The Garden Party

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD

Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp was born in New Zealand to a successful Australian-born English business family. The Sheridans' estate in "The Garden Party" is based on Mansfield's own childhood home on Tinakori Road in Wellington, which is now a museum to her memory. She was determined to become a writer from grade school; in 1903, her family sent her and her two sisters to study in London where she quickly became an accomplished cellist. When she returned to New Zealand in 1906, she just as quickly became dissatisfied with the routine of endless social functions and empty courtship that her parents expected her to undertake; it is this period in her life—Mansfield's dissatisfaction with her privileged, cloistered upbringing—that "The Garden Party" most recalls. During this period, she began to publish stories and developed complicated relationships with Edith Kathleen Bendall, an artist, and Maata Mahupuku, a Maori woman whose path from Wellington to London and back again paralleled Mansfield's and who appears in many of her stories. Mansfield longed for a return to London and successfully found passage back in 1908. Over the next decade in London she maintained friendships with other prominent modernists, particularly Virginia Woolf, and married her editor, John Middleton Murry, after dating on and off for nearly a year. The death of her brother during a World War I training exercise in 1915 spurred her to start writing more and seriously reflecting on her childhood in New Zealand. In 1917, she was diagnosed with tuberculosis, but her remaining years proved her most prolific, yielding two short story collections and all of her best-known work. Mansfield's final days were marked by her worsening illness and desperate search for a remedy, which led her to George Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man in France. She died there at age 34 and remains one of New Zealand's most celebrated writers.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As with most modernist fiction, "The Garden Party" was written in the shadow (both historical and moral) of World War I. The death of Mansfield's younger brother Leslie by a prematurely detonated grenade during a World War I training drill in Belgium devastated the author and may have influenced her treatment of death in "The Garden Party." Leslie's final words were "lift my head, I can't breathe," but Mansfield was known to report them as "lift my head, *Katie*, I can't breathe." She and her brother spent the summer in London together planning a trip home to New Zealand; Leslie died in October, and the nostalgia of their planned trip carried on to become a central theme in her work.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Katherine Mansfield's work is perhaps most conventionally likened to that of her close friend Virginia Woolf, who famously called Mansfield's writing "the only writing I have ever been jealous of." Woolf's best-known work (especially *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*) is written in a similar free indirect discourse and similarly pays close attention to the sensitivity of perception and the tumultuousness of sensibility. Mansfield was also close friends with DH Lawrence, from whom she probably contracted the tuberculosis that killed her and whose notorious *Lady Chatterly's Lover* was criticized for subverting many of the same social and sexual mores Mansfield was charged with flouting during her life. James Joyce's collection *Dubliners*, which appeared in 1914, remains a landmark in both modernism and the short story genre; *Dubliners* shares with "The Garden Party" a sense of marginality vis-à-vis social codes from the inside and an emphasis on the moments of epiphany that bring people into new worlds of understanding. Oscar Wilde was an early favorite of Mansfield's, and she adored Russian writer Anton Chekhov so much that she tried to translate all of his correspondence into English. She died before she finished, but her work is so deeply indebted to Chekhov that scholars have debated whether she plagiarized him. Other stories by Mansfield (including "The Daughters of the Late Colonel," "Bliss" and "How Pearl Button Was Kidnapped") include themes similar to those in "The Garden Party," including the death of a father figure, the fruits and pitfalls of curiosity, and relationships forming across social class lines. Finally, Laura's siblings' names (Laurie, Meg, and Jose) are borrowed from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* series, which are also semiautobiographical coming-of-age tales about conflict between daughters and family expectations.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Garden Party"
- **When Written:** 1921
- **Where Written:** London
- **When Published:** 1922 (first serialized in newspapers, then published in a collection also called *The Garden Party*)
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short story, modernism, literary impressionism
- **Setting:** The Sheridans' house, the neighborhood down the hill, the Scotts' house
- **Climax:** Laura anxiously visits Mr. Scott's house with flowers,

sees his body, and is overcome with wonder

- **Antagonist:** Laura's mother, a snobbish but outwardly welcoming woman whose hyperbolic speech and deflection of responsibility frustrate her daughter
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient narrator, free indirect discourse involving Laura's point of view

EXTRA CREDIT

Posthumous Publishing. Mansfield never wanted her husband John Murry to publish her papers; she asked him to dispose of them. She had earlier managed to destroy her journals from 1906-1912, but Murry ignored her wishes and meticulously preserved everything that he could get his hands on. His effect on her posthumous reputation is a hotly-debated topic among literary scholars, but he certainly had a significant one: he edited and published two more collections of her short stories, a book of poetry, a novel, and about a half-dozen books of correspondence, which altogether comprise the majority of her published work. But he didn't find everything: in 2012, a London PhD student discovered four previously unknown stories by Mansfield.

Marriage to George Bowden. Mansfield actually married twice. In 1909, almost a decade before she married Murry, Mansfield fell in love with a musician who spurned her. She had an affair with his brother, got pregnant, and then suddenly married another man altogether: George Bowden, who was also a musician. She purportedly wore a funeral dress to the ceremony and left Bowden forever after only a few hours. The pregnancy ended in miscarriage, and Mansfield was also involved with her closest friend and fellow writer Ida Baker, but she never officially divorced Bowden for eight years.

PLOT SUMMARY

Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" follows Laura, a teenaged daughter of the wealthy New Zealand Sheridan family, as her family throws a garden-party at their estate. The early summer day could be no more perfect, and neither could the family garden; after the story's opening paragraphs assert this in the formal register of English nobility, Laura's mother sends Laura, "the artistic one," to tell four workmen where to set up the **marquee** (a large outdoor tent). Laura takes her breakfast outside and is astonished to find four polite, strapping men who speak with an urgency and directness unlike anyone from her own social class. They negotiate about the marquee's location, the workmen begin setting it up, and Laura complains about the "absurd class distinctions" that keep her from socializing with such "extraordinary nice" men like these.

The telephone rings and Laura runs inside to answer it, briefly encountering her father and her brother Laurie on the way. She answers it, invites a family friend to lunch, and hears the piano being moved in the other room. Sadie, one of the Sheridans' domestic servants, tells Laura that the florist's deliveryman has arrived. They meet him at the front door and see trays upon trays of beautiful pink canna lilies, which Mrs. Sheridan ordered on a whim the day before when she saw them in a shop window. Laura complains that her mother promised the children control over the party this year, but Mrs. Sheridan convinces her daughter to overlook her interference. The story jumps to the drawing-room, where another Sheridan daughter, Jose, sings the mournful song "This Life is Weary" with a "brilliant, dreadfully unsympathetic smile" while the third, Meg, accompanies her on the piano.

Again, Sadie interrupts the narrative to announce another working character's request: the cook wants the name flags for the sandwiches she has made. Mrs. Sheridan has not written the flags yet but tells Sadie that she has them before ordering Laura to write the names. She accuses the children of hiding the envelope where the guest list is written, but finds it behind the dining-room clock. Laura writes the flags and brings them to the kitchen where Sadie has another announcement: the cream puff deliveryman has arrived from Godber's. The cook tells Laura and Jose to have a cream puff each, and they scarf them down even though they find it improper to eat sweets so soon after breakfast.

Laura heads back to the garden but first encounters Godber's man telling the horrified servants about the death of Scott, a cart-driver, in an accident that morning. She decides that it would be inconsiderate to continue the party because Scott lives in a row of decrepit cottages just downhill from the Sheridans' estate. She tells this to her sister Jose, who accuses Scott of drinking on the job and finds Laura's concern for the poor ridiculous. Laura then approaches her mother, who cares even less: Mrs. Sheridan is amused and irritated at Laura's concern once she realizes the death didn't happen in their garden. Mrs. Sheridan gives Laura her **hat** to distract her; once Laura sees herself in her bedroom mirror, she suddenly starts to see Scott's death as "blurred, unreal, like a picture in the newspaper." Laura changes her mind about the party and goes to lunch.

After lunch, Laurie returns from the office and Laura goes to ask his opinion on stopping the party. After her brother compliments her hat, Laura decides not to bring up the accident after all and goes to the party, which Mansfield recounts in scarcely half a page. After it ends, the Sheridans convene in the marquee and Mr. Sheridan mentions Scott's accident. Mrs. Sheridan, irritated that her husband also wants to ruin their fun, makes fun of Laura and then suddenly has an idea: they should send their leftovers to the Scotts. Laura finds this presumptuous but agrees to take the basket herself.

Laura heads down to the cottages, where she is horrified at the unsightly residents and ashamed at her own expensive clothes. She decides to turn back but realizes she has already reached the Scott house; she knocks and tells Em's sister, who answers the door, that she simply wants to leave the basket and go. But Em's sister brings her inside nonetheless and introduces her to the man's crying widow, Em Scott, who thanks Laura for coming but does not understand why she would visit at all. Laura tries to run out the front door but instead walks through the door of Scott's room, where his body lies under a sheet. Em's sister assumes that Laura must want to see him and draws down the sheet. To her surprise, Laura finds the body peaceful and marvelous; she sees the man as dreaming, far removed from the suffocating constraints of social convention. But she does recognize the tragedy in his death and exclaims "forgive my hat" before running out of the house and meeting her brother Laurie on the road outside. He embraces and comforts her as she cries but does not understand that hers are tears of joy; Laura starts to explain what she has realized but cannot finish her sentence. "Isn't life—" she says, and the story ends with the narrator's insistence that Laurie "quite understood" and his entirely empty response: "*Isn't* it, darling?"

