

# The Theme of Death in "The Garden Party"

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By Sabrina Pittoello

Katherine Mansfield explores profoundly the world of death and its impact on a person in her short story, "The Garden Party."

Enter the Sheridans, a wealthy, high-class family who live in England. They are your everyday rich snobs who think themselves better than the common person. There is, however, one person who is quite unlike her family, and that is Laura Sheridan.

Laura started off in a bubble, and has lived in it all her life. She has been protected from the real world, so she has never experienced the effects of betrayal, poverty, or labor, let alone death, which she does get to experience, by the end of the story. Laura meets face to face with death, and the results of it will change her look on life forever. It is a wonder she ever had a chance to be a caring, sensitive person with a sibling like Jose. Jose is an unfeeling, heartless and self-absorbed person who is completely clueless to those around her who don't have lots of money or expensive assets. She sings songs with mock passion:

This life is wee-ary  
A Tear – a sigh  
A Love that Chan-ges  
This Life is wee-ary  
A Tear – a sigh  
A Love that chan-ges  
And then...good bye!

This is the song that Jose sings before the garden party is held. It's ironic how she can sing a song about life being weary, a tear-a sigh when she cannot-could not, even remotely relate to ever being in the position of being weary. She is singing about something that she doesn't understand, something she can't feel. She can't sing it with any *real* compassion, because she has none. This shows when she breaks into a brilliant smile at the end of the song, which is supposed to be full of sadness. This is what gives the effect of irony. In truth, if anyone were to be singing this song, it should have been the man who was killed.

...Hope comes to die  
A dream – a Wa-kening...

This part of the song is so foreshadowing that it is

impossible to miss the second time through. After reading the story, one notices that Laura described the dead man as giving into his dream. And who is awakened, but Laura Sheridan, after seeing the man lying on the sofa. This song portrays everything that is to happen in the latter part of "The Garden Party." Mansfield writes, "He was far from all those things. He was wonderful, beautiful. While they were laughing, and while the band was playing, this marvel had come to the lane." These are Laura's thoughts in the scene where she is looking at the corpse. To one's surprise, she feels no pang of guilt or anything like it. She is taken aback by the *beauty* of this man. She realizes that he is beyond her, passed all the lace frocks, fancy hats and garden parties. Where he has gone, none of these superficial things matter. To Laura, this is something beautiful, something special. She has never seen death before, so she has no preconceptions of it being horrid or gross. She doesn't see it as dying, but as moving on to a different and better place. It crosses one's mind as being ironic though; to think of death as marvelous is nothing short of ridiculous. When someone dies, there is mourning and a feeling of loss and sadness, not marvel.

There is a certain taste in this story that makes one see the superficialities of life, and that is the taste of death. It does it like no other, giving one the opportunity to look inside and truthfully see what is important. The way Mansfield delivers the part of the story where Laura is looking at the dead man gives a view on life, which more than Laura can share. It makes one realize that there are many superficial things in life that matter, which should not.

When Laura says, "forgive my hat," it gives away everything she is, everything she will be, and more. These three words tell the reader everything he needs to know about Laura and this story. In saying this, Laura admits to wearing the fancy clothes and expensive hats, but also she understands somewhat that life is more than that. She knows her hat is grossly inappropriate. It brags to these poor people that she is wealthy and they are not. It is a party hat, but also it is everything Laura was. It represents her narrow-minded upbringing, such as the way she was taught to treat others of "lower class" and it represents a person who doesn't care much for the well being of others. "Forgive my hat" is truly the heart of this story.

When Laura sobs, "Isn't life, isn't life-" she is trying to explain how she feels now about life, how the experience of seeing the dead affected her. She can't put it into words though, because it was a feeling that she experienced-an understanding. It could be concluded that she had the words all along, only she had them mixed up. What Laura was really trying to say, is "life *isn't*." That is the effect Mansfield wished to create, and she succeeded beautifully

at it.