

Palpable Yet Inarticulable: The Gendered Narrative Regulation in Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party*

XIONG Yanbing

Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China

CAO Duanhong

Warwick University, Coventry, United Kingdom

This article utilizes Katherine Mansfield's short story *The Garden Party* as the research object to explore the narrative generation conditions of ethical experience in the text. Through a close analysis of the novel's narrative structure and key scenes, the article argues that ethical discomfort does not evolve into enduring moral judgments within the text; rather, it is continually managed and deferred through the interplay of aesthetic order, familial discourse, and the distribution of social roles. The novel eschews a linear trajectory of ethical awakening, instead crafting a narrative mechanism that keeps ethical experience palpable yet inarticulable. The female subject is given the role of sensing ethical incongruity, but lacks the narrative position from which to articulate it as judgment. Consequently, ethics remains confined to the level of personalization and unimplementability. Far from a narrative of moral growth or awakening, *The Garden Party* exposes why ethical judgment has become structurally unrealizable in modern narratives.

Keywords: gendered, narrative regulation, ethical judgment, Katherine Mansfield, *The Garden Party*

Introduction

Since its publication, Katherine Mansfield's short story *The Garden Party* has been regarded as a work of modernist literature, celebrated for its emotional sensitivity (Kaplan, 1991). Critics repeatedly discuss the moral awareness, class perception, and growing experiences depicted in the story, especially in relation to the psychological fluctuations experienced by the female protagonist, Laura, between the garden party and the death of a nearby worker. Laura is frequently seen as a character not yet fully shaped by middle-class norms. Her emotional reactions to death are viewed as an apparently unfiltered ethical feeling and are seen as a key opportunity to understand the complexity of social reality (Richardson, 2011). However, such interpretations often rely on the assumption that affective disturbance inherently leads to ethical insight. In this view, intense feelings are implicitly considered a precursor to moral development, whereas silence is seen as either an incomplete understanding or a form of enlightenment that transcends language (Nussbaum, 2001). This article argues that it is precisely this perspective that naturalizes emotions as ethical foundations, thereby obscuring the more nuanced and subtle narrative work that *The Garden Party* accomplishes. What the novel truly presents is not how ethical awakening occurs, but how ethical discomfort is systematically managed, translated, and ultimately suspended in the narrative. From this perspective, the core issue raised by *The Garden Party* is not what Laura has learned, but

XIONG Yanbing, MA, Associate Professor, School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China.
CAO Duanhong (corresponding author), MS, Department of Sociology, Warwick University, Coventry, United Kingdom.

how the narrative organizes this experience when a female subject in a middle-class context encounters a death event that cannot be naturally absorbed by the daily order, thereby making it difficult for the experience to be transformed into ethical judgment or social actions. Death is neither denied nor completely suppressed in the novel. On the contrary, it is continuously retained as an experienced form that is felt but difficult to implement, and gradually loses the formal conditions for entering the judgment level in a series of narrative operations.

The existing research on *The Garden Party* can be roughly summarized into three main paths. The first type of research regards the novel as a coming-of-age narrative, emphasizing that Laura gained an understanding of the meaning of life and class reality after facing death directly (Kaplan, 1991; Dunbar, 1997; Khan, Taher, & Alam, 2023). The second type of research begins with class critique, emphasizing the contrast between garden parties and workers' deaths, interpreting it as a satirical critique of middle-class indifference and symbolic charity (Kaya, 2016). The third type concentrates on female subjects and psychological experiences, highlighting Laura's sensitivity, hesitation, and silence, and seeking to understand these as complex expressions of women's limited positions in modern society (Knickelbein, 2014; Goh, 2022). These studies provide valuable insights into the text but share a common methodological tendency: their analyses often focus on characters' inner feelings or moral stances, with little consideration of how the narrative structure itself influences the conditions under which these feelings develop, change, or even break down. In this research tradition, emotions are frequently viewed as the final goal of analysis rather than phenomena that need explanation. Silence is given deep symbolic meaning but is rarely examined as an effect created by the narrative. Notably, the female character's emotional sensitivity is often seen as a sign of ethical potential. Still, it is seldom questioned what narrative purpose this sensitivity serves or what discursive constraints delimit its scope.

