

An Analysis of Binary Oppositions in *The Garden Party*

HE Hui-wen

School of Foreign Languages, Yunnan Minzu University, Kunming, China

The Garden Party is one of the major short fictions of famous female writer Katherine Mansfield. In this work, the writer makes a profound reflection on the inequality in different social classes and the truth of life. This paper will focus on the research method of binary opposition. Through the study of binary oppositions in the text, the deep themes and meanings will be clearly revealed.

Keywords: *The Garden Party*, Katherine Mansfield, binary opposition

Introduction

Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923) was regarded as the prominent modernist writer of short fiction who was born in Wellington, New Zealand, in a middle-class family. Later, she moved to England in 1903 and married her first husband. Then in 1906, she returned to New Zealand for study but back again to London two years later and started to create and write. Because of her wandering life, she felt like a “foreigner” both in New Zealand and England, which made her have double identities and conflicting feelings about this. Sometimes, she was proud of having double identities but also get loneliness and solitude. During these years, her works *In a German Pension* (1891), *The Tiredness of Rosabel* (1908) and *The Woman at The Store* (1912) were created. Besides, it is said that her works were influenced by Russian literature, especially the very famous Russian writer and dramatist Anton Chekhov. Unfortunately, Mansfield was suffering sadness of losing her brother during the First World War, which deeply influenced her life and works. She began to think about life and death and wrote works such as *Prelude* (1918), *Sun and Moon* (1920), *Bliss* (1920), *Her First Ball* (1921), *The Stranger* (1921), etc. The following years she continued to build her reputation and made a lot of works. However, during her last years of life she suffered illness that turned more serious day by day. She greatly missed her country and her lost brother and showed her nostalgia of hometown—New Zealand as well as her early life in the works *Thy FLY* (1922), *At The Bay* (1922), and *The Garden Party* (1921). Her works often reflect marital and family relationships of middle-class characters and most of them also reveal feminist ideals. Besides, they are also notable for using of stream of consciousness, depicting trivial events and subtle changes in human behavior. Symbolism is often used to make narrative functions and express symbolic meanings in her works. In addition, the characters in the work are usually ordinary people like poor women, servants and old men, etc. These people are not considered as important or indispensable ones at that time but regarded as main characters in Mansfield’s works.

The Garden Party (1921) is one of the representative short fictions of Katherine Mansfield. It describes a few plots related to the young lady named Laura within a day in this novel. She helps to prepare a garden party for her family but receives a sad news about a poor neighbor's death, which makes her feel sorry and wants to stop the party. However, her suggestion is not accepted by her mother and sister. The party continues to be held finally, and Laura takes some leftover to visit the poor family after the party. The story is simple but actually expresses some deep meanings. Most scholars study the class opposition and ideology conflict in the fiction. Other studies are talked about means of artistic expression and themes in the article. Besides, some papers discuss the short fiction from the narrative perspective or combine the author's life and experiences with the story themes to analyze the story.

In this work, some binary oppositions are found and this paper will focus on three groups of binary oppositions and discuss the details to make the short fiction more profound and comprehensive.

2. Binary Oppositions within Social Classes

The middle class and the working class is one of the binary oppositions first appearing at the beginning of the whole story. The main character Laura is one of the middle-class members. When she helps to arrange things for the party, she copies her mother's voice to give orders to the workmen. Because in her mind, there is a clearly difference between social classes at that time, the middle class is superior to the working class. But this young kind lady behaves differently and expresses her friendly in her own way.

His smile was so easy, so friendly that Laura recovered. What nice eyes he had, small, but such a dark blue!
(Mansfield, 1945)

This sentence shows that she does not have prejudice towards the workmen, the working class. When she unnaturally speaks to the workers in a little embarrassed tone, their friendly smile comforts her and lets her relaxed, which makes her have a kind of affection to these people. Actually, she is only a simplehearted girl and she cannot go against her true feeling that she wants to be friends with them. However, this conflict thought could not be realized with the inequality between classes at that time.

Another social classes opposition happens when the middle-class family enjoys the party time and they get the news that a poor neighbor died outside the front gate. Laura suggests that they should stop the garden party with sympathy after she heard this horrible accident. But her mother and sister are astonished and only care about if the accident happened in their garden and influenced the party process. They do not accept Laura's suggestion of stopping the party and think that she is so absurd and extravagant, which presents their selfish and indifference to other's life.