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Laura Sheridan – The story's curious and free-spirited protagonist, Laura is Mr. and Mrs. Sheridan's teenage daughter and sister to Laurie, Jose and Meg. As she begins to come of age, Laura starts to realize the pitfalls of her privileged upbringing, especially the restrictions it places on socializing. She is disappointed, for example, by the "silly boys" courting her rather than "extraordinarily nice" men from the lower classes, like the workmen who put up the **marquee**. Laura's mother calls her "the artistic one" and sends her to do various odd jobs in preparation for the garden party that afternoon, but as Laura increasingly realizes that working-class people in her community must work tirelessly and endure poverty in order for her family to maintain their extravagant lifestyle, she becomes increasingly torn between the leisurely gentility of her upbringing and her sympathy for the workers her parents and siblings barely acknowledge. When Laura overhears that Scott has died in a horrible accident, she urges the rest of her family to cancel the party, but her protests fall on deaf ears and she decides to go on with the party once she sees herself in the mirror wearing her mother's extravagant daisy-trim **hat**. Later, Laura's mother sends her to deliver a basket of leftover food to the cart-driver's family. When she arrives, Laura is unsettled by the cottages' squalid conditions and overwhelmed with anxiety about her own wealth, especially the hat and clothes that make her class status obvious. Upon seeing Scott's body, Laura has an epiphany about life, death, wealth and poverty (although the reader never quite learns what exactly she has figured out).

Mrs. Sheridan – Laura's domineering and passive-aggressive socialite mother, Mrs. Sheridan obsessively plans the garden-party with her children's help even as she insists that all the preparations are up to them. Her authority and tendency to speak in leading questions make Laura feel unable to express the disagreements she feels with her mother. This creates conflict after Scott's death, since Mrs. Sheridan ceases to care as soon as she realizes the accident didn't happen in her garden. Mrs. Sheridan, like Jose, becomes angry with Laura for proposing that they cancel the party and later even teases her for suggesting it. When her husband Mr. Sheridan mentions the accident, Mrs. Sheridan considers it "tactless," but decides to feign sympathy by sending Laura to take leftovers from the party to the Scotts.

Meg Sheridan – Another of Laura's siblings, Meg is a relatively minor character and does not speak in the story. Like the rest of her family, Meg is depicted as living a leisurely life: she drinks coffee with her hair wrapped in a green towel, which makes her too busy to supervise the workmen, and she later plays the piano while Jose sings.

Jose Sheridan – Jose is Laura's forceful, practical, and confident sister who enjoys ordering around her siblings and the family's servants. The way Jose talks to her mother suggests that she is younger than Laura, and she is happy to act as her mother's enforcer, encouraging Laura to stop worrying about Scott's death and "pacifying" the cook, of whom Mrs. Sheridan is "terrified." Before the party, Jose insists on practicing the song "This Life is Weary" to Meg's piano accompaniment. Instead of matching its elegiac tone, she sings the song about heartbreak, death, and needless suffering with a wide smile and asks for her mother's approval. Laura's conflict with Jose symbolizes her increasing (but incomplete) independence from her family's social position and her mother's way of thinking.

Laurie Sheridan – Laurie is Laura's brother, confidant, and character foil. He is close to Laura in age but behaves in an exceedingly formal way, like a caricature of British gentry. While he is a comforting and understanding presence for Laura in his first two appearances (when they hug and Laura realizes how excited she is for the party, and later when he complements her **hat** and she decides not to mention Scott's death), in his final appearance at the end of the story, Laurie embraces the crying Laura and assumes he understands the reason for her tears but really does not. He responds to Laura's half-sentence "Isn't life—" with the story's final line, "*isn't* it, darling?" Although the narrator suggests that Laurie believes he understands what Laura means to say, he clearly does not, and their miscommunication evinces the growing gulf between Laura and her family.

The Narrator – The narrator of "The Garden Party" is third-person and omniscient, but far from objective. In general,

Mansfield's narrator parrots the Sheridan family's condescension toward the poor and their obsession with showing off all the beautiful things they can buy. When Laura interacts with working-class characters, the narrative voice tends to satirize Laura's privilege by pretending she has transcended class or that she remains in control of situations in which she plays no significant role. When the other Sheridans try to persuade Laura not to think about Scott's death, the narrator takes their side and suggests that Laura's concern for the poor is childish and unnecessary.

Hans – "Good little" Hans is a servant in the Sheridan house and does not speak in the story. He helps Jose and Meg move the piano in the drawing-room and listens to Godber's man recount Scott's death with his face "screwed up in the effort to understand." Hans's character is a good example of the invisible labor that goes into preparing the garden-party.

Cook – Occasionally capitalized but usually referenced in lowercase, the Sheridans' cook has a much more forceful presence than the other servants. On the morning of the garden-party, Mrs. Sheridan insists she is "terrified" of cook and sends Jose to "pacify" her; later, even though it seems improper to the children, cook gives Jose and Laura cream puffs just after breakfast. Later, cook is the one who first tells Laura about Scott's death (although she lets Godber's man finish the story). Cook's unassuming warmth and Mrs. Sheridan's authoritarian directives offer competing maternal presences in the Sheridan household. Nevertheless, the fact that the Sheridans refer to cook by her job title rather than her actual name emphasizes the social hierarchy in the Sheridan household and the family's general disregard for the humanity of working-class characters.

Kitty Maitland – Kitty Maitland is the only named guest who attends the garden party, but the story doesn't include any information about who she is or how she knows the Sheridans. She is clearly also a member of the colonial social elite; she calls at breakfast time and Laura adopts her mother's refined English on the phone. Later, Maitland compares the green-clothed band to frogs as they set up in the garden's tennis court. Her character largely serves to underscore and satirize the Sheridans' class background.

The Workmen – The four workmen who arrive with their tools to set up the **marquee** in the Sheridans' yard instigate the story's first encounter between Laura and characters of another class background. Laura is impressed by their straightforward dialect and unassuming kindness, which contrast with her family's Queen's English and snobbishness toward people unlike themselves. Laura is particularly struck when she sees one of them bend down to sniff a lavender sprig, which makes her wish she could spend time with "men like these" rather than the "silly boys" of other rich families. She imagines herself as a "work-girl" while she watches them go about their business. The workmen largely serve to introduce Laura's differences from her family—namely, her dissatisfaction with class divisions and sympathy for workers.

The Band – A "green-coated" band arrives in the afternoon and plays at the garden-party. The Sheridans' ability to hire a band reflects their class status, and Laura worries about this repeatedly. When one of the workmen asks, Laura emphasizes that it is a "very small band" so as to not offend. Later, she worries that the Scotts might hear the band while they grieve and asks her father whether the band can have a drink.

Godber's Man – The deliveryman for Godber's famous cream puff shop is the one who first tells Sadie, Hans, and the Sheridan family about Mr. Scott's accidental death. He is a peculiar character because, although he is a worker and speaks a lower-class dialect, he "relish[es]" the opportunity to tell the Sheridans' servants about Scott's death rather than feeling sympathetic for the deceased's family. In this sense, he is a mirror image to Laura: a poor man who takes on the attitudes and class interests of the rich.

Em Scott – Em is Mr. Scott's wife and mother to their five children. After his death, she is left without a livelihood. Laura encounters Em sitting by the fireplace at her house, her face swollen from crying, and thanks Laura for visiting despite seemingly not understanding why she would ever do such a thing. Em's condition represents the pain that the rest of the Sheridans refuse to acknowledge—both the acute pain of Scott's death and the ongoing pain of poverty in the cottages.

Em Scott's Sister – Em's unnamed sister greets Laura upon her arrival at Scott's house. Laura is terrified, both of the poor people who live in the cottages but also of how out-of-place she looks in her party clothes, but Em's sister nevertheless insists that she come in. Even though Laura insists she wants to leave, Em's sister brings her to Em and then to Scott's body. Her leading questions recall Mrs. Sheridan's, but her hospitality and comforting lines to Laura draw out the contrast between Mrs. Sheridan's maternal style and the lower-class warmth that cook and Em's sister exemplify.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Sheridan – Mr. Sheridan, the family's patriarch, only appears twice in the story: he goes "to the office" with Laurie (readers do not learn his profession or the source of the Sheridans' wealth) and later mentions Scott's death in the **marquee** after the party.

Sadie – Another servant in the Sheridan house, Sadie is primarily a messenger: she repeatedly interrupts the action with news concerning other characters' arrivals or requests. She speaks directly but deferentially and seems to understand that the Sheridans look down on her as an inferior.

The Florist's Man – The florist's man delivers trays and trays of bright pink canna lilies to the Sheridans' house on the morning of the garden-party.

Mr. Scott – Mr. Scott is a poor horse-drawn cart operator who lives at the bottom of the hill with his wife Em and five children. He is thrown out of his cart and killed the morning of the Sheridans' party. Laura encounters his "wonderful, beautiful" dead body at the story's climax.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

WORK AND LEISURE

"The Garden Party" emphasizes the stark division between working-class people and economic elites in a deeply unequal society—in this case, early 20th century New Zealand. As she follows the wealthy Sheridan family on the day of their extravagant party, Mansfield critiques this society's division between elites who get the privilege of leisure time and the disposable laborers whose work makes leisure possible.

All the characters in the story belong unambiguously to one or the other class; as they set up for the party, the Sheridans' "work" (if it can be called that) merely consists of telling actual laborers what to do. The family has a gardener who manicures the property all morning and three domestic servants who fulfill the Sheridans' every demand. A florist and a fancy cream-puff shop send delivery men with their goods, and a band comes to perform at the party. The Sheridans are surrounded by workers they pay to set up their party, but readers have no indication of where their own money comes from. Laughably, the Sheridans insist on micromanaging the workers' every move, even while they lack the expertise and energy to do so effectively. One Sheridan sister, Meg, "could not possibly go and supervise the men" setting up the **marquee** because she is too busy relaxing, drinking coffee, and waiting for her hair to dry.

Furthermore, despite that the Sheridans do very little to prepare for the party, they delegate their tasks to others and then take all the credit for the party's success. For instance, when Sadie asks Mrs. Sheridan whether she has the name-flags for the fifteen different kinds of sandwiches cook has prepared, Mrs. Sheridan lies that she does have them and then asks Laura to write them; meanwhile, Laura's sister Jose "congratulate[s]" the cook for making fifteen different kinds of "exquisite" sandwiches, as though doing so is an accomplishment rather than her job. Later, when Mr. Sheridan takes a sandwich, he thanks *Laura*. This is the only thank-you that any Sheridan utters in the entire story, and it is entirely misattributed. The guests laud the Sheridans as they leave the party—"'Never a more delightful garden-party…' 'The greatest success…' 'Quite the most…'" (the most *what* scarcely matters)—but the domestic servants, hired workmen and delivery people who are actually responsible for the party's success get no credit.