This paper attempts to recalibrate this research approach. Rather than understanding Laura's emotional fluctuations as a gradual emergence of ethical consciousness, it views them as an empirical phenomenon continuously re-encoded by the narrative. The novel denies Laura stable language conditions for articulating ethical judgment or enacting social action. Instead, through a series of subtle yet highly consistent narrative choices, it keeps her feelings at a level that can be felt but is difficult to articulate. Ethical experience is not erased but fixed as an unattainable ideal in this process. Accordingly, the paper introduces "the narrative regulation of affect" as a working concept to describe how narrative form shapes and constrains affective experience, specifically how it can guide, buffer, and even neutralize potential ethical conflicts without overt coercion. The analysis traces a clear yet often-overlooked operational path in the novel: aestheticization, renaming, deferral, the internalization of management, and, ultimately, inarticulacy. Within this process, ethical conflicts are not denied but gradually displaced from the realm of action and judgment, instead being stabilized through the emotions and prescribed role positions of the female subject. The analysis shows that *The Garden Party* is not a work about moral growth or ethical awakening, but one that exposes how ethical experience in the narrative of the modern middle class is formally constrained. Laura's silence is not a sign of sudden enlightenment, but rather the result of the successful operation of the narrative. Her emotions did not lead to action; they were fixed as an ethical experience, allowed to be felt but difficult to fulfill.

Critical Context and Theoretical Framework

The Main Critical Path of *The Garden Party* and Its Methodological Limitations

Since the mid-20th century, *The Garden Party* has remained a cornerstone of Mansfield studies. Its enduring critical attention not merely stems from the dramatic contrast between the garden party and the worker's death in

the story, but rather from the fact that the novel, through its highly restrained narrative style, makes this juxtaposition both sharp and always difficult to reduce to a clear moral judgment (Severn, 2009). For this reason, a relatively stable yet mutually distinct interpretive path has gradually developed around this text. Starting from the research focus and interpretive core, existing studies can be broadly categorized into three groups: the growth narrative perspective, the class criticism orientation, and the interpretive path centered on the female subject and psychological experience.

The first type of research typically views the novel as a coming-of-age narrative. A common feature of this approach is to see Laura's reaction to the death as a turning point in her subjectivity. Researchers often focus on her psychological changes before and after the party, especially tracking her shift from excitement and engagement to shock and unease, and then going down the hill to confront death directly. They interpret this as the development of a certain form of moral maturity (Kaya, 2016). Alongside, a strong emphasis is placed on pauses and unfinished sentences: the interruption at the end is often seen as a kind of insight beyond language, or an ethical realization that is not yet complete but already present. However, this path usually implies a key premise that affective disturbance itself inherently moves toward ethical understanding. The issue is that the text does not clearly show how this movement is sustained in the narrative. Although emotion is widely regarded as the foundation of moral judgment, the extent to which narrative form provides the sustained linguistic and practical conditions necessary for such judgment is often overlooked.

The second type of research adopts a class-critical perspective, with its explanatory focus typically centered on the satirical effect generated by the juxtaposition structure. The garden party, as a cultural ritual for the middle class, contrasts sharply with the deaths of workers and the circumstances of their families, and thus is interpreted as a criticism of bourgeois self-containment, symbolic charity, and decent discourse (Richardson, 2011). The advantage of this approach lies in its acute revelation of how spatial stratification, social distance, and cultural taste constitute a social order in the text that requires almost no self-defense. However, its limitations are equally obvious: class differences are often treated as an external background, emerging as a fact that the existing structure oppresses the lower classes. In contrast, the continuous naturalization of class through narrative language, affective rhythm, and subject positioning, which confers a form of sustainability within the text, has received less systematic analysis. While class inequality is often visible, it is not consistently interpreted as a process of ongoing production and consolidation at the narrative level.

