Consuming Beauty: Aesthetic Experience in Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party"

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Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" exposes the economic disparities within the white colonial community of New Zealand in the early twentieth century. While the wealthy Sheridan family enjoys a garden that produces "literally hundreds" of roses on "green bushes bowed down as though they had been visited by archangels," the gardens within the working class neighborhood adjacent to the Sheridan house contain "nothing but cabbage stalks, sick hens and tomato cans" (197, 204). Laura Sheridan, the protagonist of "The Garden Party," crosses the "the broad road" separating the classes in order to deliver a basket of party leftovers to the family of a deceased workman, a carter named Scott. While in the cottage, Laura views Scott's body, having been encouraged by Scott's sister-in-law that "'e looks a picture. There's nothing to show" (209). Presumably, Scott's body has been "made up," and all marks of the violent accident ("His horse shied at a traction-engine") have been removed (203). What Laura sees is "a young man, fast asleep—sleeping so soundly, so deeply, that he was far, far away from them both" (209). She reflects, "He was wonderful, beautiful. While they were laughing and while the band was playing, this marvel had come into the lane. Happy . . . happy. . . . All is well, said that sleeping face. This is just as it should be. I am content" (209).

Because "The Garden Party" is a coming-of-age tale, Laura's interpretation of Scott's body has received much critical attention as the culmination of her experiences throughout the course of

the single day represented in the story. It is almost universally agreed upon that Laura aestheticizes Scott's body in the moment of viewing, and many critics conclude that Laura's aestheticizing action signals her inability to confront the harsh economic realities facing Scott's surviving family. William Atkinson, for instance, claims that Laura finds the dead man "fearsome," and by "transforming" Scott's body "aesthetically" she "neutralises its danger by refusing to see the body for what it is"—a corpse (59). Laura's reference to happiness, Atkinson argues, "is all hers. She is the one who has succeeded in neutralising death by transforming it into benign sleep and in finding a way to overcome her inconvenient sympathies for those who are less fortunate than herself" (59). In other words, because the aestheticizing process allows Laura to view Scott's body as fundamentally at peace, she can enjoy her class privileges without feeling the discomfort or guilt she experienced earlier in the day. Christine Darrohn, who reads the story as part of Mansfield's response to her brother's death during a training exercise in World War I, also finds that Laura's act of aestheticization serves to displace the discomfort of economic realities: "through this aestheticization Laura again averts a confrontation with the painful facts about the lives of the working class" (529). As Darrohn contends, "Though Laura tries to resist her mother's social blindness, Mansfield casts doubt on Laura's ultimate success. Scott's eyes, we are told, are 'blind under the closed eyelids,' but the suggestion is that perhaps it is Laura who is blind" (529).

Both Atkinson and Darrohn rightly call attention to Laura's lack of recognition of the economic realities that shape this colonial community. Indeed, Laura fails to perceive the real hardships endured by any of the working class individuals she encounters throughout the day despite her declared desire to cast off " these absurd class distinctions" (199). However, neither Atkinson nor Darrohn examine how the instances of aestheticization in the story may be linked to Mansfield's sustained interest in the aesthetic theories and practices of Walter Pater and Oscar

Wilde, writers Mansfield discovered, admired, and imitated as a young woman. Throughout "The Garden Party," Laura experiences episodes of decadence: intense, extravagant, and erotic responses to her environment. These decadent moments inform Laura's maturation process as well as her sexual awakening. Laura exhibits a response to the world that reflects, and perhaps deliberately follows, Pater's *The Renaissance* (1873) and, as Gerri Kimber points out, also alludes to Wilde's *A Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). While critics have acknowledged the influence of Wilde and Pater on Mansfield, the role of aestheticism in "The Garden Party" has not been fully explored. Specifically, the conflict within Laura herself, between her artistic sensibilities and her mother's conventions, between artistic appreciation and instant gratification through consumerism, can best be understood in terms of Mansfield's response to aestheticism after the devastation of World War I. The story illustrates both the liberation Mansfield associated with aestheticism as well as its limitations. In Laura's case, an aestheticism that turns into an empty consumerism fails to offer her a different experience from the one carefully cultivated for her by her family. As she consumes beauty throughout the day, she vacillates between freedom and conformity.

