

Katherine Mansfield's short story "The Garden Party" and Nadine Gordimer's "The Moment Before the Gun Went Off," though written in the same time period, are stories from different worlds. One is a look into materialism, the shallow superficiality of upper class behavior, and a character unexpectedly affected by a death that does not concern her; the other is a unique text that inverts the ancient storytelling order and strives to make political statements with a surprising profundity of literary quality. Yet these two stories are tied together by the common, overarching themes of the poetry of death, the superficiality and ultimate ephemerality of life, and two decidedly unsympathetic communities placed in juxtaposition with the exception of two unexpected bonds.

"The Garden Party" begins enthusiastically with the rushed excitement of party preparations, busy people, and images of perfect, pretty upper-class festivities. "After all, the weather was ideal," and the eager hostesses dash about, conspiring with gardeners, workmen, creampuff deliverymen, and whomever else the planning necessitates. The protagonist, Laura, is no exception. She has an extensive discussion with the workmen about the placement of a marquee; they cannot place it "against the karakas [because] then the karaka trees would be hidden. And they were so lovely, with their broad, gleaming leaves and their clusters of yellow fruit..." (Mansfield 2647). Laura seems at first to embody the atmosphere of the story: fresh, full of life, contentedly hectic, materialistic and extravagantly snobby. Yet, unlike the other characters, there is more to Laura's nature than mere superficiality. While she considers for a moment her

“upbringing” and whether it is appropriate for a workman to speak to her in crude analogies, she quickly dismisses the thought and wonders “why couldn’t she have workmen for friends rather than the silly boys she danced with and who came to Sunday night supper? She would get on much better with boys like these” (2647). With this, she distances herself from less-than-humble peers, simply by her rejection of those “absurd class distinctions” which they seem to find so imperative.

The cheerful ambiance of the story is momentarily spoiled by a song played on the piano by the character of Meg:

The piano burst out so pationately that Jose’s face changed. She clasped her hands. She looked mournfully and enigmatically at her mother and Laura as they came in.

This Life is *Wee*-ary,  
A Tear – a Sigh.  
A Love that *Change*-es,  
This Life is *Wee*-ary,  
A Tear – a Sigh.  
A Love that *Change*-es,  
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. (2649)

Despite her initial pretense of sorrowfulness, Meg fails to be affected by this song’s oddly depressing nature, as are the other characters. She sings another few lines, remaining cheerful even through the lyrics, “Hope comes to die.” Only the narrator takes note of the irony in this, but if Laura was present it is presumable that she might have been surprised as well. For these characters, the dark concept of death exists only in worlds other than their own, until it is literally at their front gate.

After this interaction with the *idea* of death comes the story’s collision with *actual* death. The deliveryman from Godber’s is the first to break the news of the

accident, full of morbid excitement at being the bearer of bad news. Although the characters present are upset by the news, their sorrow is ephemeral. Only Laura sees the accident as a reason to cancel the entire garden party, everything they have spent so much time planning. The others are shocked at this proposal. ““Stop the garden party? My dear Laura, don’t be so absurd. Of course we can’t do anything of the kind. Nobody expects us to. Don’t be so extravagant” (2651). Laura believes that the sound of the band playing and the festivities would be difficult for the dead man’s family to listen to, considering the close proximity of their dwellings. Here, even the narrator adopts a condescending tone towards Laura when describing the houses outside the gate: “they were the greatest possible eyesore, and they had no right to be in that neighborhood at all. They were little mean dwellings...the very smoke coming out of their chimneys was poverty-stricken” (2651).

After being admonished by everyone she tries to appeal to, Laura has another short moment where she seems to be as materialistic and superficial as her peers when she looks in a mirror:

There, quite by chance, the first thing she saw was this charming girl in the mirror, in her black hat trimmed with gold daisies, and a long black velvet ribbon. Never had she imagined she could look like that. Is mother right? she thought. And now hoped her mother was right. Am I being extravagant? Perhaps it was extravagant. Just for a moment she had another glimpse of that poor woman and those little children, and the body being carried into the house. But it all seemed blurred, unreal, like a picture in the newspaper. I’ll remember it after the party’s over, she decided. (2652)

And with that decision, Laura selfishly attempts to push away that concept of death that is now hanging over the party like a shadow that only she can see. Later it is remembered when Mr. Sheridan insensitively brings it up, as casually as the weather, for

the purpose of table talk. Mrs. Sheridan is annoyed by the tactlessness of this, and then tries to appear charitable by sending the family a basket of their party leftovers, delivered by the single-handedly sympathetic Laura. On this mission, Laura is all too aware of the inappropriate nature of her dress. “She wished 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?” (2654). As with her worries about the band’s music and the loud partygoers, Laura is embarrassed by her station and her family’s lack of concern for the dead man. When she sees the body, she sees the role of death as the ultimate equalizer: “What did garden parties and lace frocks matter to him? He was far from all those things... While they were laughing and while the band was playing, this marvel had come to the lane” (2655).

