

CULTURAL CAPITAL AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN KATHERINE MANSFIELD'S 'THE GARDEN PARTY': A BOURDIEUSIAN ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper examines Katherine Mansfield's The Garden Party (1922) through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concepts of cultural capital, habitus, and social mobility, analyzing the integration and critique of social class in literature. The social class implications of the cultural refinement and aesthetic sensibility appropriation to the Sheridans' garden party unmarked bourgeois enjoyment establishes the party as both objectified and embodied cultural capital. The Sheridans' social and cultural alchemy explains the Sheridans social power overflowing social closure and reinforcing structural mobility inequality. Laura's brief encounter with death, 'the class unconditioned,' seems to condition her unclassed response, opening the slightest possibility of cross-class sympathy; and yet her response to the dead carter is an aestheticized response, working-class pain made politically mute to a deeply personal, existential experience, unvoiced. Mansfield's unflinching focus on the social and cultural structures of inequality leaves little to critique. Using the Bourdieusian dimensions of this reading, we can assert how the totality of social inequality, and the structures that regulate it, frustrates emotion, morality, and even flashes of keen cross-class sympathy. The critique of cross-class empathy's absence demonstrates Mansfield's modernist lens is, and remains, relevant. Her woven threads, ridged with class and social mobility, offer a precursor to the cultural capital with which we now frame social position issues and continua, alongside class issues. Thus, the critique of Mansfield as foundational modernist literature remains relevant, illustrating the class issues that frame the argument today.

Keywords: class, cultural capital; habitus; social mobility; symbolic violence

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

The late twentieth century witnessed the emergence of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a multidisciplinary approach to the study of language, power, and ideology, integrating these concepts within the parameters of social contexts, social frameworks, and social actions. Critical theory is the basis of this theory and it is nourished and supported by numerous academic disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, and communication. CDA investigates the social structures which both shape and are shaped by discourse (spoken or written) (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993). CDA aims to investigate language as something which is not exercised in a social vacuum, and investigate how it can reproduce or challenge dominance, inequality, and hegemonic ideologies (Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

Norman Fairclough, Teun A. van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak are some of the most influential scholars in CDA, focusing on the social conditioning and social constituting character of discourse: social practices shape it, but it also helps produce and transform social relations (Fairclough, 2013; van Dijk, 2008). Text, discursive practice, and social practice, proposed by Fairclough (1995) in what he referred to as the three-dimensional model of analysis, sheds light on the interrelation of sociopolitical structures and linguistic choices. van Dijk (1998) developed the concept of “ideological discourse analysis” to focus on the use of discourse by the ‘power’ elite to reproduce and sustain control.

CDA isn’t an isolated approach or technique; rather, it is a collective viewpoint with a synthesizing scope that incorporates various techniques to uncover concealed power relations (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). It has been used on media, political and educational texts, and literature to demonstrate the ways in which language constructs social identities and exerts power or resistance (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Discourse and society has CDA provides a critical approach integrated with the emphasis surrounding the tension to uncover the social meanings that are produced and reproduced in relations of discourse and inequality.

Again, Bourdieu describes cultural capital as the head start an individual earns based on the traits that they possess, which the individual knows or has been socialised into or educated, and skills or competencies that are of social and cultural worth (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu elaborates on the various forms of capital (economic, cultural, and social) and the ways in which they determine an individual’s habitus and upward mobility. Mansfield, through the contrast of the Sheridan Family and the working class that populated the adjoining cottages, highlights these social structures that are characteristic of Colonized New Zealand in the 20th century. At the centre of the story is the eagerly anticipated annual garden party of the Sheridans, who are the embodiment of cultivated taste, education, and etiquette—a refinement of cultural capital. From the lavishly decorated party, the Sheridans appreciate beauty, which signifies their social status. This status is preserved, and reproduced, not by mere economic means but by cultural practices. Preceding their routine of leisure, they are abruptly interrupted by the death of a working-class neighbour, whom they are suddenly made aware of, and who calls into question the rigidity of class boundaries. The classist boundaries of the protagonist Laura are, through her cross-class sympathy, almost insidiously unsettled and exposed, having reflected on the humanity she shares with the working class. This is in stark contrast to the insularity of having grown up in a class-privileged and stratified society.