Vincent O'Sullivan has argued that Wilde's and Pater's influence on the adolescent Mansfield, who desired to set herself apart from her conventional, middle class family, continued to inform her work throughout her unfortunately short but prolific career. As O'Sullivan describes, Mansfield may have quickly abandoned her youthful fascination for Wilde the person, "but his traces will be in her work for the rest of her life" (98). O'Sullivan contends that Wilde in particular presented Mansfield with a dramatic alternative to middle class experience; in Wilde's "demand that experience be intense," a young Mansfield found a striking contrast to the predictability and routine of family life (100). As O'Sullivan explains, "Wilde had given her a vocabulary and a preciosity that her notebooks and early sketches declare

as pervasive. It was Wilde who directed her insistence on art, and what an artist might expect from life" (96).

In Mansfield's notebooks from 1906-1908, a period when Mansfield begrudgingly returned to New Zealand after three years of study in London before convincing her parents to let her to return to Europe on an allowance, Wilde's voice resounds. As Margaret Scott describes, during this period, Mansfield "was very susceptible to such exhortations of Oscar Wilde as 'risk everything' and 'push everything as far as it will go'" (xix). In her notebooks, Mansfield recorded quotations from numerous writers, from John Stuart Mill to Henrik Ibsen. However, Wilde's words dominate. Next to quotations from other writers, Mansfield also included her own original sayings, marked by her initials or by "A Woman" (or "A.W."), demonstrating how her voice was developing in dialogue with others, and especially with Wilde's voice. From Wilde, Mansfield recorded declarations such as "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it," "To realise one's nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here for," and "I do not want to earn a living, I want to live" (96, 97, 98). On the artistic process, Mansfield herself writes, "To acknowledge the presence of Fear is to give birth to Failure," "Ambition is a curse if you are not armour-proof against everything else, unless you are willing to sacrifice yourself to your ambition," and "To have the courage of your excess—to find the limit of yourself!" (94, 97, 98). As Wilde's words instruct Mansfield to live intensely, outside of the bounds of convention and middle class morality, Mansfield portrays her artistic ambitions as requiring the same intensity, risk, and excess.

O'Sullivan also suggests that Wilde assisted Mansfield in engendering a "theatrical" personality and prose style. For O'Sullivan, "theatrical" refers to Mansfield's "ability to accept the mood of the moment as all important for that moment, the fact that ambivalent or even contradictory behavior must be accepted as a valid human process" (96-97). O'Sullivan's definition of "theatrical" echoes a letter Mansfield wrote to William Gerhardi

in 1922 concerning "The Garden Party." Mansfield's letter illustrates how Wilde's influence stretched beyond her adolescence. While O'Sullivan underscores Mansfield's tendency to recognize and depict the validity of contradiction or ambivalence as part of human experience, Mansfield herself describes the "inevitable" disorder of life despite earnest attempts to organize, control, and compartmentalize it:

> And yes, that is what I tried to convey in *The Garden Party*. The diversity of life and how we try to fit in everything, Death included. This is bewildering for a person of Laura's age. She feels things ought to happen differently. First one and then another. But life isn't like that. We haven't the ordering of it. Laura says, "But all these things must not happen at once." And Life answers, "Why not? How are they divided from each other." And they *do* all happen, it is inevitable. And it seems to me there is beauty in that inevitability. (250)

For Mansfield, Laura's inexperience prohibits her from understanding that life is essentially diverse, which, in this context, means that life and death occur simultaneously just as joy and despair can co-exist as conflicting, but equally real, emotions. As Mansfield reveals in this letter, Laura's journey throughout the day involves confronting the beauty of death as and because life pulses around and within her. As O'Sullivan suggests, Mansfield's commitment to demonstrating the contradictoriness of emotion and behavior or the "diversity of life" has its roots in Wilde's example to live with intensity.