Nadine Gordimer’s short story “The Moment Before the Gun Went Off” is also marked by images of death. The narration feels blunt, factual, impersonal, as if it is a newsreel, glossing over the facts of a man’s death while caring more about the political station of the man who caused the accident. The narrator predicts two different reactions from two general groups of people. “People in the farming community understand how he must feel” (2719), to have killed one of his labourers, whom he considered a friend, completely by accident and have the world see it otherwise. “None of those Americans and English, and none of those people at home who want to destroy the white man’s power will believe him... They don’t want to know it. They think all blacks are the big agitators in town” (2719). They want to see him as a callous, unfeeling white supremacist, refusing to listen to the dryly-presented facts.

Here the theme of death is just as central, but quieter than in “The Garden Party.” In this story, it is a fact, but it is over, and now the reactions of the living are what is important. In Mansfield’s story, those reactions are significant, but the depth of the concept of death is also an essential consideration of the reader. Both stories have a set of people who are insensitive to the passing of their fellow men, whether it is a deliveryman telling the story “with relish” or a country of people condemning a man for a death he never meant to happen. In the same manner, both stories also have a select few people who are sympathetic to the situations, even if it is just a topic in casual conversation, an excuse to show off, or a measure of compassion for the big politician whom they know will be unfairly judged.

The protagonists of each story are at the same time incredibly similar and completely different. Laura’s vehement reaction to the death outside her front gate is surprising to the other characters because of the complete disconnection from her. They do not feel as compassionate towards the family; this causes her to feel disconnected from them, and she longs to be as shallow and superficial as them so that she can ignore the terrible presence of death. Marais Van der Dyer’s outward reaction to the death that he has caused, though ignored by the public, is shared by his concerned neighbors and equals. Yet his internal reaction, mentioned only when the narration suddenly shifts to a deep omniscience, would not be expected by anyone. He is more profoundly affected by this accident than anyone could ever anticipate, because the dead man in this story is his son.

Laura has no connection to the dead man in Mansfield’s story; she meets him only after he has passed and knows nothing of him but his beauty in death, mirroring the

story's focus on the notion of mortality. On the contrary, Van der Dyer shares an indelible bond with the dead man in Gordimer's tale, as his father, so this death impacts him as tremendously as any death could to anyone, perhaps more because he was the cause of it. The fact that their relationship *did* exist while the young man was living, and the dead man is barely described after he has passed, similarly mirrors this stories focus on the behavior and thoughts of the living, without Mansfield's considerations of *life in comparison with* death, fatality versus vitality.

In each story, there is only one character who even begins to understand what Laura and Van der Dyer are feeling. In "The Moment Before the Gun Went Off," that character is the dead man's mother, the only one who knows the secret of her son's fatherhood. "[Van der Dyer], too, stares at the grave. The dead man's mother stare at the grave in communication like that between the black man outside and the white man inside the cab the moment before the gun went off" (2721). That communication is shared by the young black man and the white farmer, presumably, because of their shared blood, and by the white farmer and the black mother because of their shared parenthood.

In "The Garden Party," Laura is aware that her brother is the only one who would understand her view of the untimely death and her feelings about what it was like to see him, in death. She wants to tell him of the death in the beginning of the story because she feels that he would agree with her that the party should be canceled, but she refrains. In the last few lines of the story, he comforts her while she cries, assuming that the sight of the corpse upset her. She conversely claims that "it was simply marvelous," and asks him "isn't life – ' but what life was she couldn't explain. No matter. He quite understood" (2655). He can empathize with Laura, feel what she feels, understand her

unspoken sentiments, because of their shared blood. Although it is not acknowledged, like the secret father-son father-mother bonds in “The Moment Before The Gun Went Off,” this is the same unspoken union that brings a complete and shared understanding between two individuals.

Though these stories address different issues, view death at different depths, and feature two completely different main characters, they share more than a focus on mortality; they share an unsympathetic public, unexpected bonds between two protagonists, two dead men, and two living people, and a literary shift between atmospheres at least once within the texts. A reading of each text would illuminate the reading of the other through this comparing and contrasting, simply because of their profound and paradoxical ability to be at once both identically structured and barely alike.