The third type of research tends to start with female subjectivity or psychological experience, foregrounding Laura's sensitivity, hesitation, and uncertainty, and situating them within the broader disciplinary constraints faced by women in modern society. Its key contribution lies in refusing to reduce Laura's uncertainty to mere weakness or immaturity, instead interpreting it as a complex expression of modern experiences (Knickelbein, 2014). It reminds us that silence and hesitation do not necessarily signify failure; they can also indicate distance or non-cooperation from the normative order. However, this approach is also susceptible to assigning excessive symbolic meaning to silence in analysis, transforming silence from a narrative element that requires explanation into a profound marker that inherently carries meaning. When silence is directly equated with ethical depth, the processes through which narrative creates silence, why it is silent here, and how silence interacts with narrative rhythm, social discourse, and gendered expectations become obscured.

By examining the three approaches together, it becomes clear that although they reach different conclusions, they share a methodological tendency worth further reflection: Researchers often focus their analysis on characters' internal states or values, assuming that narrative is merely a transparent vehicle. As a result, the most

significant issues in the text are often prematurely simplified into conclusive judgments, like whether the characters are awakened, whether the class is satirized, or whether women are oppressed. Meanwhile, it becomes difficult to fully see how the narrative form influences emotions, shapes conflicts, and legitimizes certain reactions while suppressing others. Hence, rather than contesting the valuable insights of existing research, this article seeks to reframe the question. Instead of asking whether Laura achieves awakening, it examines how the narrative form restricts that awakening from becoming a sustainable ethical stance, thereby illuminating how the so-called ethical experience is produced, rewritten, and ultimately suspended within the text.

Narrative Distance, Affective Regulation, and Formal Conditions of Ethical Experience

To address the aforementioned research blind spots, this paper introduces three interrelated analytical concepts: narrative distance, affective regulation, and the formal conditions of ethical experience. The reason for introducing these concepts is that the key to *The Garden Party* lies not in whether it presents ethical conflicts, but in how its narrative forms impede the stable emergence of those conflicts as ethical judgment or actions.

First of all, narrative distance in the novel is not simply manifested in the choice of objective or subjective positions. *The Garden Party* makes sustained use of free indirect discourse, making the narrative language highly close to Laura's perception and emotions at the semantic level. Readers can enter into her excitement, shyness, sympathy, and hesitation, almost experiencing the emotional fluctuations together with her (Brinton, 1980). However, this closeness does not mean that the narrative completely hands over the right to interpretation. On the contrary, the text always maintains a subtle yet effective narrative distance: it allows effect to occur but prevents effect from naturally transforming into a stable judgment. Emotions are presented as instantaneous intensities rather than logical channels leading to assertions. Readers are invited to experience, but not provided with an ethical language that can be implemented within the text.

Secondly, affective regulation does not come from direct suppression by external authorities, but is an internal management mechanism accomplished jointly through language rhythm, aesthetic structure, and social etiquette (Nussbaum, 2001). The order of the garden, the atmosphere of the music, the repeated appearance of costumes and decent discourse are not merely environmental descriptions or class symbols, but function more as an affective frame that delineates which responses are appropriate and which are excessive or inappropriate (Böhme, 2016). It is notable that the text does not deal with ethical discomfort by explicitly prohibiting it, but rather neutralizes it through renaming and redistribution. When Laura's response is marked as sentimental or extravagant, the potential for ethical engagement is recast as a matter of emotion management; when the bustle of preparatory work constantly fills time, ethical reflection is postponed to an "after" that never truly arrives. Ethics has not been denied, but has been continuously guided back into private, affective, and temporalized paths.

In this sense, ethical experience is not triggered merely by the death event itself, but also depends on whether the event can take a form that is judgeable and responsive. Ethical experience requires rupture, interruption, and language that can point to responsibility and action. If the narrative continues to translate conflicts into aesthetic feeling, ritual discomfort, or individual emotion, then ethics can only remain at the level of being felt rather than being articulated (Crowley, 2003). The key to *The Garden Party* lies precisely here: It constantly demonstrates how ethics can be delayed, rewritten at the formal level, and eventually lose its stable position of expression.