The Sheridans' disregard for their own workers echoes their indifference about Mr. Scott's death. The story is set around the turn of the 20th century, and Scott is said to have died when his horse "shied at a traction-engine" and threw him out of his cart—in other words, Scott is killed when the march of technological progress makes his kind of work outmoded, when the horse sees the technology that makes its work obsolete. The death of Mr. Scott's job precipitates his actual death. Mrs. Sheridan sees his death as natural and unremarkable: she suggests that, "if some one had died there normally," the party would go on without a hitch. Mrs. Sheridan has no sympathy for working people whose death she does not hear about; she interprets Laura's sympathy as a response to the *way* Scott dies rather than the horrific circumstances in which his family is left.

Despite the mutual dependence between the Sheridan family and their servants—the Sheridans need the servants because they are incapable of caring for themselves and the servants need wages from the Sheridans in order to survive—Mrs. Sheridan, since she does not work, can forget that labor is embedded in broader social relations and, unlike Laura, does not even begin to think about her own power to mitigate the family's suffering. Curiously, Laura's father, who goes "to the office" with Laurie earlier on in the story, *does* pity the Scotts; his reaction is surprisingly similar to that of Sadie, Hans and the cook, who clearly understand the indignation workers face on a daily basis and can empathize with the horrific injustice of Scott's death. But Laura is also not immune to her family's prioritization of wealth over work: when she sees Scott's body, she thinks, "this is just as it should be." This echoes her mother's indifference to Scott's death, not because Laura is herself indifferent, but rather because she sees his death as reflecting the proper order of things. As in virtually every colonial and contemporary society, the poor die poor, unrewarded for a life of labor at the feet of wealthy capitalists who own, do not work, and imagine themselves inherently superior to working people in order to sustain the indifference toward human life that in turn sustains the institution of labor in the first place.

EMPATHY, UNDERSTANDING, AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

Mansfield's story is as much about class division as it is about characters' *awareness* of that division. While "The Garden Party" demonstrates how elite prejudice against working-class people helps sustain an unequal society, it also shows how encounters across class lines can change (at least some) people's social understanding. In other words, meeting people from other classes can help people develop a consciousness of class difference and, therefore, empathy for

those of different classes. However, the story is not particularly optimistic: in it, Mansfield *also* shows how class prejudice can limit understanding even when the privileged are well-intentioned, and that their identification with and empathy for the disadvantaged are often insufficient to meaningfully affect the material conditions that structure class differences.

Mansfield emphasizes and parodies the sharp social divide between rich and poor by depicting the Sheridans' often absurd prejudice against working-class people and their inability to imagine the perspective of lower-class people. After learning of the death of the cart-driver Mr. Scott, one of the Sheridan daughters, Jose, accuses Scott of being drunk during the accident. She suggests that he must be responsible for his own death and, therefore, that the Sheridans should not concern themselves with it. It is clear as Jose makes this argument that her primarily goal is to get to enjoy her family's party, rather than have it stopped by the "inconvenience" of some poor person's death. Mrs. Sheridan similarly argues that the Sheridans should not stop the party because "people like that don't expect sacrifices from us." In fact, she is "amused" when Laura suggests putting off the party out of concern for the Scotts. Mrs. Sheridan, like Jose, cares only about the garden party, not about Scott's death. When Mr. Sheridan mentions the tragedy, she considers him "tactless" and complains that it "nearly ruined" the Sheridans' plans.

The omniscient third-person narrator also reinforces the Sheridans' prejudices, even as Laura begins to move past them. The narrative voice can be seen as carrying the force of social convention, butting in to remind the reader whenever anyone behaves "improperly." When a deliveryman arrives with cream puffs from Godber's, for example, the narrator is the one who explains their significance: "Godber's were famous for their cream puffs. Nobody ever thought of making them at home." When the cook offers some to Jose and Laura, the narrator interjects, "Oh, impossible. Fancy cream puffs so soon after breakfast. The very idea made one shudder." Mansfield makes the Sheridans' social codes explicit through the narrative voice, and these codes extend to the family's views of the poor. It is the narrator who first condescendingly describes the cottages where the Scotts live, explaining that the structures sit "far too near" to the Sheridans' house and are "the greatest possible eyesore" because they are "disgusting and sordid." The narrator sides with the neighborhood and against the cottages on the grounds that the cottages "don't fit" and are in fact intrusions on the neighborhood, which ought to stay wealthy. The Sheridans and the narrator alike take working-class residents as an unsightly imposition, feeling disgust rather than pity. The Sheridans—and society at large—ultimately do not see the poor as people. The omniscient narrator's alignment with the Sheridans demonstrates just how powerful social conventions can be, particularly when it comes to blaming the poor for their own plight. The narrator also reflects Laura's tacit understanding of the expectations and attitudes she wishes to escape, as well as the social forces that will align against her should she ever truly try to escape them.

However, unlike the rest of her family, over the course of the story and due in part to the jolt of Mr. Scott's death, Laura begins to develop an awareness of her privilege and tries to consider the world from working-class characters' perspectives. Her transformation starts when she watches four workmen put up the **marquee**. She is struck by how directly and informally they speak, and when she sees one of the workmen bend down to smell a lavender plant, Laura starts to "wonder for him caring for things like that" and decides that "she would get on much better with men like these" than the "silly boys" of her own class background. Laura recognizes that wealthy New Zealanders keep things, like the garden, for show and not for experience; she appreciates the way that the workers seem to live in, experience, and enjoy the real world, rather than holding it as property for status's stake. Laura laments the "absurd class distinctions" and "despises" the "stupid conventions" that block her from spending time with people like the workmen; despite recognizing the restrictions class divisions put on her, she paradoxically decides that "she didn't feel them. Not a bit, not an atom…"

But the main development in Laura's class consciousness is, of course, her response to Scott's death: she insists that the Sheridans cancel the party to respect the Scott family's mourning process. She recognizes the Scotts as "nearly neighbours," which contrasts with the narrator's suggestion that such a poor family is not welcome in the neighborhood at all. At the end of the story, when Laura visits the Scotts' house, she again becomes caught between her actual class status and her sympathy for the less fortunate families that live down the hill. She is incredibly self-conscious about her trip, worrying that her expensive clothes betray her class status and hoping that she can leave as soon as possible because she believes her appearance might offend them. Like her realization that the workmen appreciate beauty, Laura's realization that "garden-parties and baskets and lace frocks" could not possibly matter to the dead Mr. Scott demonstrates her understanding that certain human experiences transcend class lines. Death figures as a great equalizer, one that lets her imagine she is no longer bound by the frivolities of her class.

However, while Laura *tries* to identify with working-class people's perspective, the story portrays her as ultimately unable to overcome the blinders of her class position. In part due to the workmen's comfortingly informal speech, Laura literally does not understand them, even as she begins to identify with the working class: one of the workmen says that "you want to put it somewhere where it'll give you a bang slap in the eye, if you follow me" and Laura thinks instead that the man is referring to the bangs in her hair. When they respond that she should choose a more "conspicuous" spot, she

completely ignores their advice and suggests putting it in the corner of the tennis court, near the band. Laura stutters when interacting with the workmen and the Scotts—she literally cannot communicate with them, which suggests her inability to understand their experience. When she visits the Scotts' house, Laura's predominant feeling is guilt, not sympathy; she only felt the latter from the comfort of her home. Her ecstasy at seeing Scott's body is only followed later by a recognition that, next to the deceased's wife and sister-in-law, "all the same you had to cry," and Laura nevertheless speaks out of guilt rather than empathy: "forgive my hat."

And yet, in addition to failing to build a mutual understanding with the Scotts, the awareness that Laura does gain causes her to lose connection with her own family—she ends up caught in the middle, unable to communicate with either side. At the end of the story, Laura and her brother Laurie, who speaks with the caricatured formality of English gentry, have their own misunderstanding. Laura stutters here, too, asking "isn't life—" and, before she can complete the idea, Laurie interjects "*Isn't* it, darling?" Laurie believes he understands what Laura is thinking and preempts her words, but the implication that they are not actually thinking the same thing suggests a growing gulf between the two siblings. Laura believes she understands life for the Scotts but does not; Laurie believes he understands Laura's epiphany but he also does not.

BEAUTY, REFINEMENT AND DETACHMENT

"The Garden Party" suggests that beauty is a double-edged sword: it is as much a worthwhile source of pleasure as a way for the privileged Sheridans and their associates to detach themselves from the suffering that surrounds them. In this story, social elites become so focused on the surface appearance of things that they seem to lose a normal range of human emotion; they position themselves as viewers of, rather than participants in, the world.

The Sheridans, for instance, carefully cultivate their garden as an aesthetic space; from the start, the reader is told that the conditions are "ideal" for a garden-party. The weather, flowers, and lawn are divine, the sky is "veiled with a haze of light gold," the roses apparently know their impressiveness, and "the green bushes bowed down as though they had been visited by archangels." This contrasts with the cottages' gardens, which have "nothing but cabbage stalks, sick hens, and tomato cans." For the poor, a garden is for growing food, a way to eke out a living, whereas for the Sheridans a garden is about consolidating and packaging beauty for the sake of social recognition.

But beauty, although a luxury, still has a strong hold over the Sheridans and other characters of their class. It is provocative and distracting; they respond to it instinctively, with involuntary physical outbursts and mental associations rather than deliberate contemplation or analysis. When the florist's man delivers a ridiculous amount of canna lilies, for instance, Laura feels their beauty physically: "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." Likewise, when Laura catches a glimpse of her own beauty in her bedroom mirror, her sympathy for the Scotts begins to fade and she gives into the temptation to prioritize the immediate pleasure of the garden-party over her conscience. But, two paragraphs later, when she sees Laurie still in work clothes, she recalls the world outside the party and suddenly thinks of Scott's death; Laurie's own sudden and forceful reaction to Laura's beautiful **hat**, however, leads her to immediately forget Scott again.