Bourdieu would likely view *The Garden Party* as an example of how cultural capital both aids in the preservation of distinctive class traits and stunts social mobility. As part of class reproduction, the working class is both materially and symbolically absent from the elite, while the Sheridans possess habitus that justifies and rationalises their domination and privilege. However, Laura’s brief encounter with social death and the transience of social order suggests the very slim possibility of overcoming class barriers. This paper utilises Bourdieu’s culture and literature nexus to examine the ways in which Mansfield’s text critiques as much as it reflects Bourdieu’s class culture, thereby richly attending to the nexus of cultural capital and social mobility that the story powerfully epitomises.

1.2. Research Problem

Katherine Mansfield's short story, "The Garden Party," highlights several themes including representations of modernism, use of symbols, classism, and even death; however, the work has decidedly been less critiqued using Bourdieu’s cultural capital and social mobility theory. Bourdieu suggests that the components of cultural capital such as education and highbrow social activities are critical in the creation and maintenance of social strata as they restrict vertical mobility. Mansfield's story starkly illustrates the class differences between the upper-class Sheridans and their proletariat neighbors. However, the role of cultural capital sustaining

this disparity remains neglected. Thus, the problem this research addresses is concerning the ways in which Mansfield's story illustrates the intertwining of social mobility and cultural capital and demonstrates how the Sheridans' dispositional tastes and attitudes shield and enhance their social privilege, simultaneously constraining the lower class's social mobility. It further examines whether Laura's momentary encounter with death collapses her class habitus or whether she merely suffers from a sense of class awareness that does not alter the deeply rooted social structure. Focusing on concepts introduced by Bourdieu, the objective is to show how such works of art do not only illustrate classism but also demonstrate the ways in which the class structure is concealed.

1.3. Research Objectives

1. To analyze the ways in which Mansfield represents cultural capital as a mechanism for sustaining social privilege and reproducing class distinctions.
2. To evaluate whether Laura's moment of class consciousness signifies a meaningful disruption of social hierarchy or simply reinforces the existing structures of inequality.

1.4. Research Questions

1. How does Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party* illustrate the role of cultural capital in reinforcing class hierarchies and limiting social mobility?
2. To what extent does Laura's encounter with death challenge or reaffirm the class-based habitus depicted in the story?

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study integrates literary criticism with sociological thought by offering a new Bourdieusian perspective on Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party*. The story has often been assessed within the framework of modernist aesthetics or as a commentary on class consciousness. Nonetheless, using Pierre Bourdieu on cultural capital, social habitus, and social mobility illustrates more how literature tackles the subtle reproduction of social order. This research positions Mansfield's text as relevant as ever to contemporary concerns surrounding social inequality and stratification by examining how the refined tastes of the Sheridans and their inherited cultural capital sustain relational class accretion and block social mobility. It also exemplifies the value of interdisciplinary work by demonstrating the social theory within a work of fiction, thereby contributing to sociological literary criticism and, more broadly, social theory. It will also be of considerable interest to scholars of modernist texts, cultural studies, and those researching the intersections of class, culture, and power.

2. Literature review

2.1 Class and Social Stratification in Mansfield's Fiction

In her works, Katherine Mansfield shows how complicated class relations were and how unstable social structures were in the colonial society of the early 1900s. Mansfield demonstrates how the boundaries of class, particularly of privilege and the working poor, are elements of painful social constructions in which the boundaries are often clear. One of her best stories, *The Garden Party* (1922), shows how well Mansfield captures these boundaries. Scholars, such as Boddy (2011) and Smith (2013), note how the tale captures the deep gulf between the Sheridans' bourgeois, gracious, and genteel world and the adjacent impoverished working-class world that is complete with economic misery and harsh shocks. The garden party with working-class hands that boasts glittering savories and exquisite blooms in wreaths of white and green, immense dance marquees and mile-high decorated party towers, captures the poor fellow labourer's nearby death in the extreme, suffused with the nervousness of the social gap.

