

EVOLUTION OF THE PROTAGONIST IN *THE GARDEN PARTY* BY KATHERINE MANSFIELD

Keywords: *modernist literature, symbol, literary image, figure of speech, protagonist's evolution.*

Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923) is a prominent New Zealand modernist author and “one of the 20th century’s finest short-story writers” [1, p. 55]. Mansfield’s most famous short story, *The Garden Party* (1922), features the native places of the author, that is, the “extraordinarily vivid memories of Wellington” [1, p. 56]. As a matter of fact, the short story raises questions “of class identity and social hierarchy” [5, p. 71]. The protagonist of the story, Laura Sheridan, – an immature, class conscious girl, aware of her social status, but uncertain of her place in this world, – eventually evolves into an unprejudiced person of high moral standards and ethical principles. Through the extensive use of imagery and figurative language, the author managed to depict the hypocrisy of the upper class, and their claim to superiority over the laborers. In the long run Laura’s evolution into the moral integrity and maturity signifies the victory over these social shortcomings. Thus, the narrative *The Garden Party* establishes the true identity of the protagonist.

It is necessary to observe that the story falls into the two major stages on a temporal level: “the time before and after the party, while the party itself is virtually insignificant” [6, p. 44]. The garden of the Sheridans resembles a sparkling Eden with lovely images of karaka-trees, “blaze of lilies,” and “gleaming leaves” [2]. The heavenly atmosphere of the garden is emphasized in the first sentence of the story: “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” [2]. The story begins “in an optimistic mood, though, with a scene of conspicuous consumption abundant with good things to eat, lovely things to wear, wonderful expensive flowers to enjoy” [1, p. 55]. The Sheridan children are isolated in this perfect, luxurious estate, sheltered from the “real”, mundane world. Their garden is full of pleasure and comfort, described in such epithets as “brilliant,” “charming,” “radiant,” “perfect,” “delicious,” “exquisite,” “rapturous,” “delightful,” “stunning,” and so on. As a matter of fact, these epithets “convey the outward beauty of the Sheridan’s life” [4, p. 50]. Indeed, the Sheridans live in a dreamlike world where everything is ideal. Moreover, the author

deliberately uses hyperboles and similes. For instance, Laura's sister, Jose, is described as a "butterfly" who always "came down in a silk petticoat and a kimono jacket" [2]. Occasionally, the bliss of the garden's atmosphere is certainly hyperbolized: "the green bushes bowed down as though they had been visited by archangels" [2]. It is necessary to observe that the guests are compared with birds: "there were couples strolling, bending to the flowers, greeting, moving on over the lawn. They were like bright birds that had alighted in the Sheridans' garden for this one afternoon" [2]. Moreover, the image of flowers is also hyperbolized: "there, just inside the door, stood a wide, shallow tray full of pots of pink lilies ... Nothing but lilies: radiant, almost frighteningly alive on bright crimson stems" [2]. The extensive use of these devices is aimed at creating the atmosphere of unnaturalness. Gradually, Laura starts to realize her parents' overprotection on the subconscious level, when she reflects on the way the karaka-trees are covered: "Then the karaka-trees would be hidden. And they were so lovely, with their broad, gleaming leaves, and their clusters of yellow fruit ... Must they be hidden by a marquee?" [2]. Thus, the extensive use of abundant floral images also emphasizes the vanity and emptiness of the Sheridans' world.

Laura's encounter with workers in the garden is the first time in the story when she realizes the abyss between the rich and the poor. The girl comes to meet them with the remnants of her breakfast in hand and immediately feels embarrassed, since the bread and butter signify her class superiority. More than that, one workman is particularly pale and has "a haggard look" [2]. Laura tries to act naturally, however, she is obviously torn between snobbery ("Laura's upbringing made her wonder for a moment whether it was quite respectful of a workman to talk to her of bangs slap in the eye" [2]), and the developing wish to cancel the absurd class distinctions and bridge the worlds of workmen and high-class (quite an unacceptable idea for the girl of her social status, indeed): "Why couldn't she have workmen for her friends rather than the silly boys she danced with and who came to Sunday night supper? She would get on much better with men like these" [2]. Laura even attempts to adopt the role of "a work-girl," deliberately taking big bites of the bread-and-butter. Thus, this is the initial stage of development of a young character; yet the heroine is very unstable in her views.

When a delivery man informs the family about the accidental death of a local carter from the cottage below, Laura is the only one to suggest the cancellation of the party: "But we can't possibly have a garden-party with a man dead just outside the front gate ... Mother, isn't it terribly heartless of us?" [2]. However, her mother and sisters simply do not understand why they should bother about the dead workman. The hypocrisy of the upper class representatives reaches its climax at this point: "People like that don't expect sacrifices from us. And it's

not very sympathetic to spoil everybody's enjoyment as you're doing now" [2]. Indeed, Laura's family "does not share her empathy; Mrs. Sheridan concentrates exclusively on her own social circle, her first and only priority" [3, p. 36]. Mrs. Sheridan gives Laura a stylish hat and persuades her to continue the preparations for party, in spite of their neighbor's death. Thus, in my opinion, the image of hat implies the sense of class-consciousness, snobbery, vanity and selfishness which Mrs. Sheridan wants to inculcate in Laura. The main heroine lets herself be tempted by this gift. She persuades herself that her mother is right and tries to get distracted: "I'll remember it again after the party's over, she decided" [2]. Looking at her new hat, Laura tries to calm her conscience. However, the author's use of simile emphasizes the abnormality of this situation: "but it all seemed blurred, unreal, like a picture in the newspaper" [2]. Hence, this is the second important moment of Laura's character formation; however, this time the axiological pendulum has swayed in favor of her family's class prejudices.