Mansfield's description of the party itself is entirely a series of disjointed surface details: strolling couples look at the garden, people compliment Laura's appearance, and the guests' happiness is a contrived performance rather than genuine feeling: "what happiness it is to be with people who are all happy, to press hands, press cheeks, smile into eyes." One of the Sheridans' guests, Kitty Maitland, sees the band and "trills" her only line, "aren't they too like frogs for words? You ought to have arranged them round the pond with the conductor in the middle on a leaf." While she is a minor character, Maitland is also the only named guest in the story and, accordingly, the reader's only window into the Sheridans' social circle. Her concern with the band focuses on their appearance—and how they ought to be arranged for the most striking visual effect—even though they are there to play music (which is never described). Whereas Laura worries whether the band needs a drink, for Maitland the band is purely a thing to look at and their beauty deprives them of humanity.

But Laura is not immune to this pattern of aestheticizing the poor: when she sees Mr. Scott's body, Laura does not see him as dead, but rather perceives "a young man, fast asleep" whose expression says "Happy… happy… all is well." She thinks his body is "wonderful, beautiful," and the tranquility of his lifeless body prevents Laura from feeling the sense of tragedy and injustice that she ought to at his death. She blurts out "forgive my hat" because she remains so distracted by the fact that she looks out of place in the cottages that she forgets the deep sense of tragedy she originally felt when she heard about his accident. She sees the poor worker's body as a kind of art, the same way her family sees their garden. At the end of the story, it is unclear whether Laura has returned to an appreciation of the tragedy; when she says "isn't life—" to her brother as she leaves the Scotts' cottage, her inability to express her thought suggests that life, death, and the struggle to survive poverty are far more consequential than the cultivated surface beauty of the Sheridan family's lives and garden.

The other Sheridans' indifference to death suggests that Laura has learned something they might never experience. Jose and

Mrs. Sheridan are unable to conceive Scott's death as a real tragedy that happened to a real person and affects a real family. Analogously, when Jose sings the song "This Life is Weary," because everyone is so preoccupied with the quality of her voice, nobody seems to notice that the song is actually about death and suffering. Jose sings with "a brilliant, dreadfully unsympathetic smile," and the song's last lines ("This Life is *Wee*-ary / Hope comes to Die / A Dream—a *Wa*-kening") foreshadow the story's conclusion, where Laura sees Scott's death as a dream and then experiences her own sort of awakening. It also emphasizes the way that the rest of the Sheridans never awaken from this dream. Their inability to see past superficial beauty makes them monstrous and leads them to miss out on real, spontaneous experiences that are valuable in themselves rather than orchestrated for show. For instance, Mrs. Sheridan tries to send Laura to the Scotts' house with arum-lilies because she thinks it will impress them—she tries to send beauty instead of sympathy or condolences. (Jose then suggests that the flower stems might damage Laura's clothes, so Mrs. Sheridan decides not to send them at all because preserving her daughter's beauty is more important.) The beauty of surface appearances repeatedly seduces the Sheridans, distracting them from the reality of death.

CHILDHOOD, FAMILY AND INDEPENDENCE

"The Garden Party" is also a coming of age story: Mansfield depicts Laura's struggle between, on the one hand, her sense of duty to her family and her instinct to follow her mother and, on the other, her growing dissatisfaction with her sheltered upbringing and desire to explore a broader world. Mansfield treats adolescence as a half-step to independence: Laura begins to question the circumstances and expectations into which she is born, even as she remains completely dependent on them. Her ambivalence about her upbringing—and her mother in particular—grows throughout the story and reflects both the privileges and the limitations of the structure that a nuclear family can provide.

In particular, Mrs. Sheridan's passive-aggressive style lets her pretend that the children are acting independently while she continues to influence them. Because she recognizes that her children are getting older, Mrs. Sheridan pretends to relinquish responsibility for the party: she insists throughout that the party is her children's idea, even as she seems to do all the planning. She asks to be treated not as a host but "as an honoured guest," pretending to defer to her children even as she effectively plans the whole party. After the party, she exclaims, "why will you children insist on giving parties!" Mrs. Sheridan tends to talk to her children in leading questions like "don't you agree?" and "we should still be having our party, shouldn't we?"; Laura strongly feels that she should not openly disagree with her mother, so Mrs. Sheridan gets to pretend that her ideas are her children's while nevertheless making her children do her bidding.

While Mrs. Sheridan's decisions covertly control most of the action in this story, this does not mean her only function is to retrench Laura's dependence on her family. Even though Laura was the one who originally wanted the Sheridans to reach out to the Scotts, she only goes when her mother has "one of her brilliant ideas" and decides to send her with a basket of leftovers. Without her mother's idea, Laura simply would never have gone. And, just before Laura departs down the hill, her mother calls out, "don't on any account—" but decides not to finish her sentence. Presumably, her order would have had something to do with viewing Scott's body, and readers are left to wonder whether Laura would have done so had Mrs. Sheridan finished her thought.

Laura's dependence on her mother extends beyond the obvious situations where Mrs. Sheridan compels agreement, as Laura also tends to imitate her mother when dealing with adults. When she meets the workmen, she tries to "copy her mother's voice" and "look severe and even a little bit short-sighted." Likewise, on the phone with Kitty Maitland, Laura's overly-formal, ornamented speech is indistinguishable from her mother's. Even when she inadvertently copies her mother—namely, when she accidentally sees herself wearing her mother's **hat**—she falls back in line with the family consensus. Laura had never before "imagined she could look like that," which reflects her burgeoning maturity: she is on the brink of womanhood. Laura's dinners with the "silly boys" of other wealthy colonial families and ecstatic reaction to the beautiful canna-lilies suggest that she is also undergoing a subtle sexual awakening around this time in her adolescence.

Despite all Mrs. Sheridan's covert influence over Laura's behavior, the reader's window into Laura's thought process reveals that she clearly begins to think beyond the constraints of her family's conspicuous and limited lifestyle. If the force that binds Laura to her family's way of thinking is her mother's subtle manipulation, the force that leads Laura to think independently is her own curiosity. She begins to think for herself primarily by noticing things that she is not necessarily meant to see or hear; her own curiosity leads Laura to places and perspectives the rest of her family does not reach. This starts well before the day the story recounts: even though the cottages are "disgusting and sordid," Laura and Laurie cannot resist sometimes exploring them "on their prowls." Their curiosity consumes them despite their class instincts: "one must go everywhere; one must see everything." In this vein, Laura learns about Scott's death when she accidentally runs into the cream puff deliveryman telling the Sheridans' domestic servants about it; she is the first in the family to find out. At the end of the story, Laura ends up visiting the Scotts' house and viewing Mr. Scott's dead body not because she wants to see the dead man's body, but rather because she enters the wrong

room in an attempt to flee the Scotts' house. Once she sees his body, she is transfixed by its tranquility and reaches an epiphany that, unlike her earlier expeditions into the cottages, she can no longer share with Laurie. For Laura, growing up in the Sheridan family also, to some extent, means growing *out of* the Sheridan family.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MARQUEE

The story opens with Mrs. Sheridan sending her daughter Laura to go supervise four workmen as they set up the marquee (a large outdoor tent) in the family garden. The marquee represents Laura and her siblings' sheltered upbringing, and Laura's forays out of the marquee mark the beginning of her broadening horizons. Laura's mother asks her to decide where to put the marquee and to instruct the workmen of her decision, which gives Laura a false sense that she has meaningful decision-making power. Her ideas, of course, are not taken seriously, as the workmen decide on their own where to put the marquee while Laura imagines herself as a "work-girl." This shows how sheltered Laura is: she simultaneously believes that she has power in this situation, and also fancies herself of a different class now that she has brushed shoulders with working people. Laura's role in setting up the marquee echoes her later advocacy for the Sheridans to help out the Scotts. While Laura earnestly instructs her family to postpone the party, they ignore her pleas. After the party, however, they finally agree to help in a condescending and limited way by sending Laura with a basket of leftovers. Notably, Mrs. Sheridan makes this decision in the marquee, to which her family has returned for shelter after the party's end. Mrs. Sheridan wants to remain in her sheltered, upper-class life, while Laura walks out of the marquee and towards the Scott household, giving her an experience of poverty to which she had not previously had access. Laura's illusion of control over the marquee's setup represents her illusion of control over her own sheltered childhood, but her trip out of the marquee represents her gradual but incomplete voyage beyond that upbringing.

HAT

Laura's mother's daisy-trim black hat—an elegant accessory that evokes the family's high social class—influences Laura's behavior and values throughout the story. The hat, therefore, shows the corrupting nature of wealth and beauty. When Laura first learns of Scott's tragic death, she begs her family to cancel the party out of respect to him. Instead of agreeing or even acknowledging her daughter's request, Mrs. Sheridan changes the subject of their conversation by declaring her daisy-trim hat "much too young" for herself and putting it on Laura. She holds up a mirror, but Laura refuses to look; however, when Laura accidentally glimpses herself in the mirror wearing the hat she immediately reaches the same conclusion as her mother, that the party must go on. In this circumstance, the hat represents Mrs. Sheridan's indirect but decisive influence over Laura; captivated by her own beauty, Laura is drawn back into the decadence and refinement of her upbringing and away from her new sympathy for the working class. Furthermore, as Laura begins to question her own judgment about the Scotts, she decides that Laurie's opinion will be the decisive factor in whether the party should continue: "if Laurie agreed with the others, then it was bound to be all right." She approaches him to ask whether they should stop the party, but she drops the idea when he compliments her hat. The hat, then, is a clear distraction from Laura's moral intuitions, leading her back to frivolous and selfish concerns. As Laura begins to think for herself, rejecting the restricted world her family has set up for her, the hat nevertheless offers her the opportunity to return to the comfortable lifestyle to which she is accustomed, trusting and imitating her mother but overlooking the Scotts' pain in the process. When she visits the cottages, Laura is ashamed of her hat, which symbolizes her wealth to people who will never have the privilege to experience the aesthetic extravagance of the garden-party. When she apologizes to them for her hat, she seems to be rejecting her privilege and aligning herself outside her family.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The Garden Party and Other Stories* published in 1997.