Methodological Stance: From Meaning Interpretation to Narrative Operation Analysis

Based on the above theoretical framework, the methodological stance of this article is clarified accordingly. This article does not attempt to provide a new thematic conclusion for *The Garden Party*, nor does it aim to judge

the characters' moral qualities or degree of consciousness. Far from it, the analysis focuses on how the narrative operates, how it mediates the emergence of affect through a series of specific and traceable formal choices, and how it constrains the possibility of such affect entering into ethical judgment and social action. This stance implies that the article's focus lies not in what the text means, but in how it naturalizes certain meanings and gradually renders other possibilities ineffective. Meaning does not preexist in the characters' hearts, but is shaped through narrative rhythm, linguistic choice, and structural arrangement. Consequently, emotions are not regarded as intermediaries leading to ethics, but are understood as narrative outcomes that require interpretation.

At the operational level, this article adopts a close reading method, focusing on key narrative nodes and moments of transition in the text, including: the establishment of the world state at the beginning, the mode of response when the death event is first mentioned, how family discourse renames ethical discomfort, and how language collapses in the final scene of directly confronting death. Through analysis of these nodes, this article seeks to reveal how narrative gradually transforms potential ethical conflicts into issues of emotion, image, or timing, thereby forestalling their resolution in judgment or action. Therefore, silence is not treated as a naturally profound symbol in this article but as the product of narrative operations, a state produced through the interplay of linguistic resources, social roles, and aesthetic structures. Only by situating silence within its conditions of production can we understand the structural function it performs at the end of the novel. This article further argues that in *The Garden Party*, narrative does not intervene after an ethical conflict occurs; rather, through aesthetic structure, it neutralizes the conditions necessary for ethical judgments before any such conflict can emerge.

Analysis of Gendered Narrative Regulation

Aesthetic Totality and the Gendered Preemptive Neutralization of Ethical Judgment

At *The Garden Party*, ethical issues are not excluded from the narrative through explicit denial or suppression. Instead, they are pre-emptively absorbed into a highly stable aesthetic structure before the story even begins to unfold. (Sorkin, 1978). This process is not an abstract formal operation but is enacted through a mode of perception and participation closely aligned with the experience of the female subject. In this sense, aesthetic totality does not merely neutralize the conditions for ethical judgment; it also presupposes a gendered subject position, depriving ethical consciousness of the possibility of being transformed into judgment or action before it fully takes shape.

The seemingly plain declaration "And after all the weather was ideal" (Mansfield, 1922, p. 1) at the very beginning of the story is not simply a scene-setting remark, but a normative statement that establishes the emotional and social order of the narrative in advance. The term "ideal" here does not function as a subjective emotional response but as a naturalized judgment, presupposing that the state of the world is already appropriate, complete, and in no need of reassessment. What matters is not the weather itself, but the way the narrative eliminates the need for ethical reevaluation from the outset, rendering judgment unnecessary. The following sentence further substantiates this premise: "They could not have had a more perfect day for a garden-party if they had ordered it". In this formulation, natural conditions appear to have responded seamlessly to social ritual. Weather ceases to be an accidental external factor and instead becomes integrated into the smooth operation of the middle-class order, presenting the world as a coherent and self-consistent whole rather than a field open to doubt, conflict, or ethical rupture (Bell, 1988).

This aesthetic totality is further developed in the subsequent depiction of the garden. Lawns, daisies, and roses do not appear as neutral natural objects but are organized into a scene designed for appreciation and

affective immersion. Through subtle personification, nature is represented as actively cooperating with the social ritual, as when “the green bushes bowed down as if they had been visited by archangels” (Mansfield, 1922, p. 1). Such rhetoric is not merely decorative or poetic. It performs an important naturalizing function by projecting social hierarchy, aesthetic preference, and cultural consensus onto nature itself, thereby presenting these structures as inevitable and beyond question (Dickson, 2022).

Significantly, this aesthetic order does not exert the same binding force on all subjects. It relies in particular on a subject position that is socially coded as sensitive, adaptive, and responsible for maintaining continuity and harmony rather than initiating disruption. Within modern middle-class culture, this position overlaps strongly with femininity. The effectiveness of aesthetic totality as a narrative mechanism lies precisely in its structural alignment with the gendered roles women are expected to perform: sensing atmosphere, responding to detail, and sustaining order.