In “The Garden Party,” Mansfield utilises modernist techniques to explore the subconscious reproduction and maintenance of class identities through the use of irony, selective focalisation, and subdued yet powerful imagery (Nathan, 2010). Instead of a direct critique of society, she depicts mundane occurrences and relies on the trivial comments made by the characters to unveil the deeply rooted beliefs and attitudes that underpin and perpetuate class privilege. This narrative technique illustrates social stratification; however, it also assesses the moral and psychological aspects of inequality. The power that critics speak of, in relation to the story, is its ability to showcase the middle-class's wife's empathy, the Sheridans, who, much to the reader's dismay, possess with only a few instances of “wavering pity,” are cocooned in a world of comfort and artistry. Mansfield extends beyond mere class conflict and provides a critique on the class boundaries of emotion and ethics that discourage true social unity.

2.2 Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital and Habitus

One of the most credited theories in attributing social inequality to non-material powers is cultural capital theorised by Pierre Bourdieu (1986). Bourdieu (1986) defined three forms of cultural capital, namely, embodied, which is the incorporation of habits, skills, and dispositions as a result of socialisation and formal, informal, and non-formal education; objectified, which includes cultural items such as art and books, and is associated with symbols of refinement and culture; and institutionalised, which consists of formal education and recognised social qualifications. These different forms of capital serve as social resources, which in turn, shape individual opportunities and determine the “life chances” of a person, such as privilege or social mobility.

Bourdieu (1986) introduced the framework of habitus which forms the basis of his argument. Bourdieu (1986) conceptualised habitus as a system of notions that is fundamental and lasting, and which classifies how people envision, conceive of, and take action in the social world, and which is the result of class conditioning. It is more than a programme of learning, and is structural, long lasting, and a subconscious element that delineates social practice for taste and culture, and which operates in such a way as to be socially naked or devoid of ideas. As Grenfell (2014) outlines, structural internalisation of social mechanisms enables the reproduction of the dominant class in society devoid of resistance, and makes privilege seem natural and legitimate. Due to its explanation of the intricate processes involved in social reproduction, Bourdieu's theory has been employed in literary and cultural studies to consider how texts represent, legitimise, or challenge social hierarchies (Swartz, 1997). It has been shown by scholars that fiction, indeed, mirrors the subtle forms of cultural capital and its functions in the maintenance of class boundaries, even in instances where economic exploitation is not clearly visible. As noted by Fowler (2011), literary texts often feature characters whose tastes, education, and styles of art appreciation signify and perhaps determine closure through social boundaries and demonstrate the power of cultural capital to class-structure, even when such boundaries are not manifestly pronounced.

2.3 Bourdieusian Analyses of Literature and Social Mobility

In recent years, Bourdieu's concepts have garnered attention from a growing number of scholars who examine the merging of the narrative and the thematic in the cultural capital of a literary work. Such studies reveal the ways literary works highlight and make palpable the often opaque realities of the maintenance, legitimization and the infliction of class rigidity as well as classification. For instance, Fowler (2011) maintains that in fiction, the characters are often constructed possessing different pieces of cultural capital which include an education, an appreciation of the arts, and a set of socially recognized accomplishments which are used as markers of class distinction. Such depictions access how cultural capital is not background, but an active slayer of social restraints, creating social stratifications and boundaries of interaction for the characters in the book.

Robbins (2005) focuses on how literature remains, at the same time, a subtle critique of the systems that sustain such systems of privilege. By elucidating the socially constructed nature of taste and refinement, literary works are able to challenge the idea of the natural attainment of cultural superiority. According to Robbins, the ‘high social’ meaning signified by the possession of refinement and sophistication is a result of very particular historical and cultural contexts and literature, more than any other medium, makes it its work to reveal this fact to the reader.