The Garden Party Quotes

"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.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

The opening lines of Mansfield's story—which come in the

middle of the narrator's train of thought—situate the reader in the midst of the Sheridans' party preparations. By beginning with praise for the garden and in the middle of a train of thought, Mansfield immediately establishes the narrative voice as an "insider" to the Sheridan family and suggests that somehow the weather seems to be looking out for their party's success as much as they are. Indeed, the notion that one would "order" perfect weather is perfectly in line with the way the Sheridans see the people and material objects around them as there for them to arrange and enjoy. The narrator and Sheridans alike insist on throwing an "ideal" party in order to assert their social status; this frivolous obsession with their own perfection is what ultimately blinds the Sheridans, most of all Jose and Mrs. Sheridan, to the feelings and emotions of other characters.

"My dear child, it's no use asking me. I'm determined to leave everything to you children this year. Forget I am your mother. Treat me as an honoured guest."

Related Characters: Mrs. Sheridan (speaker), Meg Sheridan, Laura Sheridan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

After one of her children asks her where she wants the marquee, Mrs. Sheridan evades the question by insisting that her children are responsible for all the planning. Of course, the story later reveals that Mrs. Sheridan has tightly controlled the planning of the party, so the reality is that she has not given her kids control of the party. Rather, Mrs. Sheridan simply takes a back seat when it suits her, sending Laura or Jose to do the chores she doesn't want to do. Knowingly or otherwise, the Sheridan daughters constantly try to please or emulate their mother: Laura takes on her voice and hat, and Jose sings to her and parrots her views. Mrs. Sheridan's desire to be treated as an "honoured guest" reflects her vain expectation that the children will put her first. Whereas this quote might at first seem like Mrs. Sheridan reasonably ceding control to her children as they age, in fact she is insisting that they serve her every need.

He bent down, pinched a sprig of lavender, put his thumb and forefinger to his nose and snuffed up the smell. When Laura saw that gesture she forgot all about the karakas in her wonder at him caring for things like that the smell of lavender. How many men that she knew would have done such a thing? Oh, how extraordinarily nice workmen were, she thought. 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.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Workmen , Laura Sheridan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

When she sees this workman smell a lavender plant, Laura forgets her worry that the marquee will hide the karaka trees. This demonstrates how beauty distracts and provokes Laura, foreshadowing her later reactions to the beauty she sees in her mother's hat and in Scott's body. Crucially, the sight that Laura finds beautiful is itself the workman's ability to appreciate beauty; even though the Sheridans and their wealthy associates are obsessed with cultivating, collecting, and showing off exquisite objects, Laura does not expect someone to actually enjoy things for what they are (rather than as an indicator of their owners' social status). In other words, men of Laura's class conspicuously own and control sensory beauty, but Laura realizes that the workmen, unlike her peers, are capable of actually *appreciating* it. Laura realizes that she has more in common with this working-class laborer than any of the "silly boys" that are beginning to court her. This introduces Laura's empathy for working-class characters, which contrasts with the rest of the Sheridans' attitudes.

There, just inside the door, stood a wide, shallow tray full of pots of pink lilies. No other kind. Nothing but lilies 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.

Related Characters: Laura Sheridan (speaker), Sadie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

Laura's reaction to the florist's delivery further demonstrates her "artistic" sensibilities; even though she soon berates her mother for reneging on her promise to let the kids plan this year's garden-party, Laura nevertheless reacts instinctually and physically to the flowers' radiance. The lilies "warm" her with a synesthetic energy that undeniably carries sexual undertones as she comes of age in a culture that limits her romantic options to the "silly" rich boys of whom her parents approve. Indeed, Laura's attraction to pink lilies suggests lesbian undertones, which supports an analogy between Laura's coming of age and Mansfield's own childhood, particularly given the author's lifelong pattern of covert and controversial same-sex relationships.

> "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!"

But at the word "Good-bye," and although the piano sounded more desperate than ever, her face broke into a brilliant, dreadfully unsympathetic smile.

"Aren't I in good voice, mummy?" she beamed.

"This Life is *Wee*-ary,
Hope comes to Die.
A Dream—a *Wa*-kening."

Related Characters: Jose Sheridan (speaker), Mrs. Sheridan, Hans, Sadie, Laura Sheridan , Meg Sheridan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42-43

Explanation and Analysis

Jose sings "This Life is Weary" to Hans, Laura, Sadie and Mrs. Sheridan as Meg accompanies her on the piano. Although such a melancholic ballad may seem out of place at a celebratory function like the Sheridans' garden-party, Jose's apparent inability to understand the song's content and the implication that it may be played at the garden-party demonstrate how inconceivable the realities of human suffering are to her and her wealthy family. Throughout, the song also foreshadows the story's closing scene. After Laura sees Scott's body, which she describes as "dreaming," Laurie finds her in tears because she realizes the reality of meaningless suffering and death, and her feelings toward her family change irreversibly—her "love that changes" causes her an awakening.

> Godber's man wasn't going to have his story snatched from under his very nose.

"Know those little cottages just below here, miss?" Know them? Of course, she knew them. "Well, there's a young chap living there, name of Scott, a carter. His horse shied at a traction-engine, corner of Hawke Street this morning, and he was thrown out on the back of his head. Killed."

"Dead!" Laura stared at Godber's man.

"Dead when they picked him up," said Godber's man with relish. "They were taking the body home as I come up here." And he said to the cook, "He's left a wife and five little ones."

Related Characters: Laura Sheridan , Godber's Man (speaker), Mr. Scott, Hans, Cook, Sadie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

As Laura heads back to the garden, intent on returning to ogle the workmen, she encounters the cream-puff deliveryman from Godber's chatting with the family's servants. The cook tells her about Scott's death but Godber's man insists on finishing the story. He seems to be assimilating to the Sheridans' altogether detached, privileged view of life as artwork, valuable for its aesthetic qualities above all else: even while the other servants are horrified to hear of the accident, he is excited to be the messenger of such juicy news. His statement that *there is* (present tense, not past) a man named Scott living in one of the cottages suggests that he has somehow failed to process the reality of Scott's death, much like Jose and Mrs. Sheridan, even though he saw the man's family bring his body home. Scott's "wife and five little ones" are left helpless by an accident of the labor market while the Sheridan family of almost the same size are rewarded with endless leisure time largely due to what Laura astutely sees as the accident of their wealth.

The little cottages were in a lane to themselves at the very bottom of a steep rise that led up to the house. A broad road ran between. True, they were far too near. They were the greatest possible eyesore, and they had no right to be in that neighbourhood at all. They were little mean dwellings painted a chocolate brown. In the garden patches there was nothing but cabbage stalks, sick hens and tomato cans. The very smoke coming out of their chimneys was poverty-stricken. Little rags and shreds of smoke, so unlike the great silvery plumes that uncurled from the Sheridans' chimneys. Washerwomen lived in the lane and sweeps and a cobbler, and a man whose house-front was studded all over with minute bird-cages. Children swarmed. When the Sheridans were little they were forbidden to set foot there because of the revolting language and of what they might catch. But since they were grown up, Laura and Laurie on their prowls sometimes walked through. It was disgusting and sordid. They came out with a shudder. But still one must go everywhere; one must see everything. So through they went.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Mr. Scott, Laurie Sheridan, Laura Sheridan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is the first to describe the cottages as wretched and forbidden, which demonstrates how the narrative voice is not neutral but rather reflects the Sheridans' class instincts. The "broad road" between the rich and poor clearly symbolizes the class divide in geographical form, and the garden with cabbages, tomato cans and hens—nearly-depleted sources of food—contrasts with the Sheridan garden, which is cultivated for aesthetic qualities alone. Indeed, the narrator views the cottages with the same lens, worrying about the way they look (as "the greatest possible eyesore") rather than the welfare of their inhabitants. Even their inability to sustain consistent smoke counts against the cottage residents—for the Sheridans, it seems, the ability to pollute serves as a status symbol. The "revolting language" reflects the obvious divide in this story between the Sheridans' refined English and the poorer characters' dialect. While it may seem strange that the Sheridans would worry about their children encountering lower-class speech, Laura's response to the workmen—which was in fact largely a response to the way they talked to her—suggests something contagious about the directness and honesty of dialect.

"Oh, Laura!" Jose began to be seriously annoyed. "If you're going to stop a band playing every time some one has an accident, you'll lead a very strenuous life. I'm every bit as sorry about it as you. I feel just as sympathetic." Her eyes hardened. She looked at her sister just as she used to when they were little and fighting together. "You won't bring a drunken workman back to life by being sentimental," she said softly.

Related Characters: Jose Sheridan (speaker), Mr. Scott, Laura Sheridan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

Jose's insistence that there would be something "strenuous" about stopping the band demonstrates the irony in the way she and Mrs. Sheridan view their lack of social obligations to the Scotts. The notion that anything about the Sheridans' lives would be "strenuous"—least of all letting a hired band off for the day—clearly overlooks the actually strenuous nature of working people's lives in this story. The Sheridans see themselves as the victims of unfortunate news rather than recognizing the Scott family as the victims of an unjust social system. Jose suggests that Laura is "sentimental" whereas they are *both* "sympathetic," which inverts the normal senses of these terms—Jose's baseless accusation that Scott was drinking on the job suggests that she blames him for his death rather than seeing it as a tragedy. In fact, the most important feeling here goes unspoken: it is *empathy* that distinguishes Laura's response—the ability to imagine how the Scotts feel and would respond to hearing the Sheridans' party. Just as when Jose sang "This Life is Weary" with a smile, in this scene Jose professes deep emotion while her attitude actually hardens—she shuts down in response to suffering. Finally, the sibling rivalry here echoes the sisters' very different roles in the Sheridan household. Whereas, for the most part, Laura treats workers as equals and wonders about the correctness of the Sheridans' various actions, Jose, like Mrs. Sheridan, cares mostly about seeing the party through and believes herself inherently superior to the family's servants. Jose pretends to feel emotion; Laura, to keep her family's approval, must pretend not to.