Within this structure, ethical judgment is not explicitly prohibited but fails to acquire the formal conditions necessary for its emergence. Ethical judgment typically requires rupture, dissonance, or an experience that resists assimilation. Laura’s excitement and dedication in the early part of the story must therefore be understood against this background. Her sensitivity to atmosphere and detail reflects not naïveté, but a socially validated feminine mode of perception. This perceptual capacity is encouraged and affirmed, yet it remains confined to the realm of feeling and experience, lacking the narrative conditions necessary for its development into ethical judgment or social action (Vial & Cowgill, 2022).

It is under these aesthetic conditions that death first enters the narrative, not as an ethical crisis but as a disturbance of propriety. Laura’s initial response is characterized less by considerations of responsibility or injustice than by a sense of incongruity between the event and the ongoing ceremony. Death is initially experienced as an interruption of the atmosphere rather than a challenge to the moral order. Importantly, the narrative neither corrects nor reframes this response. Instead, it continues to stabilize the aesthetic structure, making it difficult for death to enter the central narrative logic as an ethical claim. Ethical issues in *The Garden Party* are therefore not suppressed but rendered structurally unproducible at the narrative level. Aesthetic form here functions not as a cover for ethics, but as a preemptive neutralization mechanism (Day, 2011).

From a gendered perspective, this mechanism has a clear orientation. The female subject is permitted to feel incongruity but is denied a legitimate position from which such feelings can be transformed into ethical judgment. Before ethical consciousness can fully form, it is absorbed into an experiential structure centered on harmony, continuity, and propriety. In this way, *The Garden Party* does not merely depict the influence of aesthetic form on ethical experience; it establishes a gendered narrative condition that underpins the subsequent mechanisms of deferral and narrative resettlement.

Deferral as a Gendered Social Technique: The Feminization of Ethical Discomfort

If the aesthetic totality analyzed in the previous section laid the formal foundation for the failure of ethical judgment, then the subsequent narrative development of the novel demonstrates a more refined and socially targeted operational mechanism. In *The Garden Party*, ethics is neither denied nor suppressed; instead, it is continuously postponed, renamed, and transformed into an emotional state that requires management. Crucially, this delay mechanism is not an abstract temporal strategy but a gendered social technique: It stabilizes ethical discomfort through the emotional rhythms, role expectations, and behavioral coordination of the female subject (Gordon, 2022).

When Laura learns of the death of a nearby worker, her initial response does not take the form of a clear moral judgment but manifests instead as a strong sense of situational incongruity. She recognizes an undeniable tension between death and the ongoing garden party. Yet the crucial issue lies not in the existence of this discomfort, but in how the narrative immediately repositions it. Laura's response is not framed as the beginning of ethical judgment; rather, it is swiftly incorporated into a state that must be regulated and soothed. Ethics does not disappear at this moment; rather, it is relocated to a position marked as *inappropriate* (Hochschild, 1979). It is precisely here that delay, as a technology jointly produced by narrative form and social norms, begins to operate. This delay is first enacted through temporal reallocation. The death is not denied or trivialized; it is explicitly acknowledged as serious, yet simultaneously scheduled for a later moment: *after the party*. Through this temporal displacement, ethical judgment is transformed from a demand for immediate response into a matter that can legitimately wait. Delay here is not mere procrastination but a structural mechanism of de-urgency: It removes the temporal pressure necessary for judgment, rendering action premature, improper, or even unnecessary (Walker, 1957).

