gardening can be a form of resistance against patriarchal norms and a way to assert their agency and identity. They analyze the cultural and theoretical background surrounding modernism and femininity, emphasizing how women's relationship with gardens reflects their desires for autonomy and self-expression within a patriarchal society. The article examines various dichotomies like culture/nature, public/private, and masculine/feminine to highlight the complexities of women's interactions with garden spaces as a means of liberation. However, in the body of studies about "The Garden Party," there is limited research specifically addressing the depiction of garden in "The Garden Party", its relation to gender, its symbolic salience for the plot and characters, and the importance of the garden as a key element that constitutes the symbolic center of the story. The current study fills this gap by exploring three dimensions of the Sheridans' garden as a conventional space of gender-based restrictions, as a liminal space of freedom and possibility for women, and as a symbolic rendering of the growing ideological becoming and social awareness of the central character Laura Sheridan.

Methodology

This study uses the feminist literary analysis technique, which is informed by the theoretical view of ecocriticism represented by Gaard (2010). To determine the symbolic meanings of the garden in Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party," the analysis is based on a close reading of the story, concentrating on the passages that depict the garden and its significance to the female characters, mostly Laura Sheridan. Through the lens of feminist literary criticism, the study investigates how the garden represents feminine spaces and complex gender roles in Victorian society. The research utilizes secondary sources such as scholarly works and books relevant to Mansfield's work and it

critically applies the feminist literary theory and eco-critical theory to build the theoretical framework for the study (Gerard, 2016; Hughes, 2018; Nystrom, 2021; Vakoch, 2012).

Firstly, the researchers analyzed the text (Federico 2015; Smith 2016) and they specified the passages where the garden and the character come in contact. The results of these textual analyses were then analyzed using feminist literary theory. The historical setting and culture of the Victorian times, with special attention to women's position, have been carefully incorporated into this examination. "The Garden Party" revolves around a garden, which symbolizes the female space and nature at the same time (Augspach, 2004). The garden, which is historically often seen as women's area of expertise and their caring function for the family, can represent a small world of the larger nature that symbolizes control over women and nature (Raisborough & Bhatti, 2007). Through ecofeminist theory, this article seeks to explore how Laura's interactions in the garden mirror that of a woman in the patriarchal society and her views about the natural world. It delves into the questions of how Laura's experiences in the garden relate to nature and in turn to women's social roles in general.

Analysis

Feminists can explicate the garden as a domestic symbol which means that it can be seen as the safe haven where women learn to value traditional feminine attributes and acquire gendered identity (Day, 2011; Khan et al., 2023; Nystrom, 2021). Nevertheless, the garden can also be seen as a liminal space that gives women the possibility to reveal their individuality and artistic talent and exert control. This section analyzes the symbolic meanings of the garden in "The Garden Party" from three perspectives, focusing first on how it represents a feminine space that provides both protection and freedom for the expression of female gendered identity; second, the garden as a liminal space between the domestic and the public space that mediates these spaces in a non-fixated, non-binary liminal realization of self; and third, the garden as symbolic of the ideological becoming of the budding social identity of the central character of Laura Sheridan.

The garden as a conventional space

Like some other Victorian literary productions, "The Garden Party" portrays the garden as a space that reflects the values and activities of middle-class women, particularly in terms of leisure, socialization, and appreciation of beauty in nature. The setting of the garden party serves as a microcosm of the characters' social world, highlighting their interactions and experiences within this enclosed, domestic space. The story depicts middle-class protagonists spending time mostly in the garden, walking among the flowers, admiring plants, or holding garden parties, reflecting the typical activities of middle-class women in the Victorian age. The setting of a garden party serves as a backdrop for the characters' interactions and activities, showcasing the leisurely pursuits of the middle class. The protagonist, Laura, is involved in organizing the party and is described as having a sense of authority over the arrangements, indicating her familiarity and comfort with such social events.

The garden is described as an idyllic space perfectly suited for the party: "And after all, the weather was ideal. They could not have had a more perfect day for a garden party if they had ordered it. Windless, warm, the sky without a cloud." This setting aligns with the notion of the garden as a place of leisure and social gathering for the middle class. Further, the story portrays the garden as a space where the characters express their creativity and aesthetic sensibilities. Laura's mother decides to order an abundance of lilies for the party, purely for their visual appeal.

"It's some mistake," [Laura] said faintly. "Nobody ever ordered so many. Sadie, go and find mother."

But at that moment Mrs. Sheridan joined them.