Combined and considered in totality, the previously examined works are the first of their kind to generate a methodological framework for a Bourdieusian analysis of Katherine Mansfield’s *The Garden Party*. The works epitomise the capacity of fiction to both document and scrutinise the cultural systems of perpetuating social stratification. The cultural ‘bourgeois’ in Mansfield’s story resides in the delicate interplay between the ‘polished’ bourgeois aesthetics and the conspicuous absence of the working class, providing a rich backdrop for the investigation into the cultural capital that both reveals and shrouds the layers of social class stratification, preserving the illusion of class supremacy masqueraded in a vaporous veil of taste and cultural refinement.

2.4 Cultural Capital in The Garden Party

Critical approaches to *The Garden Party*’s class consciousness and modernist aesthetics have yet to utilise Bourdieu’s framework. Smith (2013) focuses on Laura Sheridan’s fleeting recognition of the pains of the working class, but does not extend the analysis to the more salient issue of cultural capital. Regarding the garden party, Boddy (2011) interprets it as a display of bourgeois culture, but does not address the sociological consequences of the idea of habitus. This gap shall be filled in the present study by bringing in Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital and habitus, showing how Mansfield not only portrays class difference but also critiques the class cultural mechanisms underpinning the social inequality.

3. Research Methodology

This study utilizes interpretive methods that are based on sociological theory and the literary works. Indeed, the work integrates a Bourdieusian analysis on the concepts of cultural capital, habitus, and social mobility, and the textual analysis of Katherine Mansfield’s *The Garden Party* in order to assess how the work portrays and critiques class stratification in society.

The most appropriate approach for this study is qualitative because it intends to identify the meanings in a text, not quantifiable data. The study aims to examine the intricate cultural mechanisms that preserve class stratification employing different forms of cultural capital as defined by Bourdieu—embodied, objectified, institutionalized—along with the concept of habitus. This analytical perspective assists in clarifying the ways the narrative both reinforces and challenges social inequalities.

The primary text for the study is Katherine Mansfield’s short story “*The Garden Party*,” published in 1922. This text is central to the analysis. In order to deepen the analysis and situate the text within the critique, the study constructs secondary sources from Mansfield’s work, peer-reviewed journal articles, and fundamental particulars of Bourdieu (1986) and later authors like Grenfell (2014) and Swartz (1997).

Textual evidence comprises the passages and dialogues, the sign systems, and the narrative techniques which reflect the themes of class, culture, and social mobility. The relevant critique and theoretical literature has been gathered from academic databases and library resources to underpin and contextualize the analysis.

The analysis proceeds within a thematic and conceptual framework. First, the text is analyzed to uncover scenes, characters, and narrative elements that depict cultural capital and class differences. These outcomes are interpreted using Bourdieu’s habitus and cultural reproduction framework to reveal the mechanisms that enable or impede social mobility within the narrative.

Relevant secondary scholarship is incorporated to either support or dispute these interpretations, thereby grounding the analysis within the existing scholarship.

The analysis is centered on one specific short story, which does not allow for findings to be generalized to Mansfield's other works, or to other literary traditions. Furthermore, as an interpretive analysis, it includes the author's viewpoint and, as with any literary scholarship, involves an analysis's possible biases.

4. Analysis and discussion

4.1. Cultural Capital and Class Hierarchies in *The Garden Party*

4.1.1. Cultural Display as Objectified Capital

The way the Sheridans prepare demonstrates what Bourdieu (1986) terms 'objectified cultural capital', the material indicators of taste that signify one's social superiority:

'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. ... 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.'

This quotation demonstrates what Bourdieu (1986) terms 'objectified cultural capital.' The Sheridans do not have a garden as merely a physical setting; they have a garden as a stage for the performance of privilege. The roses are described almost as conscious actors; 'they understood that roses are the only flowers that impress people.' for the Sheridans, social status is granted through the symbols of taste roses and flowers. The pleasure of the garden party is more than simple aesthetic; it is cultural and a means of marking and reproducing status. Bourdieu asserts that the bourgeoisie converts economic capital into cultural capital by mastering and performing 'legitimate culture.' the garden party of the Sheridans is a perfect example.

The description of the weather as if it was ordered for the occasion emphasizes the assumed concordance between nature and privilege. Inequality is woven into the event with the utmost subtlety. The Sheridans' leisure is in abundance, seeming so "ideal" that it makes the act of social superiority effortless, as natural as a sunny afternoon.