This temporal strategy does not function in isolation but is reinforced through family discourse. Jose's evaluation of Laura's response is especially significant. She neither denies the gravity of death nor offers an explicit moral defense of the party. Instead, she labels Laura's reaction as *sentimental* and *extravagant*. Through this act of naming, ethical concern is translated into an emotional issue, and emotion is repositioned as private, subjective, and lacking public validity. Ethical discomfort thus loses its capacity to function as judgment and is redefined as an individual state that requires emotional regulation. From a gendered perspective, this discursive shift carries clear structural significance. Within modern middle-class culture, emotional excess has long been associated with femininity and used to limit women's legitimacy as public moral speakers (Frasca, Leskinen & Warner, 2022). When Laura's response is reframed as emotional excess, she is not accused of moral error; rather, she is gently relocated to a position lacking the authority to judge. Ethics is not rejected but feminized, and in this feminization, it loses the possibility of being translated into social judgment or action.

This reencoding at the level of discourse is accompanied by continuous occupation at the level of action. Laura is afforded neither time nor space for sustained reflection. She is absorbed in the practical tasks of the party, answering the phone, checking labels, arranging food, and receiving guests. These activities are not depicted as oppressive labor, but as natural, necessary, even pleasant forms of participation. Yet it is precisely this uninterrupted flow of action that deprives ethical judgment of the very interruption required for its emergence. Busyness here functions not as a sign of efficiency, but as a mode of regulation. Within this rhythm, Laura's social function becomes clear: she is valued not in judgment but in maintaining order, responding to needs, and sustaining the smooth progression of the ritual. She is positioned as a *subject in operation* rather than a *subject in judgment*.

Ethical awareness is thus not suppressed but gradually loses its footing within the continuous process of role fulfillment. This transformation is achieved not through negation but through soothing. Laura is not persuaded that death does not matter; instead, she begins to *hope* that her mother is right. This hope marks the success of the delay mechanism. Ethical judgment is neither resolved nor denied but displaced into an indeterminate future. The subject does not become indifferent; she is repositioned into a role that allows social continuity to proceed. In this process, the female subject's emotions are not silenced but mobilized, becoming a crucial resource for maintaining order and stabilizing experience.

The Breakdown of Narrative Management: Death, Inarticulacy, and the Gendered Limits of Ethical Speech

It is not until the final part of the story that *The Garden Party* withdraws Laura from the narrative framework that has, up to this point, maintained remarkable stability. Importantly, this shift is not achieved through ideological advancement, moral reflection, or inner awareness, but through a simultaneous rupture of spatial position and social role (Severn, 2009). When Laura leaves the garden, crosses the road, and enters the workers' residential area, the narrative no longer provides her with a clear or sustainable social position (Mansfield, 1922). For the first time, she enters a field that cannot be smoothly absorbed by aesthetic order, family discourse, or mechanisms of affective regulation. This spatial transition carries a distinct structural significance. Within the garden, experience is consistently structured as an element of a social ritual. Characters occupy stable roles, actions follow recognizable purposes, and language remains intelligible and responsive. Even when ethical discomfort emerges, it can be translated into matters of emotion, timing, or propriety, and thus re-incorporated into a manageable narrative framework. In the workers' dwelling, however, this entire organizational logic collapses. The space does not constitute an aesthetic whole, nor can it be integrated into any existing ritual order (Atkinson, 2006). It is precisely in this setting that the narrative mechanisms previously deployed to regulate ethical discomfort all cease to function.

This failure first manifests in the female subject's bodily experience. Laura's sudden awareness of her own appearance does not signal vanity or narcissism, but rather indicates a pronounced sense of structural dislocation. Her dress, hat, and bodily posture appear incongruous within this space, yet this dissonance does not signify a personal moral failing. Instead, it reveals the collapse of the subject position that previously sustained her presence. The gendered role logic that had enabled her participation within the ritualized aesthetic order no longer functions. She can neither continue to act as a young woman within a socially sanctioned ceremony nor access an alternative ethical position from which judgment could be articulated. When Laura enters the room, the narrative register undergoes a marked shift.

The aesthetic rhetoric that previously organized experience loses its capacity to structure perception in this scene. Death is not depicted through violence or emotional excess, but through an unsettling calm. The deceased is described as "sleeping so soundly", a state that appears detached from social time, narrative rhythm, and affective exchange (Mansfield, 1922). This description does not aestheticize death. Rather, it exposes a deeper predicament: Within this encounter, available ethical language becomes redundant and ineffective. At this moment, the collapse of language becomes unavoidable. Laura's utterance "Forgive my hat" does not constitute a complete ethical statement (Mansfield, 1922). It is neither a formal apology, nor an explanation, nor a judgment. Its significance lies not in its propositional content, but in what it reveals as a failed speech act. Language is not rejected, but its incapacity to bear ethical meaning is exposed.