"It's quite right," she said calmly. "Yes, I ordered them. Aren't they lovely?" She pressed Laura's arm. "I was passing the shop yesterday, and I saw them in the window. And I suddenly thought for once in my life I shall have enough canna lilies. The garden party will be a good excuse."

But I thought you said you didn't mean to interfere," said Laura. (Mansfield, 2006, p. 200).

This exhibits the connection between freedom and control with regard to the garden as a place for free and creative expression. Mrs. Sheridan projects her freedom and independence by ordering the florist to deliver an extravagant quantity of canna lilies for the garden party. This decision reflects her taste in art and the significance she attaches to having a beautiful gathering to emphasize it. This liberty is accompanied by a compromise for Laura in terms of her individualism and self-expression. In this scenario, Laura, who had been entrusted to handle the party arrangements, felt her agency and control curtailed by Mrs. Sheridan's whim for ordering the lilies. Laura's response, "But you said you didn't mean to interfere," shows that she is, in fact, shocked and disappointed because her mother has blatantly ignored the position that she occupies in the party organization. Through this discussion comes to light a struggle between personal liberty and family hierarchy. Mrs. Sheridan's actions emerge as an attempt to organize a beautiful garden party that, at the same time, hinders her daughter's autonomy and independence. The garden, commonly a space of artistic and aesthetic expression, is revealed as a site of struggle for control showing a dimension of power hierarchy in families and society.

The garden functions as a symbol of social status and class distinctions. Specifically, it illustrates the difference between the Sheridan's garden and the nearby gardens of laboring-class families. Further, the only native plants in the garden, karakas, are hidden behind the marquee, indicating the veiling of the indigenous elements by the more fashionable non-native plants that are considered exotic, expensive, and a symbol of wealth and social status. The meticulous care given to the garden, with the gardener working since dawn to ensure its perfection for the party, reinforces the idea of the garden as a symbol of the family's status and social standing. The description of the roses as the only flowers that impress people at garden parties and the only flowers that everybody is certain of knowing further underscores this point. The abundance and beauty of the roses, with hundreds blooming overnight, suggest a level of privilege and access to resources that allows for such extravagance.

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. Hundreds, yes, literally hundreds, had come out in a single night; the green bushes bowed down as though they had been visited by archangels. (Mansfield, 2006, p. 197)

In Victorian society, gardens played a significant role in the lives of middle-class women, serving as both a space for leisure and a reflection of their domestic roles and societal status. Women were expected to be proficient in the domestic arts, including gardening, which was seen as an extension of their role as nurturers and caretakers of the home. Gardening provided an opportunity for women to demonstrate their skills in creating a beautiful and harmonious environment, showcasing their ability to manage and beautify the domestic space. Furthermore, gardening was broadly understood as a moral and educational activity that empowered women with the feeling of purpose and freedom in their domestic life.

Garden as a liminal space

Garden as a liminal space challenges the norms of what it is to be a female in traditional Victorian society. In "The Garden Party," the garden is shown as the space where female sexuality is symbolized through the plant's ornamental metaphors. The garden, with its plentiful plants and various flowers, is an image of fertility and sexuality. It is a reflection of the inner experience of the characters, mainly Laura, who is on the threshold of becoming a woman. Laura's encounters with the flowers in the garden evoke intense and extravagant responses, reflecting her maturation and burgeoning sexuality.

There, just inside the door, stood a wide, shallow tray full of pots of pink lilies. No other kind. 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. (Mansfield, 2006, p. 200)

In Laura's instance, it is clear that her sexuality is touched by the sight of the flowers, creating a vital and powerful sensory sensation for her. Mansfield interprets flowers as symbolic of Laura's sexuality, which is similar to the common Victorian use of flowers as symbols of femininity and sensuality. By reaching for lilies, Laura sensed a presence that was more profound and private in nature as well as in her soul. This indicates Laura's sexual awakening, as she feels a visceral reaction to the flowers that are not in proportion to the sight of mere flowers. Lilies are characterized as "wide open, radiant, almost frighteningly alive," which connotes a strongly vital vigor that holds Laura captivated as all her senses are aroused. Her calling to Sadie in an intense emotional tone—a sound that could be compared to a "little" moan—hints at the deep emotional response evoked by the flowers. Laura stooping over at the lilies "as if to warm herself" is specifically evocative and indicative of a physical, sensuous response. Her physical and emotional response indicates that, under the influence of her budding adulthood, Laura senses a moment of intense connection between her inner feelings and the aesthetic aspect of nature evoked by the flowers. The usage of the word "growing" about the sensation in her bosom further elaborates on the surging desires in her heart.