In her letter to Gerhardi, Mansfield characterizes the "inevitability" of our experiences to be simultaneously shaped by the overlapping of life and death as "beauty." Mansfield's reference to beauty in her letter is not surprising. Beauty is something that Mansfield attends to carefully as a general concept and a concrete experience after World War I. As she writes to her husband, John Middleton Murry, in 1919,

> I cant imagine how after the war these men can pick up the old threads as tho' it never had been. Speaking to *you* Id say we have died and live again. How can that be the same life? It doesn't mean that Life is the less precious or that the "common things of light and day" are gone. They are not gone,

they are intensified, they are illumined. Now we know ourselves for what we are. In a way its a tragic knowledge. Its as though, even while we live again we face death. But *through Life*: that's the point. We see death in life as we see death in a flower that is fresh unfolded. Our hymn is to the flower's beauty—we would make that beauty immortal because we *know*. Do you feel like this—or otherwise—or how? (150)

As Mansfield expresses, war fundamentally alters what experience is. Having once "died," through the loss of her younger brother and friends during the war, she lives to die again, especially as she comes to terms with her own frail health. Having awakened to the experience of death, she sees death in the very freshness of life. To cope with this new knowledge, Mansfield contends, we must celebrate beauty, immortalize the moment that is fleeting and the life is that surely moving toward death. This recognition of death produces a sense of purpose: to commit to an intense awareness and appreciation of beauty. As Kimber argues, the war, for Mansfield, "*had* to be seen as a beginning, not as an end" (68, emphasis original). In "The Garden Party," Laura's response to the dead carter and her exclamation to her brother that viewing the body "was simply marvelous" demonstrate, for Kimber, Mansfield's conviction that death should be seen as a new beginning.

By turning to beauty in the wake of World War I, Mansfield also returns her creative attention to the New Zealand setting of her childhood. Simultaneously, Mansfield re-evaluates the aestheticism that first presented her with a model to intensify experience, to commit to an excessive, and non-conformist, approach to life. In "The Garden Party," aestheticism plays a role not only in the way Mansfield describes the mood and setting or in the way Mansfield uses flowers symbolically, but aestheticism becomes part of a conflict within the protagonist herself. The story concerns the intersection of class politics and aestheticism. Even though the story is presumably set before World War I, it reveals Mansfield's process of understanding the experience of death after World War I. Throughout the story, Laura's experi-

ence of time and her commitment to the democratization of art suggest that her unconscious affinity with Pater can potentially liberate her from her family's middle class, colonial ideology. When she adopts an aestheticist perspective, Laura carves out a space for a critique of the colonial class system. At the same time, Laura's perceptions are inconsistent. In viewing Scott's body, Laura does not, in fact, follow the pattern of aestheticization she creates earlier in the day; instead, she aestheticizes Scott's body from a consumerist perspective. The story suggests that Laura cannot distinguish between an authentic aesthetic experience and a consumerist response to the world. Laura conforms to the system she wishes to critique.

Class is obviously an important issue in this short story, and Atkinson and Darrohn rightly reveal that Laura does not gain any new insight about class dynamics and power relationships by the end of the story. However, Mansfield does not ultimately condemn an aesthetic response to the world, nor does she even seem to criticize an aesthetic response to death. Instead, the story does demonstrate an all too easy fluidity between a potentially destabilizing aestheticism and a seemingly stabilizing consumerism.

"The Garden Party" alludes to both Wilde's *A Picture of Dorian Gray* and Pater's *The Renaissance*. In *A Literary Modernist: Katherine Mansfield and the Art of the Short Story,* Kimber emphasizes that Mansfield, following Wilde, uses flowers as symbols of Laura's "burgeoning sexuality" and that the story tracks "Laura's cruel entry into the adult world via the death of a carter" (27). Kimber provides new insight into Mansfield's references to *A Picture of Dorian Gray* in "The Garden Party." For instance, Kimber contends that the carter who dies in "The Garden Party" refers to the carter in *A Picture of Dorian Gray*. In Wilde's novella, the carter appears at a pivotal moment in the plot; Dorian, after cruelly casting aside the actress Sybil Vane for giving up her art for her love for Dorian, goes for a walk to clear his mind and to cement his new identity. This moment in the novella shows that

Dorian has transitioned from an idealistic youth to a decadent connoisseur of beauty and art. During his walk, a carter offers Dorian cherries free of charge. Here is the scene:

> Huge carts filled with nodding lilies rumbled slowly down the polished empty street. The air was heavy with the perfume of flowers, and their beauty seemed to be an anodyne for his pain. He followed into the market, and watched the men unloading their wagons. A white-smocked carter offered him some cherries. He thanked him, wondered why he refused to accept any money for them, and began to eat them listlessly. A long line of boys carrying crates of striped tulips, and of yellow and red roses, defiled in front of him, threading their way through the huge jade-green piles of vegetables. (216)

Like Dorian, Mansfield's Laura also encounters working class men as she teeters on the edge of a possible identity transformation. Dorian notices "nodding lilies" just as Laura is overcome by the sheer quantity of lilies her mother orders for the party. While the carter in *A Picture of Dorian Gray* gives Dorian a gift of cherries, the carter in "The Garden Party" also arguably "gives" a gift to Laura—an encounter with death that is marvelous and beautiful. For Kimber, Mansfield's allusion to *A Picture of Dorian Gray* suggests that Laura, like Dorian, will succumb to a corrupting influence, "Mrs. Sheridan's artificial values" (28). This allusion to *A Picture of Dorian Gray* suggests that Mansfield is deliberately incorporating and focusing on aestheticism and identity in "The Garden Party." Mansfield underscores a slight, but crucial, difference between aestheticism and consumerism, however, by incorporating and turning to the ideals of art appreciation in Pater's *The Renaissance.*

Although it is not possible to prove that Mansfield read *The Renaissance,* her notebook entries indicate that she was familiar with Pater's work, including "The Child in the House." As Sydney Janet Kaplan notes, Mansfield "probably read *The Renaissance* between 1903 and 1906 at Queen's College, where her professor Walter Rippmann had great enthusiasm for the creative work of the aesthetes and decadents; but there is no definite evidence for it" (58). In *The Renaissance,* an inspirational text for British

aestheticism's most famous practitioner and Mansfield's early idol, Wilde, Pater shifts the focus of art criticism away from the object and toward the viewer's perceptions. What makes *The Renaissance* relevant to "The Garden Party" is its interest in the process of aesthetic education. As Pater notes in the preface to the book, the aesthetic critic "should possess . . . a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects" (xxx). In "The Garden Party," it is possible to read Laura's maturation process as artistic development. Laura describes herself as having artistic interest: "she loved having to arrange things; she always felt she could do it so much better than anybody else" (197). Although she does not create a tangible artifact nor gaze upon objects of high art, she does express the "temperament" Pater identifies as necessary for the aesthetic critic. Pater proposes these seemingly simple questions as a guide for the aesthetic critic:

> What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence? (xxix, emphasis original)

Not only does Pater shift the attention of the art critic from the object to the art critic himself, but he also suggests that many things and even people, not just artifacts or paintings, can evoke an aesthetic response. Laura's aesthetic experience can be considered within the context of Pater's advice, particularly in terms of his reflections on the experience of time.

The Experience of Time

By the late Victorian period, as Jonathan Freedman describes, new forms of transportation and new modes of production as well as new theories of human development (such as Darwin's theory of evolution) contribute to widespread attention to the nature of time itself (14). As Jerome Buckley has described, "The Victorians, at least as their verse and prose reveal them, were

preoccupied almost obsessively with time and all the devices that measure time's flight" (2-3). In a colonial context, the obsession with time extended to a construction of Englishness in the Edwardian period. In novels like E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India,* Englishness is equated with the ability to adhere to timetables and to be punctual; Englishness in the colonies was a performance that played out, in part, through the regulation of time. One way to show Englishness, or to critique non-Englishness, then, was through reference to an individual's relationship to time.

Pater's discussion of time in the conclusion to *The Renaissance* can be viewed as distinctly modern. In *The Renaissance,* Pater seems to disavow the regulation of time and disregard any cultural mania for timetables or clocks. Pater implies that life does not progress orderly toward some meaningful conclusion; instead, only individual and discrete moments of time hold the potential for temporary transcendence. Pater calls for his readers to release themselves from habitual modes of thinking. He wants his readers to experience moments attentively and intensively, which implies releasing oneself from the oppression of the timetable. Pater contends, "The service of philosophy, of speculative culture, towards the human spirit is to rouse, to startle it to a life of constant and eager observation" (152). This posture of "eager observation" toward the world, Pater suggests, can stretch out our experience of time: because life is finite, "our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time" (153). For Pater, it matters less what is observed than how it is observed, and the goal is not moral instruction: "Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life" (152). As Freedman shows, Pater views time as "the only source of value and meaning available to us" (15). By training our senses to observe and attend to a moment of time, Pater's reasoning suggests, it is possible to create experience in a world structured to regulate rather than enliven feeling and sensations.