Viewed through feminist narratology, this failure is decisive: Laura is not unaware of the incongruity produced by the social markers she carries into this space. She perceives clearly the disjunction among clothing, identity, posture, and situation. However, she is unable to translate this awareness into an ethical statement that could be publicly recognized or responded to. To articulate responsibility would require a position of authority that the narrative has never granted her. To pronounce judgment would demand access to a public discursive space from which she has been structurally excluded. What remains is an utterance that fails to align with the situation, and this misalignment marks the limit of gendered ethical speech.

Accordingly, this scene does not function as a moment of enlightenment. Laura does not arrive at a definitive understanding of life, death, or class relations, nor does she complete a transformation into a moral agent. Instead, she encounters a moment in which narrative continuity itself falters. Aesthetic form ceases to organize experience, social roles lose validity, and language can no longer sustain ethical judgment. The female subject is never granted a voice. Rather, she is exposed to a position in which no viable ethical language is available. The novel's ending leaves the rupture unhealed. Laurie's appearance offers no explanation nor interpretation, but returns Laura to the familial sphere through an intimate yet depoliticized gesture. His response, "Isn't it, darling?" does not complete Laura's unfinished utterance (Mansfield, 1922). Instead, it functions as a gentle closure, redirecting ethical disturbance into the private domain. Ethical difficulty is not addressed but absorbed through affective intimacy and removed from the sphere of public articulation.

Seen in this light, the ending of *The Garden Party* does not present an open revelation, but a form of structural suspension. Ethics is neither denied nor resolved. It appears instead through failure, revealing the fundamental difficulty inherent in modern social arrangements. When aesthetic order, gender roles, and linguistic norms jointly organize experience, ethical judgment tends to emerge only through breakdown rather than articulation. Laura thus occupies not only a position of emotional responsiveness, but also one of invisible affective labor. Her feelings and hesitations do not disrupt social order. They are continually transformed into resources for their maintenance. Ethics is not silenced, but systematically confined to the private sphere and separated from public action and responsibility. For the female subject, this collapse does not signify awakening. It signifies exposure. Laura does not become an agent of ethical action. She becomes the site at which the limits of language and role are rendered visible. It is precisely in this failure that Mansfield's narrative strategy reveals its modernist and feminist significance. Literature here does not demonstrate how ethics is achieved, but rather exposes the gendered narrative conditions under which ethics becomes inexpressible.

Conclusion

This article argues, through a detailed analysis of *The Garden Party*, that Katherine Mansfield does not depict a complete process of ethical awakening or moral development. Instead, the novel consistently reveals the limited nature of ethical experience within modern narrative frameworks. Ethics is present but never secures a stable or lasting narrative position. It cannot be seamlessly integrated into the ongoing world built by aesthetic totality, nor can it be translated into judgment or action under the influence of family discourse, social rhythms, and gender roles. Laura's emotional sensitivity does not serve as a hidden route to moral action. Instead, it functions as a narrative resource that is continually managed and redirected. She is allowed to feel discomfort and incongruity, yet she is not provided with the conditions necessary to transform this discomfort into an ethical statement with public impact. When narrative control ultimately fails at the moment of death, the breakdown of language does not lead to awakening. Rather, it reveals the structural limits of ethical expression. Ethics does not emerge here through expression, but becomes visible precisely through its failure and impossibility.

Accordingly, *The Garden Party* should not be read as a story of growth, compassion, or moral maturation. It presents instead an ethical dilemma shaped by the intersecting conditions of modernity and gender. In a world structured by aesthetic order, gendered subject positions, and linguistic norms, ethical judgment tends to appear only as delay, interruption, or breakdown. It is through this refusal of narrative closure that Mansfield's text reveals its distinctive significance within feminist narratology.