4.1.2. Habitus and Embodied Capital

The Sheridans' behavior illustrates embodied cultural capital; that is, the habits, dispositions, and social codes which are transmitted through families. This is particularly evident when Mrs. Sheridan tells Laura to put on the new black hat;

"My child! ... the hat is yours. It's made for you. ... I have never seen you look such a picture. Look at yourself!"

In this instance, the hat is pivotal as more than a fashion accessory but as a determinant of class identity, showing Laura what refinement and elegance look like. To Bourdieu, this is what embodied capital represents, which, as the habitus, comprises internalized dispositions. Such dispositions dictate what is tasteful, appropriate and respectable within a given class. This is the moment she is pulled, with barely perceived force, into her family's cultural circuitry, even as she critically registers their unseeing indifference and the working-class death nearby. Unlike wealth, which could, in theory, be acquired, these embodied codes of propriety are cultivated over a lifetime and, as with working-class identity, serve as invisible markers of exclusion and reproducing upper-class identity.

4.1.3. Symbolic Violence and the Reproduction of Hierarchy

Upon learning about the carter's death at nearby cottages, Laura suggests the possibility of cancelling the party.

"But we can't possibly have a garden-party with a man dead just outside the front gate."

Her mother shoots down the idea, although Laura's suggestion was a sign of the decency one could expect from her.

“People like that don’t expect sacrifices from us. And it’s not very sympathetic to spoil everybody’s enjoyment.”

The first remark simply establishes the ‘social norm’ of the dominant class, which assumes that their enjoyment should not be interrupted for a ‘dead man’ outside the gate. They claim that their enjoyment should not be interrupted, while the mother attempts to justify the social norm as ‘considerate’ and not as ‘callous,’ thereby justifying the social order without pressure.

4.1.4. Aestheticizing the Working Class

One might certainly empathize with Laura during her last visit to the dead man’s cottage:

“There lay a young man, fast asleep—sleeping so soundly, so deeply, that he was far, far away from them both... He was wonderful, beautiful. While they were laughing and while the band was playing, this marvel had come to the lane.”

Laura’s unfocused gaze transformed this scene of working-class tragedy into an aesthetic, even spiritual, experience. Rather than acknowledging the frame of death and the structural poverty surrounding the death of “a young chap living there, name of Scott, a carter,” Laura saw “marvel,” “wonderful, beautiful,” and “far, far away.” As Bourdieu might have it, this is habitus once again reasserting itself. Laura perceives the scene not through a socio-political lens, but rather through the bourgeois lens of aestheticism. The gaze makes the dead, the suffering sublime. The ability to transform real social suffering into an elevated private experience is the cultural capital of the dominant class. Laura’s parting words; “Isn’t life—” her brother “quite understood” fill the modernist void, signaling the shared mental framework of the class.

Her fleeting brush with death yields personal existential insight, yet fails to provoke any sense of social consciousness or activism, thereby reinforcing the class order.

Mansfield portrays the role of cultural capital in reinforcing class order. The class conferred tastes and socialized manners, the Sheridans, are more than neutral options and are a form of symbolic power. Accordingly, their moral economy shifts the material privilege of the class order into a sense of unearned superiority (socially and psychologically). Laura’s blink-and-you-miss- confronting death is a glimpse of higher-class awareness, but, couched in a dominant-‘habitus’ aesthetic, shows the extent to which ‘habitus’ assimilates and absorbs apparent open- disruption.

4.2. Bourdieusian Analysis of Laura’s Encounter with Death

Using the same **qualitative, Bourdieusian methodology**, Laura’s experience at the end of Katherine Mansfield’s *The Garden Party* reveals a momentary disturbance of her class-based **habitus**, yet the episode ultimately **reaffirms the social order** rather than overturning it.