The garden is a complex symbol of women's freedom and restrictions on them. On the one hand, careful ornamentation and cultivated grooming of the garden represents control and restrictions as well as imposed socially determined norms. Furthermore, this garden could symbolize not only restrictions, but it also opportunities to gain independence and freedom. A garden is a space that doesn't work based on the principle of gender, providing a groundwork where women can create their own identities, take part in activities normally restricted from them if viewed from the perspective of the traditional gender roles. This captures the way in which Laura's psychological progress mirrors her growth from being a naïve girl to becoming a mature woman. Mansfield creates dissimilar garden settings in her other stories, for example, "Prelude," which is more wild, and "Bliss," which is more contained, to point out the role nature plays in women's expression and freedom of the gender and sexuality. In these stories, the difference between wilder garden settings is associated with women's freedom as predicated upon their association with nature.

Laura, who tries to articulate her thoughts freely without following Victorian society's views on gender roles, expresses her desire to grow out of the traditional roles and identities assigned to her. Even though her attempts may not fully succeed in changing her life drastically, that motif is strongly present in the garden, as it symbolizes the constant challenge for her to break free from

the chains and venture into the freedom of the garden space. For instance, when she wants to interact with the men setting up the marquee, it symbolizes her yearning to break free from the constraints of her societal role: "'Let's go into the garden, by the back way,' suggested Laura, 'I want to see how the men are getting on with the marquee. They're such awfully nice men'". This act of seeking out the men, who represent a different world from her own, reflects her curiosity and a subtle rebellion against the expected behavior of a young woman of her class. However, despite her efforts to engage with these "nice men," the interaction remains superficial, highlighting the limitations of her attempts to transcend her assigned identity. This scene underscores the liminality of the garden space as a place where Laura can momentarily challenge gender norms but ultimately finds herself constrained by societal control, for which she is too young to put up any meaningful resistance. In terms of her budding psychosexual and social selves, Laura is in a liminal space between her childhood and adulthood, much like the garden space that both provides and symbolizes a liminal space of in-betweenness that is both private and public, domestic, and non-domestic, protected and open to the outside world.

Gardening and women's ideological becoming

The Sheridan's' garden is initially depicted as an idyllic, Eden-like space, filled with luxurious flowers and providing a sense of comfort and pleasure. Signifying innocence and the absence of evil, the protected sanctuary of the garden stands in stark contrast to the inequality and injustice in the social context outside the garden gate. This setting bears special significance for the younger generation, who are represented by Laura and who have not been exposed to the realities of the outer world. Laura enters the garden, a space of respite and freedom from familiar and societal restrictions. The garden also becomes a space of inner exploration for her, in which she can learn about her inner life. Although she is used to her social privileges and distinctions right from her childhood, Laura begins to question the factuality and validity of class-based distinctions when she meets workmen who are preparing for their garden party.

The garden also serves as a space for Laura to confront the concept of death and the fragility of life. When she learns of the death of Mr. Scott who was a carter, Laura is initially shocked and suggests canceling the party out of respect. However, her family's reaction, particularly her mother's dismissal of the idea, forces Laura to confront the callousness and insensitivity of her social class. This experience leads to a moment of moral and emotional growth for Laura as she realizes the superficiality of the world in which she has been raised.

"But listen, mother," said Laura. Breathless and half-choking, she told the dreadful story. "Of course, we can't have our party, can we?" she pleaded. "The band and everybody arriving. They'd hear us, mother; they're nearly neighbors!"

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. (Mansfield, 2006, p. 205)

Laura's departure from the garden and her subsequent encounter with the cottages below symbolize her passage from the sheltered world of childhood to the more complex and nuanced realm of adulthood. As she descends, the imagery shifts from the "gleaming white" road and the "deep shade" of the cottages into darkness and gloom, highlighting the contrast between the idyllic garden and the reality outside its confines. This descent represents her transition from the innocence and simplicity of childhood to the harsher realities of life. The description of the cottages with "women in shawls and men's tweed caps" and the "mean little cottages" with a "low hum" portrays a stark contrast to the elegance and luxury of her house and of the garden party. This juxtaposition emphasizes the difference between the world she knows and the world she is about

to discover. "The little woman in the gloomy passage seemed not to have heard her. 'Step this way, please, miss,' she said in an oily voice, and Laura followed her". Walking into a new grimmer reality, Laura unconsciously follows the dictates of the lady as if she is surrendering to get familiar with a world that is sharply different from her own.