References

- Atkinson, W. (2006). Mrs. Sheridan's masterstroke: Liminality in Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party*. *English Studies*, 87(1), 53-61.
- Bell, B. C. (1988). Nonidentical twins: Nature in *The Garden Party* and *The Grave*. *The Comparatist*, 12, 58-66.
- Böhme, G. (2016). *The aesthetics of atmospheres*. London: Routledge.
- Brinton, L. (1980). "Represented perception": A study in narrative style. *Poetics*, 9(4), 363-381.
- Crowley, P. (2003). Paul Ricœur: The concept of narrative identity, the trace of autobiography. *Paragraph*, 26(3), 1-12.
- Day, T. (2011). The politics of voice in Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party*. *English*, 60(229), 128-141.
- Dickson, J. (2022). Knowing what we feel about Katherine Mansfield: Sentimentality and expression in *The Garden Party*. In *Katherine Mansfield and The Garden Party and Other Stories* (pp.25-37). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Dunbar, P. (1997). *Radical Mansfield*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Frasca, T. J., Leskinen, E. A., & Warner, L. R. (2022). Words like weapons: Labeling women as emotional during a disagreement negatively affects the perceived legitimacy of their arguments. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 46(4), 420-437.
- Goh, C. (2022). The quest for autonomy amid shifting gender expectations and relationships in Katherine Mansfield's short stories. In G. Kimber and T. Martin (Eds.), *Katherine Mansfield and The Garden Party and other stories* (pp. 87-99). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (Katherine Mansfield Studies).
- Gordon, S. (2022). "If only one had time to look at these flowers long enough, time to get over the sense of novelty and strangeness": The political language of flowers in *Katherine Mansfield's The Garden Party and Other Stories*. In G. Kimber and T. Martin (Eds.), *Katherine Mansfield and The Garden Party and Other Stories* (pp. 127-140). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (Katherine Mansfield Studies).
- Hochschild, A. R. (1979). Emotion work, feeling rules, and social structure. *American Journal of Sociology*, 85(3), 551-575.
- Huang, Z., & Feng, X. (2020). Analysis of the narrative perspective of Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party*. *Studies in English Language Teaching*, 8(3), 71-86.
- Kaplan, S. J. (1991). *Katherine Mansfield and the origins of modernist fiction*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Kaya, Ş. (2016). Laura's lessons in Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party*. *Academia.edu*. https://www.academia.edu/20094803/Lauras_Lessons_in_Katherine_Mansfields_The_Garden_Party
- Khan, I. U., Taher, M., & Alam, K. S. (2023). Painful ambivalence: A Marxist feminist analysis of moral anxiety and gendered class consciousness in *The Garden Party*. *NUST Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 9(1), 1-15.
- Knickelbein, K. (2014). *A feminist surveillance of Katherine Mansfield's selected short stories of the "New Dawn" essay*. *Academia.edu*. <https://www.academia.edu/8199567/?spm=5176.28103460.0.0.713d7551m8NtOt>
- Mansfield, K. (1922). *The garden party & other stories*. United Kingdom: Paper + Ink.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2001). *Upheavals of thought: the intelligence of emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richardson, R. (2011). The garden party must go on: Class sympathy and characterization in Katherine Mansfield's short stories and *A Surprise* and Other Original Short Stories. *Mtholyoke.edu*. <https://ida.mtholyoke.edu/items/7925a909-7aab-442e-ac4e-39b0ec2a83fc>
- Severn, S. E. (2009). Linguistic structure and rhetorical resolution in Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party*. *Journal of the Short Story in English. Les Cahiers de la nouvelle*, (52), 1-10.
- Sorkin, A. J. (1978). Katherine Mansfield's *The garden party*: Style and social occasion. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 24(3), 439-455.
- Vial, A. C., & Cowgill, C. M. (2022). Heavier lies her crown: Gendered patterns of leader emotional labor and their downstream effects. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13(13), 849566. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.849566>
- Walkers, W. S. (1957). The unresolved conflict in *The Garden Party*. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 3(4), 354-358.