"It's only by accident we've heard of it. If some one had died there normally—and I can't understand how they keep alive in those poky little holes—we should still be having our party, shouldn't we?"

Laura had to say "yes" to that, but she felt it was all wrong.

"Mother, isn't it terribly heartless of us?" she asked.

"Darling!" Mrs. Sheridan got up and came over to her, carrying the hat. Before Laura could stop her she had popped it on. "My child!" said her mother, "the hat is yours. It's made for you. It's much too young for me. I have never seen you look such a picture. Look at yourself!" And she held up her hand-mirror.

Related Characters: Laura Sheridan , Mrs. Sheridan (speaker), Mr. Scott

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Sheridan echoes Jose's assertion that the Sheridans are the accident's true victims. The notion that there is something "normal" about the cottages' residents dying due to their lack of resources reflects Mrs. Sheridan's inability to recognize that the poor labor precisely for the benefit of wealthier families like her own. Laura feels compelled to agree because her mother asserts this view through a leading question, but when she responds with her own leading question, her mother changes the subject. By giving Laura her hat, Mrs. Sheridan reinstates the sense of inheritance and continuity that ultimately leads her daughter to pick family over empathy. Finally, Mrs. Sheridan's assertion that Laura looks "a picture" foreshadows two later moments where Mr. Scott's body looks like "a picture." The first is when Laura sees herself in the mirror and the accident recedes into the background, "like a picture in the newspaper." Later, Em Scott's sister tells Laura not to fear Scott's body because he "looks a picture." By reducing life to images, the Sheridans aestheticize suffering, looking away from the experience the "picture" represents and refocusing on the surface appearance of things.

The band struck up; the hired waiters ran from the house to the marquee. Wherever you looked 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, on their way to—where? Ah, what happiness it is to be with people who all are happy, to press hands, press cheeks, smile into eyes.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

This brief paragraph comprises almost the entire description of the Sheridans' actual garden-party. Despite the family's extensive preparations, which Mansfield recounts in real time, the party itself flashes by in a series of disjointed images. This reflects the Sheridans' tendency to aestheticize experience, as well as illustrating the transitory nature of the pleasure they derive from doing so. The fact that readers find out next-to-nothing about the guests, who are "bright birds" that showed up "for this one afternoon" on their way elsewhere, suggests that the Sheridans do not actually have close relationships with those they consider social peers—not nearly as close, for instance, as they have with their servants. The guests move through the garden mechanically and ritualistically, appreciating the façades orchestrated by the Sheridans but experiencing no deeper satisfaction than the outward signs of happiness. Happiness here is the outcome of ritualistic meet-and-greets rather than any meaningful connection among party guests; it spreads as if through osmosis from the garden's beauty. This demonstrates the superficiality of the Sheridans' form of leisure and suggests that its empty gentility could not possibly compare to the Scott family's pain.

And the perfect afternoon slowly ripened, slowly faded, slowly its petals closed.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator compares the end of the garden-party to a dying flower, suggesting both the end of something

beautiful but also a certain beauty in the gradual process of a slow and timely death. This contrasts with the young Mr. Scott's sudden and horrific death, suggesting that there is something privileged about a gradual and predictable demise. Indeed, at this point in her life, Katherine Mansfield was about a year from dying of tuberculosis. She had known for years that she was running out of time, and this knowledge in large part spurred her to start seriously publishing her work. Tuberculosis had long been considered an ideal way to die, particularly for artists and writers, because it gave the victim time to put their affairs in order and complete their work. The contrast between slow and sudden death here also reflects Mansfield's guilt about her brother's sudden death during World War I. The fading of "the perfect afternoon" also foreshadows the day's turn toward imperfection when Laura goes to visit the Scotts and her innocent joy at the party gives way to a confrontation with the suffering of the cottages' residents.

❝ The lane began, smoky and dark. Women in shawls and men's tweed caps hurried by. Men hung over the palings; the children played in the doorways. A low hum came from the mean little cottages. In some of them there was a flicker of light, and a shadow, crab-like, moved across the window. Laura bent her head and hurried on. She wished now she had put on a coat. How her frock shone! And the big hat with the velvet streamer—if only it was another hat! Were the people looking at her? They must be. It was a mistake to have come; she knew all along it was a mistake. Should she go back even now?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Mr. Scott, Laura Sheridan , Mrs. Sheridan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

When she reaches the cottages with the basket her mother has prepared, Laura becomes astutely aware of her privilege, which manifests most of all in the contrast between her own expensive clothes and the utilitarian ones the cottages' residents wear. In fact, those clothes are a metonymy for their wearers ("men's tweed caps hurried by"), and Laura finds her family's obsession with demonstrating their wealth through closely-cultivated outward appearances suddenly disadvantageous. Even though there is nothing concretely threatening about the area—children are playing and lights flickering just like in the Sheridan house—Laura's feels threatened because she feels that she has become an object of others' gaze, which is also a reversal of her family's own tendency to see others as "pictures." Unlike with the workmen, when Laura could safely imagine herself as a "work-girl" from within her family's estate, when she reaches the cottage she yearns to blend in but realizes that she cannot transcend the trappings of her upbringing. For Laura, class turns from an abstract convention into a concrete economic divide, but she still has the luxury of being able to turn back.

❝ There lay a young man, fast asleep—sleeping so soundly, so deeply, that he was far, far away from them both. Oh, so remote, so peaceful. He was dreaming. Never wake him up again. His head was sunk in the pillow, his eyes were closed; they were blind under the closed eyelids. He was given up to his dream. What did garden-parties and baskets and lace frocks matter to him? 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. Happy... happy... All is well, said that sleeping face. This is just as it should be. I am content.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Laura Sheridan , Mr. Scott

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

When Laura sees Scott's body, even though she knows the circumstances of his death, she cannot bring herself to see him as anything more than asleep. She reacts to the corpse in much the same way as she responds to the "almost frighteningly alive" lilies: she aestheticizes it, experiencing it in terms of what she learns from it rather than the tragedy it actually represents. The body's apparent happiness is a transposition of her own, and she flips her previous worry that the marvelous garden-party would distract the Scotts from mourning: now, Scott's body is the "marvel" the party guests were missing out on. Laura's sense that "this is just as it should be" suggests that she no longer sees injustice or pain in Scott's death; indeed, the body becomes entirely disconnected from the accident, and Laura consumes it visually in much the same decadent way as she earlier consumes the workman smelling the lavender, or even the

way she literally consumes the bread-and-butter and cream puffs.

> "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.

Related Characters: Laurie Sheridan, Laura Sheridan (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

The final lines of "The Garden Party" demonstrate both the transformation Laura has undergone in viewing Scott's body and also the growing gulf between her and her brother Laurie. Laura's stammer serves a few functions here: it leaves open the question of what Laura has actually learned, it suggests that Laura herself may not even know, and it allows Laurie to butt in with his oafish assertion of understanding. Earlier, Laura struggled with her stammer when she was forced to talk with the workmen, across the lines of social class. Similarly, here she does not know what to say because her experience of Scott's body was so distant from Laurie's expectation of something "awful" that she literally lacks the common language to express her realizations about life and death. Perhaps she comes to see that there is somehow no grand divide between the rich and poor in death, or perhaps she is thinking about the marvelous coexistence of life and death: a lovely party, full of life, at the top of the hill and a life-ending tragedy at its bottom.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE GARDEN PARTY

On a beautiful summer morning, the Sheridan family's gardener manicures their property in preparation for their garden-party later that day. As Mrs. Sheridan eats breakfast with at least two of her daughters, Meg and Laura, four workmen come to assemble the **marquee** (a large outdoor tent). Mrs. Sheridan insists that one of the children must decide where it should go and supervise the workers. She sends Laura, "the artistic one," to do so.

Fittingly, Mansfield introduces the Sheridan family through a detailed description of their intensively-cultivated garden, which reflects the family's superficiality and obsession with status. Mrs. Sheridan's passive-aggressive parenting style is immediately clear through her insistence that the children plan the party, even though she will still control most of the details.

Laura is delighted to have this responsibility and heads outside with her breakfast of "bread-and-butter." She meets the four workmen and is impressed by their tools. She approaches them nervously and tries to greet them as her mother would. Instead, she cannot find the right words and stutters "Oh—er—have you come—it about the **marquee**?" When one of the workmen smiles and answers warmly in the affirmative, Laura is relieved at his friendliness.

Laura imitates her mother in dealing with the unfamiliar men because her family is the only model she has for interacting with others. However, it's notable that when she stops being herself and starts being her mother, she is literally unable to speak. This strongly suggests that Laura's nature is incompatible with her mother's behavior, which is also the behavior that is expected of Laura. This sets up Laura's internal conflict over whether to be like her family or to be herself.

Laura suggests they set up the **marquee** on the lily-lawn. The workman disagrees, suggesting the marquee should go somewhere more obvious, where it can "give you a bang slap in the eye." The narrator tells readers that Laura "did quite follow" the workmen; she suggests the corner of the tennis court but the workman thinks it would make more sense to put the band in front of the beautiful karaka trees. The narrator describes them in detail and wonders, "must they be hidden by a marquee?"

Laura is uncomfortable around working-class people, but she is fascinated by them. This contrasts with her family members, who have no doubts about their inherent superiority to their workers and servants; the rest of the Sheridan family feels perfectly comfortable ordering working-class people around and cares little about their experiences or perspectives. Even though the narrator suggests that she understands the workman's "bang slap" comment, she clearly does not: a corner of the tennis court would be too inconspicuous. Laura's desire to understand the workmen is undercut by her class background, which makes her unable to understand what they are actually saying.

The narrator answers her own question: "they must." The workmen have already started assembling the **marquee**, and Laura's worries evaporate when she is surprised to see one of them bend down and sniff a lavender plant. Deciding she prefers the "extraordinarily nice" workmen to the "silly boys" from her own social class that she generally dances and dines with, she laments the "absurd class divisions" that separate wealthy from working people. One of the men calls out "are you right there, matey?" Laura smiles back, eats her bread-and-butter and tries to signal her joy, feeling "just like a work-girl."