In "The Garden Party," the Sheridans, financially successful Edwardian colonials in New Zealand, adhere to a timetable. In fact, the family establishes and enforces social conventions in part through the organization of time. By maintaining a predictable schedule, the Sheridans perform their class status as well as their Englishness. As Laura changes her orientation toward time, she distinguishes herself from her family, aligns herself, albeit unknowingly, with the type of aestheticism advocated by Pater, and begins to experience a sexual awakening.

As a wealthy, colonial Edwardian family, the Sheridan household functions according to a fairly rigid timetable. In the story, this timetable is made evident through the various interruptions to it as a result of party preparations. For instance, the narrator emphasizes that the workmen arrive before breakfast is over, Laura and Jose indulge in cream puffs before lunch, and Mrs. Sheridan chides Meg and Jose for lingering in the drawing room after breakfast. Despite the party, Mr. Sheridan and Laurie go to the office at the usual time. The narrator reminds the reader of the importance of time by stating the hour: "Lunch was over by half-past one. By half-past two they were all ready for the fray" (206). The story also indicates that the regularity of events shapes their lives: the garden party is held every year, and Laura thinks sullenly about "the silly boys . . . who came to Sunday night supper" (199). While the party disrupts the regularity of the daily schedule, it is still the regularity of time that identifies them as distinctly English. As a unit, the Sheridans exhibit the notion that Englishness is placeless; it is possible to be English anywhere as long as a schedule is created and followed.

Laura, however, breaks out of the family's dominant time structure just as she transgresses other conventions, such as when she enjoys eating her breakfast of bread and butter outside and in front of the workmen. Sitting alone inside of the house after a telephone call, Laura registers her awareness of the environment around her. She calls her attention to both the human movements and the natural activity:

> She was still, listening. All the doors in the house seemed to be open. The house was alive with soft, quick steps and running voices. The green baize door that led to the kitchen regions swung open and shut with a muffled thud. And now there came a long, chuckling absurd sound. It was the heavy piano being moved on its stiff castors. (200)

Laura gives her attention to the sounds in order to prolong and preserve the moment; she listens attentively. The range of sounds in the house—from the "muffled thud" to the "chuckling absurd sound"—awakens Laura and pushes her outside of the habits of the house; her routine is disrupted and she leisurely listens. In this moment, Laura exercises her perception; she directs her senses to detect what is normally just background noise. But what appeals to Laura ultimately is what she cannot see or hear: "But the air! If you stopped to notice, was the air always like this?" (200). As Laura's attention shifts from the sounds within the house to the air that moves from the outside to the inside, she occupies the domestic space in a new way.

The narrator notes further: "Little faint winds were playing chase, in at the tops of the windows, out at the doors. And there were two tiny spots of sun, one on the inkpot, one on a silver photograph frame, playing too. Darling little spots. Especially the one on the inkpot lid. It was quite warm. A warm little silver star. She could have kissed it" (200). Laura's exuberance for life reaches its pitch here: she wishes to kiss the "warm little silver star" due to the joy she feels. Laura's response to something relatively simple—the playing of the faint winds and the spots of the sun—illustrates not naivety, but instead an openness and eagerness for experience. Her obvious affection for these fleeting and ephemeral forces suggests how her perception and attention disrupt habits. Momentarily, Laura, hyper-aware of her surroundings, exists within a different rhythm than the rest of the household. It is not so much that Laura transcends the actions within the household as much as it is that her hyper-alertness alters the way she perceives material reality. She demonstrates an appreciation for what is fleeting and temporary rather than

investing in material goods that give the illusion of permanence and stability. In this way, Laura's feelings echo the advice proffered by Pater: to get the most out an experience as long as it lasts.