The decisive stage of Laura's development starts when she goes to the deceased carter's house with leftovers after the party. The internal evolution of Laura, her encounter with death and harsh reality are vividly represented in terms of space and time of the story: as a matter of fact, Laura's moves and actions distinctly acquire certain direction and target. As Hubert Zapf shrewdly remarks, "the activities in the Sheridans' house convey an impression of chaotic disconnectedness, of a confusing simultaneity of different aims and directions," while during Laura's visit to the workman's house the story "gains a clear aim and direction in space, linking the two opposing worlds in Laura's 'transcendent' experience" [6, p. 44]. Laura symbolically crosses "the wide road" which embodies the class barrier between the two worlds. Moreover, her journey down the hill resembles the ancient process of initiation ritual, as the heroine follows her way towards the moral maturity. The Scotts' home is represented in dark and gloomy colors. In fact, Laura's journey to the deceased carter's house involves the extensive contrast of the imagery of darkness and light. The world of working people suggests a great number of negatively connotated epithets, for instance, "haggard," "mean," "crablike," "wretched," "poverty stricken," "revolting," "disgusting," "sordid" [2] and so on.

At the Scotts' place Laura again feels very awkward because of her extravagant dress and chic hat: "how her frock shone! And the big hat with the velvet streamer – if only it was another hat!" [2]. Indeed, the "women in shawls and men's tweed caps" [2] in the laborers' world form a sharp disjuncture with her extravagant looks. Thus, the image of hat is a powerful dividing tool which generates the insurmountable precipice (both social and psychological) between

the two classes. As a matter of fact, Laura's hat is a separating agent between the laborers and the high class; it is the image of selfishness and snobbery.

However, when she sees the body of the carter – another important stage of adulthood, – Laura suddenly perceives the universality and the true meaning of life; she realizes that people are essentially equal, sharing a common human destiny, and class divisions are of no importance: “There lay a young man, sleeping so soundly ... Oh, so remote, so peaceful ... What did garden-parties and baskets and lace frocks matter to him? He was far from all those things. He was wonderful, beautiful” [2]. Thus, Laura experiences a “moment of being”; she actually achieves a moral and psychological insight [3, p. 36]. Mr. Scott's dead body is the image of the true meaning of life. Laura's apologies: “Forgive my hat” [2] indicate that she is remorseful of her previous yielding to selfishness and snobbery of the Sheridans. In other words, the image of hat immediately transforms into the embodiment of remorse and moral evolution.

Thus, *The Garden Party* “is a study of what appears to be the social and artistic awakening of a young, upper-class girl, Laura Sheridan” [3, p. 36]. The main character experiences a kind of moral and emotional catharsis; she eventually realizes that class barriers and garden parties have nothing to do with true human existence. At this concluding stage of evolution, Laura is ready to start the virtuous and unprejudiced life journey which certainly will not conform to the principles of her family. The extensive use of imagery and figurative language enabled the author to depict the hypocrisy of the upper class, the sharp contrast between the worlds of the poor and the rich, as well as the gradual moral development of the protagonist.

References

1. Kaya Ş. Laura's Lessons in Katherine Mansfield's “The Garden Party” / Şebnem Kaya // American International Journal of Contemporary Research. — 2011. — No.1(2). — P. 54—61.
2. Mansfield K. The Garden Party [Электронный ресурс] / Katherine Mansfield // Режим доступа: <http://www.katherinemansfieldsociety.org>
3. Marek J. Class-Consciousness and Self-Consciousness in Katherine Mansfield's “The Garden Party” / Jayne Marek // Papers from the 1989 PAC Conference VII. — 1990. — P. 35—43.
4. Rich J. Overview of “The Garden Party” / Jennifer Rich // Short Stories for Students. — 2000. — No.8. — P. 49—68.
5. Severn S.E. Linguistic Structure and Rhetorical Resolution in Katherine Mansfield's “The Garden Party” / Stephen E. Severn // Journal of The Short Story in English. — 2009. — No.52. — P. 71—82.

6. Zapf H. Time and Space in Katherine Mansfield's The Garden Party / Hubert Zapf // Orbis Litterarum. — 1985. — No.40(1). — P. 44—54.

Анотація

У статті досліджено еволюцію образу в літературі модернізму на прикладі психологічної новели Кетрін Менсфілд “Вечірка в саду” (1922). Проаналізовано систему символів, що становлять художньо-образну парадигму морального катарсису та емоційно-інтелектуального розвитку головної героїні.

Summary

The article examines the evolution of the literary image in the modernist literature as exemplified by Katherine Mansfield's psychological novel “The Garden Party” (1922). The system of symbols that form the artistic and figurative paradigm of the protagonist's moral catharsis, emotional and intellectual development has been analyzed.