The workman's ability to appreciate the beauty of the lavender plant surprises and delights Laura, which again points to her difference from her family: she appreciates the lavender for its existence—its beauty and scent—while her family only cultivates the garden to show off their wealth. In this moment, her internal monologue diverges sharply from her external appearance: she is delighted even though the workmen wonder whether everything is quite alright with her, which suggests again that her inner life is quite different from how her circumstances make it appear. She tries to signal her sympathy with the working classes by eating breakfast outside, but the workers probably don't understand the message she is trying to send. This also shows Laura's shallow understanding of what makes a person working class.

Someone inside yells that Laura has a telephone call. She runs inside and encounters Mr. Sheridan and her brother Laurie, who asks her to see if his coat needs to be ironed. She gives him a hug and remarks how much she loves parties before heading to the telephone.

Laura is again called to family obligations, but it doesn't seem to bother her, even though her family interrupted a pleasant experience outside. In this moment, it's less clear that Laura's inner life is out of sync with her family: she seems delighted to be around them, and she loves parties just as much as they do.

Laura answers the call from Kitty Maitland and, again imitating her mother's voice, invites her over for lunch before the party. Mrs. Sheridan yells from upstairs for Kitty to "wear that sweet **hat** you had on last Sunday." Laura relays the message, hangs up, and notices the subtle signs of activity in the house: the sound of workers moving the piano and the feeling of "little faint winds" blowing around the room.

Laura's work-girl fantasy ends as she returns to fulfilling her real class position. Her ability to speak like her mother without stuttering here shows that Laura does have the potential to be at home in her life. Mrs. Sheridan's comment about the hat shows her desire to control others and her concern with appearances, while Laura's sensitivity to the blowing winds demonstrates that she finds beauty in the everyday and the ephemeral.

The doorbell rings; Sadie, one of the Sheridans' domestic servants, answers it. Laura joins her to find that the florist has come with trays and trays full of beautiful pink canna lilies. Laura moans as she moves closer to "warm herself at that blaze of lilies," which she feels "in her fingers, on her lips, growing in her breast." She concludes that it must have been a mistake for the florist to send so many. Mrs. Sheridan walks in and affirms that she ordered them herself after seeing them in the florist's shop window the day before and deciding that "for once in my life I shall have enough canna lilies." Laura complains that her mother had promised not to "interfere" with the party planning, but her mother reprimands her and instructs the florist's deliveryman where to put the lilies as he carries them inside.

Sadie is little more than a messenger, emptied of all emotion and personality. This reflects the family's indifference to the humanity of working people, including the servants with whom they are intimately familiar. Laura's sudden, involuntary and intensely physical response to the flowers suggests a kind of sexual awakening. Laura's "artistic" sensibility again manifests in the way she is deeply moved by the beauty of the living things around her; indeed, whereas Mrs. Sheridan bought the excessive number of lilies so that she could finally have "enough," Laura can appreciate them regardless of their quantity, so she thinks that there must have been a mistake. Mrs. Sheridan's admission that she ordered the flowers reveals that she continues to run everything behind the scenes even as she professes to have no control over this year's party.

The scene jumps to the drawing-room, where Hans, a servant, and Meg and Jose, two of the other Sheridan daughters, have finished moving the piano. Jose tells Hans to rearrange the room; ordering around the servants is her greatest pleasure. She tells Meg to play the piano so she can practice, in case she has to sing at the party. Laura and Mrs. Sheridan enter the room as Jose begins to sing a tragic song called "This Life is Weary." During the most sorrowful part of the song, Jose suddenly puts on a "brilliant, dreadfully unsympathetic smile" and asks Mrs. Sheridan, "aren't I in good voice, mummy?" before finishing the song.

Mansfield emphasizes the contrast between Jose and Laura, both through Jose's pleasure at controlling the servants and in her inability to recognize the mournful content of the song she sings with delight. Jose performs primarily for her mother's approval and breaks into a young child's voice when she asks for it. Whereas Jose's attitude reflects her mother's obsession with hoarding beauty as a display of status, Laura continues to be the only Sheridan who can actually experience joy at beautiful things. Indeed, the notion that "This Life is Weary" would ever be an appropriate song for the garden-party suggests that the Sheridans and their guests are so sheltered from the suffering that poor people in their community experience that they would, like Jose, take pleasure in the song's tune without recognizing or relating with what its words actually say.

Sadie interrupts to tell Mrs. Sheridan that the cook needs the "flags for the sandwiches." Mrs. Sheridan says she will "let her have them in ten minutes," but the children can tell that their mother doesn't have them yet. Mrs. Sheridan tells Meg and Jose to finish getting dressed and tells Laura to write the names on the flags for her. Mrs. Sheridan also asks Jose to "pacify" the cook, of whom she admits she is "terrified." After finding the envelope with the names behind the dining room clock, Mrs. Sheridan accuses the children of stealing and hiding it. She reads off the sandwich names: "cream cheese and lemon-curd," then egg and olive, which she misreads as "mice."

Mrs. Sheridan is unable to admit that she forgot about the sandwich flags because doing so would be an admission that the servants know better than she does. Likewise, she accuses the children of hiding the envelope because she cannot face the possibility that she was the one who lost it. Mrs. Sheridan also evades her own responsibility for the flags by making Laura write them. Her fear of the cook is peculiar given the arrogance with which she treats the rest of the servants. Perhaps this is because the cook (unlike Sadie, Hans and the deliverymen) is actually responsible for a significant component of the party's success.

Laura brings the sandwich flags to the kitchen where Jose "congratulate[s]" the cook on the fifteen different kinds of sandwiches she has made. The cook simply smiles. From the pantry, Sadie announces that Godber's man has arrived with Godber's famous cream puffs. The cook orders Sadie to bring them inside and then begins arranging them for the party, including "shaking off the excess icing sugar." Laura remarks that they remind her of the Sheridans' past parties and Jose reluctantly agrees. The cook tells the girls to each take one, and while they realize it is improper to have "fancy cream puffs so soon after breakfast," they nevertheless eat them in a hurry. Laura decides to head back to the garden to check on the workmen.

The cook is just doing her job, but Jose congratulates her as though making the sandwiches were some sort of meaningful personal accomplishment, which reflects her inability to understand that others have to work due to their economic status. As when Laura eats outside with the workmen, eating the cream puffs at the wrong hour means breaking the social conventions of food and drink (which the sandwich flags also symbolize). Mansfield's voice comes through in Laura's nostalgia for past parties – after all, the Sheridan estate and Laura's character are based on the author's own childhood. Again, Mrs. Sheridan sees excess as impressive: the cream puffs she ordered have so much icing that the cook has to remove some of it.

On her way outside, Laura encounters Godber's man excitedly telling a story to Sadie, Hans, and the cook, who look horrified. Godber's man tells Laura "with relish" that Scott, a cart-driver who lives in a cottage down the hill has died in a horrible accident, leaving his wife and five children to fend for themselves.

Scott's accident soon precipitates the main conflict in the story. The servants' reactions to the news suggest that they can empathize with Scott's family because they are from a similar social class (even though their family is roughly the same size as Scott's, the Sheridans prove unable to do the same). Godber's man, however, delights at being the center of attention even though he brings tragic news. Unlike the servants, he is the emissary of a company that traffics in extravagance and presumably focuses on serving rich people who would care more about the intrigue of the story than the fate of Scott's family. Like Laura in reverse, Godber's man's identification with the rich overtakes his actual identity as a worker.

Laura is astonished at the news and brings Jose aside to figure out how they are going to stop the party. Jose finds the suggestion that they cancel it for the Scotts' sake "absurd" and "extravagant," and the narrator explains why: the lane of decrepit cottages at the bottom of the hill, just across a road from the Sheridan house, are home to impoverished working families. The narrator proclaims that "they were the greatest possible eyesore, and they had no right to be in that neighbourhood at all." The Sheridan children aren't allowed to go there, but Laura and Laurie still like to explore the area because "one must go everywhere; one must see everything." Jose claims she feels sympathy for Scott but complains that, "if you're going to stop a band playing every time some one has an accident, you'll lead a very strenuous life." She then accuses Scott of being drunk; this infuriates Laura, who runs upstairs to tell her mother.

Mansfield introduces Laura's central conflict with her family: whether they should go on with the garden party. Laura imagines the festivities from the Scotts' perspective and worries that the Sheridans' garden-party – which they are throwing for no special occasion whatsoever – would be insensitive to the mourning family down the hill. But Jose's coldhearted response and the narrator's description of the cottages demonstrate the disdain the rich feel for the cottage's residents, whom the Sheridans see as intruding on what is rightfully their own neighborhood. Jose is incapable of feeling pity for poor workers, even though her family relies on servants from the same class, because she thinks the cottages' ugliness makes them valueless. But Laura's previous exploration of the cottages shows her boundless curiosity about ways of life beyond her own. She expects Mrs. Sheridan to exercise better judgment than Jose, reflecting her ongoing trust in her mother at this stage in the story.

To Laura's astonishment, once Mrs. Sheridan realizes the death wasn't in the garden, she has no more sympathy for the Scotts than Jose does. She is "amused," suggesting that the Sheridans have no reason to worry about the Scotts. In fact, Mrs. Sheridan suggests that the true "accident" was merely their hearing about Scott's death. Suddenly, Mrs. Sheridan puts her **hat** on Laura's head and tells her she looks "such a picture," offering a hand-mirror. Laura refuses to be distracted but Mrs. Sheridan, running out of patience, calls her daughter unsympathetic for planning "to spoil everybody's enjoyment" at the party.