Laura's desire to "kiss" the playful spots expands in the episode that calls her away from the telephone. When Laura observes the lilies her mother ordered for the party, she exhibits her sexual awakening through her intense and passionate response to the flowers. Rather than wanting to buy or display the lilies, Laura wants to embrace the lilies. These appeal to Laura not only because they are beautiful, but also because of the intensity of their aliveness. As hothouse flowers, the lilies combine the artificial with the natural and produce an excess of life: "There, just inside the door, stood a wide, shallow tray full of pots of pink lilies—canna lilies, big pink flowers, wide open, radiant, almost frighteningly alive on bright crimson stems" (200). The lilies, "almost frighteningly alive," border on the grotesque. They are extravagantly and excessively displaying this quality of being alive. Laura is attracted to the intensity of the color, size, and radiance of these flowers. 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" (200). She spoke in a "sound" that "was like a little moan" (200). In this moment, Laura experiences something like sexual desire or erotic pleasure in her contact with the flowers. While the incident illustrates her burgeoning sexual identity, it also calls attention her artistic development. The "blaze of lilies" draws Laura toward it not only as a sexual image but also as an aesthetic image. As much as the "blaze" points to the experience of sexual desire, it also suggests a connection with Pater's conclusion to *The Renaissance* and his well known recommendation that success in life is "to always burn with a gem-like flame." Even as her response to the lilies reveals an erotic dimension it underscores Laura's decadent potential. Her feelings are extravagant; they go beyond an appreciation of the flowers' beauty and toward a transgression of convention. Laura's response cannot be contained or limited. Indeed, Laura

releases her response in an unconventional act: "She put her arm around her mother's neck and gently, very gently, she bit her mother's ear" (200).

Democratization of Aesthetic Experience

In *The Renaissance,* Pater democratizes the act of art appreciation. If the focus of art criticism shifts to the viewer, as Pater suggests it should, then anyone can practice it. No special training would be required, and, indeed, training, or the direction of expertise, could disrupt the authenticity of the impression. As Adam Phillips notes, "While Pater's idea of culture in *The Renaissance* was manifestly rarified, his aesthetic criticism, with its few simple questions, acknowledged the inevitable pluralism of that culture. Everyone, after all, has impressions" (xvii). Although Pater directs his attention to high art, he invites others to cultivate impressions of any object or thing. In *The Renaissance,* Pater suggests that not only can anyone access aesthetic experience, but any *thing* can ignite aesthetic awareness.

In "The Garden Party," Laura's aesthetic perspective is tested and transformed as she interacts with the workmen in the garden. Critical discussions of this scene tend to emphasize Laura's lack of power; sent to the garden to instruct the workmen on the placement of the marquee for the party, Laura plays practically no role in making the final decision about the structure. Although Laura may exhibit her lack of practical knowledge in this interaction, she opens herself to learning and changing. Indeed, the workman shows Laura that aesthetic appreciation transcends class boundaries, a lesson that informs Laura's commitment to the democratization of art.

When the workmen decide that the marquee can only go in front of the karaka-trees, Laura experiences private disappointment. Laura thinks:

> Against the karakas. Then the karaka-trees would be hidden. And they were so lovely, with their broad, gleaming leaves, and their clusters of yellow fruit.

> They were like trees you imagined growing on a desert island, proud, solitary, lifting their leaves and fruits to the sun in a kind of silent splendor. (198)

Laura's aesthetic response to the karaka-trees is fairly conventional; she sees the trees as symbolic of the ideal (colonial) personalities shaped by a desert island existence: "proud" and "solitary." The trees are beautiful and abundant. By aestheticizing the tree—calling attention to its qualities of beauty rather than perceiving it from a scientific or cultural or even economic point of view—Laura displays her appreciation for the natural environment, but she is not fundamentally transformed by the experience. She provides a fairly conventional account of the trees; they are beautiful because of what they symbolize. They fit, in other words, into a conventional narrative that may support nationalist or patriarchal agendas. She observes them from a distance and comments on their picturesque qualities. She exhibits no personal relationship to the trees even as she registers her appreciation for them. The use of the generic "you" in the passage suggests that her response is not fully individualized or personalized; she voices a common middle class colonial perspective on these trees. The workmen, who are left out of the prosperity of the colonial situation, regard the karaka-trees with indifference. Jane Stafford argues that "the clump of karaka trees, whose dangerous beauty Laura does not want covered by the marquee, reminds the reader of the primeval forest which settled Wellington has displaced and the poison worked into even the most self-assured worlds" (160). For the reader, therefore, the karaka-trees may symbolize the fragility of the seemingly stable colonial world; for Laura, the karaka-trees allow her to exercise a relatively impersonal act of aesthetic appreciation that connects her with—rather than against—her middle class, colonial family.