4.2.1. A Momentary Disruption of Habitus

In her spontaneous solidarity with working-class neighbors, Laura shows emotional response to the death of the Carter family. When she says,

“But we can’t possibly have a garden-party with a man dead just outside the front gate,” she almost breaks the effects of her upper-class conditioning. Bourdieu (1986) posits the habitus, the set of durable, class-conditioned, built-ways of thinking and acting. Laura’s protest indicates the class rupture is the questioning of the Sheridans’ assumption that their enjoyment is unrelated to the suffering of “people like that.” This ethical discomfort is the reflexive consciousness that habitually class disturbs the class-apportioned habitus that Bourdieu speaks of.

4.2.2. Family Pressure and Symbolic Violence

The Sheridans are quick however to mitigate Laura’s defiance. Mrs. Sheridan’s retort—

“People like that don’t expect sacrifices from us. And it’s not very sympathetic to spoil everybody’s enjoyment.”

—captures, within a Bourdieuan framework, symbolic violence: the values of the ruling stratum are treated as self-evident, while acts of exclusion are couched as acts of benevolence. Laura, persuaded to rejoin the celebration, accepts a decorative hat from her mother, a direct manifestation of her class identity. The hat serves as the embodiment of cultural capital, and the ‘distraction’ serves to re-integrate Laura into the social stratum’s habitus and external manifestations.

4.2.3. Death as Aesthetic Experience

Upon visiting the dead man’s cottage, Laura’s reflection is notably aesthetic:

“He was lovely, beautiful. While they were laughing and the band was playing, this marvel had come to the lane.”

Rather than a political awakening, she contemplates this death as a “marvel,” a moment of sublime, reflective contemplation. Bourdieu would interpret this as the habitus reasserting itself: Laura is transforming the encounter into something refined and, almost, artistic as her language turns the death of the working-class man into a precious object of aesthetic contemplation, a response determined by the very cultural capital she had, if only momentarily, questioned.

4.2.4. The Limits of Transformation

When Laura whispers to her brother—

“Isn’t life—”

—before breaking off, her unfinished thought shows a new awareness of life’s fragility. The structural lack of any change suggests the awareness is still personal, transient, and isolated. The worlds of privilege for the Sheridans remain untouched. After visiting the cottages, Laura returns to the family estate, her position in the class structure still the same.

The challenge that class-based habitus encounters during Laura’s death is momentary. The family’s return to the value structure—simply integrating her back into privilege—indicates symbolic violence. The upper-class habitus’ ability to absorb moments of shock is vividly illustrated in the aestheticization of death. In private, the sentiment is still collective critique. The critique of Laura’s experience, in Bourdieu’s terms, is a form of cultural capital and the class structure: the habitus bends, but does not break.

5. Conclusion

Katherine Mansfield’s *The Garden Party* critiques social inequality through a symbolic and cultural lens. With reference to Bourdieu’s cultural capital, habitus and symbolic violence, the analysis illustrates how the world of leisure and refinement to the Sheridans’ was not an afterthought to the family celebration but rather, a class privilege performance. The Sheridans’ status was a natural consequence of taste and refinement manners through the roses and the marquee (objectified cultural capital), and the social proprieties around Laura’s hat (embodied cultural capital), and the Sheridans’ position on the class hierarchy.

The family’s response to the carter’s death further illustrates the workings of symbolic violence. Mrs. Sheridan’s remark that “people like that don’t expect sacrifices” qualifies a hierarchical exclusion as sympathy and reinforces the order, while Laura’s, most directly, class exposed, sacred the rest of her action. The Aesthetics of class remained with the dead through value of “wonderful and beautiful” and “marvel”, and not as a testament to class violence and a social, systemic reality.

Through a Bourdieusian lens, the situation shown illustrates the idea of the habitus bending, but not breaking: the moment of moral awakening simply assimilates back into the culture of the dominant class. Mansfield thus sheds light on the invisible power cultural capital has to maintain privilege and stifle social mobility not just through brute force and wealth, but through the tastes, sensibilities, and ways of seeing and perceiving the world that constitute the bourgeois class. By demonstrating that even the shock of death can be managed by the upper-

class habitus, The Garden Party offers modernist commentary on the subtle, yet powerful, class reproduction that remains profound in contemporary issues of culture and inequality.

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