Of course we can't do anything of the kind. Nobody expects us to. (Mansfield, 1945)

This sentence shows that they only use excuse to cover their apathy, in fact, they do not think about others' feelings and lives and only enjoy their pleasant time at that moment. In their mind, the working class is nothing to do with them. They are two different social classes and there is a big gap between them. When Laura sees she wearing the beautiful hat given by her mother and the hat is phrased several times by her relatives, which makes her feel happy again, although she has conflict feeling and hesitates to convince her family to stop the party, she changes her mind finally.

After the party, Laura's mother asks her to take some leftover to visit the poor neighbor. The living environment of the working class is really impoverished and dark reflecting the great difference between two social classes. Not only the living environment but the poor's attitude presents the different state of life compared to the life in the beautiful garden of middle-class family.

Binary Oppositions in the Scene Descriptions

In this short fiction, except class consciousness opposition and character's conflict feelings, there are also darkness and lightness as well as rough and splendor. One group of binary opposition is about the contrast scene descriptions before and after the garden party. The first paragraph describes that

Windless, warm, the sky without a cloud...the green bushes bowed down as though they had been visited by archangels. (Mansfield, 1945)

It shows a pleasant and ideal scenery that is full of people, fun and laughter. The family has decorated the garden and prepared lots of things for the party. There are beautiful flowers and happy band music. According to the descriptions of the garden party, it presents the scenery with brightness. On the contrary, completely different scene descriptions after the party appear in the last part of the story.

Now the broad road was crossed. The lane began, smoky and dark...she knew all along it was a mistake. Should she go back even now? (Mansfield, 1945)

In this paragraph, Laura feel embarrassed because of her quiet unfit hat in the poor area, especially in the dead man's rough house. After the party, on the way to this place, evening is close and the darkness fell on the poor area outside the garden. The sky is pale and the lane is smoky. The widow is sitting in the gloom and the dead man is also there.

She found herself in a wretched little low kitchen, lighted by a smoky lamp. (Mansfield, 1945)

All of the descriptions about the scene after the garden party are lifeless. This area is poorer than that inside the garden and it filled with darkness. But at the same time, the garden may not lack light, warm and happiness. The binary oppositions in the scene descriptions further reflect the distinctions between two social classes and make readers deeply think of life and death.

Binary Oppositions in Theme

There are two groups of binary opposition, life and death, rich and poor about the theme of the fiction. After Laura experiences the things in a day, she gets deep reflections of life. Life is not only happy and fun, it also filled with sorrow and death. Laura is the symbol of life in this story, but death cannot be omitted in her life. The road to the poor area is the line that divides the world into two parts and they also symbolize the life and death, rich and poor. Before the party start to be held, Laura was in the dream of happiness and enjoying and perfect of life and she never thought of the meaning of life and inequality between different social classes. However, after the party she visited the dead man's family, she suddenly awaked and got her self-consciousness. Life is not always fair to everyone. Although one may be in the cozy and nice life before, he or she finally will find the truth of life. The differences of social status between the middle class and the

working class always exist in the life, which causes injustice and inequality. Life includes not only wealth and happiness but also poverty and sadness. Laura is not aware of the cruel of life until she gets out of the garden. In the garden, the living place, everything happens is so perfect that it just like an illusion. But the reality really exists outside the garden, the perfect place where she lives, and it is more authentic for people. According to this epiphany, Laura grows up in a sense and get mature.

Conclusion

The Garden Party (1921) is really a classic work of Katherine Mansfield. The experiences of the main character Laura make her deeply consider the meaning of life and differences between social classes with different status. In fact, it is also the thoughts of the author at that time in British. Sharp contrasts of characters and scene descriptions create binary oppositions in the short fiction, which makes the story more vivid. Laura finds that wealth and poverty, happiness and sadness, sympathy and indifferent and different social status all exist in our life. This new recognition reveals the inevitable problem that is imparity in the life. Mansfield is good at hiding the criticize and thoughts under the plain plot instead of giving explicit technique to show the deep meanings. By studying these binary oppositions, it could be better for readers to grasp the themes and connotations in the story.

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