As the men start moving toward the karaka-trees to begin their work, Laura notices that one workman lingers. She watches as he "bent down, pinched a sprig of lavender, put his thumb and forefinger to his nose and snuffed up the smell" (199). The

narrator reports, "When Laura saw that gesture she forgot all about the karakas in her wonder at him caring for things like that—caring for the smell of lavender" (199). Laura goes on to reflect that she preferred workmen to the "silly boys" in her social circle, but she is simultaneously reflecting on a social dynamic and an aesthetic dynamic. More common than and native to a more expansive region than the karaka-trees, lavender is not necessarily a special or unique plant. Laura has not called attention to it before, and the only flowers to be mentioned previously in the story are the "roses," "the only flowers that impress people at garden-parties" (197). Laura's attention to the tall fellow's gesture, then, has as much to do with his action as the plant. Laura is learning that something does not need to be grand or unique to have beauty. In addition, the tall fellow has a personal response to nature; he smells it instead of looking at it from afar. In the man's gesture Laura sees a demonstration of appreciation for natural beauty that is different from her initial observation of the karaka-trees. As much as the workman is "nice" because he cares for nature, he also performs for Laura a more personal, engaged, intimate response to the natural environment. This event is meaningful because Laura forgets about her previous concern to preserve the staging or scenery for the garden party. It is also important because it models, at least in its basic structure, the aestheticism of Pater and Wilde, who encouraged the cultivation of an individualized, personal response to beauty rather than the adherence to a standard of beauty. Therefore, within this story, Mansfield implies that education, wealth, or status is not required to foster a response to the external world that is individual and personal—that is aesthetic in a Paterian sense. By having a working class male perform this gesture, Mansfield suggests that aesthetic experiences are not in the sole possession of the upper classes; in fact, wealth and status may prevent individuals from fully experiencing the transformative potential of beauty.

A Voracious Appetite and a Consuming Gaze

Laura's perceptions of the external world echo the type of aesthetic experience Pater advocates for in *The Renaissance*. Through the style (rather than strictly through the content) of her perceptions, Laura finds independence from her family, from whom she "seemed to be different," and gains liberation from her family's regulation of time and enforcement of and adherence to social hierarchy (207). The story suggests that aesthetic experience can unravel habits of thinking that structure social inequality in a colonial context. The story also implies that aesthetic experience can be a channel for sexual awakening, thus providing space for the representation of female desire. However, the story also exhibits how aestheticism can blend into consumerism. As Laura fulfills her appetite for experience, she is less capable of perceiving the suffering around her. She ends the day as naive and inexperienced as she began it; life, for Laura, remains a smorgasbord for sensual delight instead of a complex network of social and class inequities. In consuming Scott's body with her gaze, she fails to reflect on her own privilege. Thus, Laura's habits of consumption (both literal and figurative) undermine the potentially liberating effects of her aesthetic attentiveness. Laura demonstrates a fluidity between the role of Paterian observer and the role of conspicuous consumer. Thus, although aestheticism can be liberating for Laura, it can also be co-opted by a consumerism that exploits the labor of the working class. The existence of this fluidity in the story also accounts for the critical difficulty of interpreting what lesson, if any, Laura learns when she views Scott's body. By the story's conclusion, Laura neither completes an aesthetic education that would divorce her from her family's ideology nor does she accept consciously or unconsciously the position of privilege afforded to her by her family's status. Ultimately, she is caught between two roles.