Laura's passage through the dead man's house symbolizes the final stage of that transformation that she experiences during the visit. The house is portrayed as "wretched", having a "smoky lamp" that only dimly lights the house. This juxtaposition between the lavish lights and glowing beauty of the garden party and the desolation and darkness of the cottage highlights the social differences that Laura has to face to be initiated into the tragic aspects of class difference. Her anxiety and feeling awkward in this environment are similar to her discomposure and lack of adaptability in this new reality. The climax of the story comes when Laura looks at the dead man's face, which she describes as being completely at peace, and it occurs to her how trivial is her garden party. The man's peace and his acceptance of his fate seemed so far removed from the shallow outlook of the party that Laura had a deep suspicion about the meaning of life and the unimportance of her petty routine affairs. The man's face is so "wonderful and beautiful," which means that he has completely resigned and accepted everything that she has been while living as a poor man. The moment when she goes through this ideological, Laura's eyes are opened and she starts to re-evaluate everything in her life. After she rushes out of the house and meets her brother outside, Laura is not able to articulate what she has been through:

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. But Laurie—" She stopped and looked at her brother. "Isn't life?" she stammered, "isn't life?" But what life was, she couldn't explain. No matter. He quite understood.

"Isn't it, darling?" said Laurie. (Mansfield, 2006, p. 210)

Conclusion

The above analysis shows that "The Garden Party" portrays the garden as a conventional space that reflects the values and activities of the middle class, particularly in terms of leisure, socialization, and appreciation of beauty in nature. Garden as a contrastive controlling and liminal space in the Victorian era has been explored to investigate the complexities of women's relations to gendered power distribution. Raisborough, and Bhatti (2007), for instance, use a case study from the Mass Observation Archive, Britain, to explore whether women's empowerment in leisure stems from a nuanced repositioning within gender norms, suggesting an agency that goes beyond simple resistance or reproduction of gender relations. The setting of the garden party serves as a microcosm of the characters' social world, showcasing their interactions and experiences within this enclosed, domestic space. The story of "The Garden Party" highlights the contrast between the idyllic garden and the harsh realities outside, symbolizing Laura's transition from innocence to maturity and her attempts to reclaim her agency in a patriarchal society (Khan et al., 2021: Wilson, 2008). The garden becomes a venue for free creative and artistic expression as is seen in Mrs. Sheridan's rather impulsive decision to order too many canna lilies, a metaphor for the contradiction between individualism and regulatory constraints of Victorian society. Moreover, the garden is an extension and symbolic projection of social status and class hierarchy, with the presence of the exotic plants emphasizing the Sheridan family's affluence and social prestige.

However, the story also portrays the garden as a borderline space that is a mix of past and present tradition and expectations around gendered sexual identity predicated upon how much space is

given to the female gender to awaken into selfhood and self-realization (Khan et al., 2022). The garden symbolizes the societal pressure and competing desires of individuals, especially Laura, who is at the threshold of adulthood. In *Laura*, Mansfield uncovers the themes of female sexuality and autonomy, highlighting in a nuanced literary depiction the tensions between collective social norms and individual freedom. The garden's luxuriant vegetation and colorful flowers represent the procreative and sensual aspects of the female characters existing in a space, the freedom of nature, and the boundaries of conventional roles. Laura's efforts to be self-determined and explore her sexuality provide the central tension emerging from the interaction between social power and individual agency.

Laura's closing sentence at the end of the story leaves it open-ended: "'Isn't life,' she stammered, 'isn't life—.' But what life was, she couldn't explain." It encourages the reader to reflect on completing the sentence with multiple interpretations of her experience inside the cottage and the possibilities that life holds for different social strata in a society. The open-ended nature of the story bears upon the uncertainty of life, the continuous struggle of classes, and the concomitant disparity. After her initial struggles with the carter's death at the beginning of the story and her attempts to cancel the party, which were met with indifference, at the end of the story, she can see more clearly through the veil of social class and the callousness of her own people. This provides grounds for her moral improvement and emotional maturity and spurs the realization that her protected, class-based upbringing hides more of the actual reality of life than it reveals to her. Her venturing outside the garden and into the darker realities of social inequality is a journey from innocence to maturity, from naïvetés to ideological becoming. Through her encounter with the dead body, Laura realizes experientially the privilege her life is built upon and its fragility and superficiality. The dead man's peaceful face seems to comment upon the triviality of concerns about life, helping her to begin her journey of coming to terms with what life is and what it means to be a mortal being living in a class-based social structure.

Conflict of Interest

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