Mrs. Sheridan, like Jose, only looks out for her own family's welfare and paints the Sheridans as the true victims of Scott's death; she snaps back into an emotionless stoicism as soon as she realizes the worker's death hasn't tainted her perfect garden. Mrs. Sheridan speaks in ways that probably seem ironic to Laura and the reader. For instance, Laura is worried that the guests' enjoyment will spoil the Scotts' mourning process, but Mrs. Sheridan suggests that Scott's death will "spoil everybody's enjoyment" of the garden-party. Laura's disappointment with her mother's lack of sympathy escalates the tension between them that has been building in the story so far, chiefly through Mrs. Sheridan's continued attempts to control the party despite her request to be treated as a guest. The hat is another of these attempts: Mrs. Sheridan tries to distract Laura from her concern by pointing out how beautiful she looks in the hat.

Laura storms out and heads to her own bedroom, where she accidentally glimpses herself in the mirror wearing her mother's **hat**. She is surprised by how "charming" she looks and begins to change her mind about stopping the party. She thinks of Mr. Scott's family but suddenly it feels "blurred, unreal, like a picture in the newspaper." She decides to forget about it until after the party and goes to lunch.

For the first time in the story so far, Laura actively disobeys her mother by refusing to look at herself in the hand-mirror and leaving to her own bedroom. But she then accidentally sees herself wearing the beautiful hat, exactly as her mother intended a few sentences before, and suddenly she transforms back from a class-conscious empath into a self-conscious aesthete like Mrs. Sheridan. As soon as she begins to act on her principles and break away from her mother's control, in other words, Laura gets drawn straight back into Mrs. Sheridan's plan to undermine her independence. Just after Mrs. Sheridan calls Laura "a picture" in the hat, Scott transforms into "a picture" when Laura sees herself in the mirror. When she refocuses on outward appearances, chasing beauty rather than morality, Laura forgets her concern for the Scotts' wellbeing and her anger at her mother's passive-aggressive control. In both cases the decontextualized "picture" loses all emotional depth.

After lunch, the band sets up in the corner of the tennis court and Kitty Maitland remarks that they look like frogs in their green outfits. Laurie returns from the office and heads inside to get dressed. Laura suddenly remembers Scott and heads inside to ask his opinion, but decides not to mention it when he compliments her **hat**.

Mansfield uses Kitty Maitland and Laurie's exaggerated personalities to satirize the presumptuousness of the Sheridans and their social class. Laura remains in line with her family's superficiality, but she does briefly remember the cart-driver's death when she sees Laurie in work clothes, which suggests that the same powerful beauty that Mrs. Sheridan uses to coax her daughter into agreement can also give Laura a way out of her family's mindset. However, Laura decides not to mention Scott when Laurie compliments her hat, which represents her family's values triumphing over her conscience yet again.

The party begins: guests arrive, stroll around the garden, and compliment Laura, who glows with joy and helps greet the attendees. She asks her father if the band can get drinks. Suddenly, the party is over and Laura and Mrs. Sheridan bid the guests goodbye. Mrs. Sheridan declares the party successful, but complains that she is exhausted because her children always "insist on giving parties." The family convenes in the **marquee**.

Mansfield's incredibly spare description of the Sheridans' party flashes by in an instant, just like the ephemeral pleasures that fill the evening. Unlike Laura, who can find lasting fulfillment in the ephemeral beauty of a gust of air or vibrant flower, the party's guests consume the garden's beauty and keep moving on. Mrs. Sheridan, despite earlier relinquishing the role of host, nevertheless takes it on during the goodbyes and even brings Laura with her. Nevertheless, Laura's enjoyment does not prevent her from recognizing the band's labor and looking out for them by asking her father to get them drinks and presumably also a moment of rest to enjoy those drinks. After the party, the Sheridans end up convening in the marquee; as a literal shelter built for them by the workmen, the marquee reflects the sheltered nature of the Sheridans' lives, in which working people provide absolutely everything for them.

Mr. Sheridan brings up Scott's death, about which he heard from another source. Mrs. Sheridan complains that Laura wanted to stop the party. Mr. Sheridan laments the tragic accident, which the narrator finds "tactless;" Mrs. Sheridan has nothing to say. Then, she has "one of her brilliant ideas" and decides to send the leftover food from the party in a basket for "that poor creature" and his family. Laura questions her idea but goes along with it, fetching the basket which her mother then fills with food. Mrs. Sheridan tries to send Laura with some arum lilies too, because "people of that class are so impressed by arum lilies," but takes them back when Jose remarks that their stems might damage Laura's clothes. Finally, Mrs. Sheridan calls out "don't on any account—" but declines to finish her sentence, deciding instead to "not put such ideas into the child's head."

Mrs. Sheridan only has her idea when her husband mentions the accident, which suggests that she may take his input seriously (unlike the children's). However, his comment initially bothers her, which suggests that Mrs. Sheridan sends the basket only signal to the rest of her family that they have done their good deed and need not keep worrying about the Scotts. She takes credit for the family's goodwill toward the Scotts even though she still puts her party and friends first: she sends a basket of leftovers as an afterthought and tries to "impress" the Scotts with beautiful lilies. As during the party, her instinctual way of interacting with others is to signal her own family's wealth, even though the extravagance of what she sends would more likely embarrass or offend the Scotts than comfort them. She continues to appear incapable of truly expressing sympathy for their pain, and her agreement that she should not risk damaging Laura's frock by sending the flowers after all shows that the Sheridans continue to prioritize their own outward appearances above all else. Laura again disagrees with her mother's judgment but nevertheless cannot translate that disagreement into action; instead, she dutifully does what her mother asks. Mrs. Sheridan's decision not to finish her final line, in addition to paralleling Laura's stutter, expresses her expectation Laura will disobey her. Given Mrs. Sheridan's tendency to say the opposite of what she ends up doing (most notably in her insistence that she will take a backseat to the party planning) her unfinished order suggests that she may be more self-aware than she previously seemed.

As the sun begins to set, Laura leaves the garden and starts down the road, but all she can think about is the successful party. Once she gets to the cottages, she suddenly notices how much her clothing stands out and worries that the residents are staring. She decides "it was a mistake to have come; she knew all along it was a mistake." But since she is already at the Scotts' house, which has a "dark knot of people" congregating outside, it's too late to go back. The crowd quiets down and confirms that the house is indeed the Scotts'. Laura anxiously knocks, wishing she could just leave, and decides to drop the basket and go.

As Laura heads to the cottages, she finds herself unable to rediscover the sympathy she previously felt for the Scotts; her mind is fixated on the pleasures of the garden-party, which reinforces the Sheridans' tendency to prioritize their own happiness at the expense of feeling for others. Once she arrives, Laura is intensely uncomfortable in the lower-class neighborhood, even though she intellectually understands that class is socially constructed and arbitrary. Those earlier realizations happened inside the Sheridan home's gates; among the cottages, for the first time, Laura realizes that social differences are based in concrete economic inequalities that she cannot surmount with her imagination alone. Also for the first time, she finds herself ogled rather than the ogler: she feels like she stands out and learns what it is like to be aestheticized rather than treated with humanity. Nevertheless, she manages to make it to the Scotts' door, again fulfilling her mother's wishes against and above her conscience.

Suddenly, the door opens and a woman tells Laura to come in against her protests. Throughout, Laura continues to stutter and is left unable to fully express her desire to leave the basket and leave. The woman who opened the door introduces Laura to her sister, Em, who is crying and looks as though she doesn't understand why Laura is there. Laura tries to run back out the front door but stumbles into the room where Scott's body lies. Em's sister figures that Laura wants "a look at 'im" and removes the sheet that covers the body.

Although Laura comes to express her family's condolences, her inability to finish a sentence ends up inverting the expected social obligations: the Scott family ends up comforting the crying Laura, and Mansfield does not tell us whether she leaves the basket after all. Even here, the poor end up serving the rich as Em's sister leads Laura around the house and shows her Scott's body when she seems to want to see it. Laura's preoccupation with her own guilt prevents her from feeling or expressing empathy for the mourning Em.

Laura is overcome with a sense of tranquility at the sight of Scott's dead body—she sees him as sleeping, "given up to his dream," far beyond the niceties of "garden-parties and baskets and lace frocks." Despite marveling at the body, however, she realizes that "all the same you had to cry" and lets out "a large childish sob." She feels she has to say something and blurts out, "forgive my **hat**" before letting herself out of the Scotts' house.

Laura's anxiety gives way to a perverse fascination with Scott's corpse, which she sees as "dream[ing]" because she cannot bring herself to see it as a corpse. Her earlier sense of outrage at Scott's death has disappeared and plays no part in her reaction to the body. Her confrontation with death is, like Jose's song, limited to the aesthetic; her earlier class consciousness has mysteriously faded. Even her obsession with her own hat suggests that she is too afraid of judgment to sincerely give her condolences. As with the hat when she first tries it on, the visual shock of Scott's body limits Laura to her own perspective; she sees its beauty but not the horror its beauty masks. When she does cry, it is not because she sincerely feels pained at the circumstances of Scott's death but rather because she feels "you had to." She cries in order to fill a social obligation, just as the most of her family members' displays of emotions are mere unfelt performances.

Laura walks past the rest of the cottages, where she encounters Laurie on the road that separates the rich from the poor in their neighborhood. Laurie says that their mother was worried and tries to comfort Laura as she cries. He assumes the visit must have been "awful," but Laura replies that it was "marvelous." She begins, "isn't life—", but cannot bring herself to finish the idea. But "no matter," the narrator tells us, "he quite understood." The story ends with Laurie's reply: "*isn't* it, darling?"

Laura and Laurie meet on the road that separates rich from poor. Laurie's assumption that Laura must be horrified by what she has seen reflects the Sheridan party line: concern for family members who have been exposed to poverty rather than for people suffering it. The narrator pretends that Laurie "quite understood" even though he clearly does not, which reflects Laura's increasing distance from her family as well as the Sheridans' tendency to insist that they know best even when they are incompetent. Ultimately, however, Mansfield does not say precisely what Laura has realized, perhaps in an attempt to let the reader's response determine the story's meaning—much as Laura's response to Scott's body determines its meaning for her. It is clear that Laura has learned something about class, life and death on the day of the garden-party; however, at the end of the story she is left caught between her family's world of superficial images and the world of authentic suffering that the Scotts represent, unable to fully communicate with either side but nevertheless privy to both.

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