Throughout the day, Laura crosses both literal and metaphoric boundaries; unlike her mother or sisters, Laura is con-

stantly in motion, running from inside to the garden and back inside again. Within the house, she moves from the hallway to the porch to the drawing-room to the smoking-room to the kitchen to her mother's bedroom and finally retreats to her own room before the party begins. She and her brother are accustomed to taking "prowls," because they "must go everywhere" (204). In her flight around the house, garden, and neighborhood, Laura also pushes on metaphorical boundaries. She desires that class distinctions do not exist, so she bites into her bread and butter outside instead of eating indoors. She gives into the tempting cream puffs, thus taking pleasure in the sugary treat before lunch. Encouraged by the cook to indulge in the cream puffs, Laura and her sister stage a minor rebellion against the implied restrictions within the house. By following the cook's suggestion, Laura again demonstrates her lack of belief in class differences. During the party, Laura asks her father if the band " can't . . . have something to drink," showing one more time that Laura perceives the consumption of food and drink as a way to transcend class boundaries and cultivate social unification. In her movement across spatial boundaries and in her consumption of food, Laura wishes to absorb the world, to eliminate the separation between herself and the external world; she wishes to make everything one. In her quest for experiences that unify, however, she imitates the consuming habits of her family. Her aestheticism becomes part of her consumerism and fails to be something different.

The experience of the party provides Laura with the feeling of unification; instead of achieving unification through the elimination of class barriers, however, her sense of unity evolves out of the preservation of class distinctions. The party is not cancelled, despite Laura's earlier protestations, and the well-to-do colonialists meet for an afternoon of food and socializing. That there is more than enough food for the partiers, just as there are more than enough lilies for them to admire, is evident when Mrs. Sheridan "had one of her brilliant ideas" to

deliver the leftover food to the family of the deceased workman. Demonstrating that the family would not themselves enjoy "all those sandwiches, cakes, puffs," that they were "all going to be wasted," Mrs. Sheridan affirms the family's preference for what is new and fresh (207). Throughout the day, Mrs. Sheridan consistently looks at excess as non-extravagance. For instance, Mrs. Sheridan purchased the lilies because she "suddenly thought for once in my life I shall have enough canna lilies" (200). Like Mrs. Sheridan, Mr. Sheridan displays an insatiable appetite. As the family gathers on the marquee after the party, Mr. Sheridan, when Laura offers him a sandwich, "took a bite and the sandwich was gone. He took another" (207).

As Laura leaves the garden with her mother's basket of party leftovers, she not only feels satiated but also metaphorically stuffed to the point that she felt there was "no room for anything else" (208). The party provides Laura with a sense of fulfillment, but it is based on the preservation of class differences and the privileges afforded the wealthy. On her walk, Laura pauses, as she did earlier, to observe her surroundings: "The road gleamed white, and down below in the hollow the little cottages were in deep shade. How quiet it seemed after the afternoon" (208). As she did before, Laura turns her attention directly toward the present moment. Fully integrated with her class after the event of the party, however, Laura realizes that she no longer sympathizes with the dead man or his family: "Here she was going down the hill to somewhere where a man lay dead, and she couldn't realise it. Why couldn't she?" (208). Aware of the shift in her sympathies, Laura takes an inventory of what she has absorbed: "it seemed to her that kisses, voices, tinkling spoons, laughter, the smell of crushed grass were somehow inside her. She had no room for anything else. How strange! She looked up at the pale sky, and all she thought was, 'Yes, it was the most successful party'" (208). Indicating her alliance with her family and class in her declaration of the success of the party, Laura also accomplishes the sense of fulfillment she has desired since

the beginning of the day. However, her journey is complete by becoming a consumer rather than realizing a fully aesthete subject position.

Laura's transition from aesthete-in-process to consumer seems to occur when Mrs. Sheridan gives Laura a new hat to quell her request to cancel the party, a proposal that Laura's sister describes as "extravagant" (204). Mrs. Sheridan exclaims that the hat makes Laura "look such a picture" (205). When Laura finally catches a glimpse of herself, she sees "this charming girl in the mirror, in her black hat trimmed with gold daisies, and a long black velvet ribbon" (205). The image Laura perceives seems to confirm her mother's impression of the hat's power, and this confirmation leads Laura to consider the validity of her mother's other statements about Scott's family: "Never had she imagined she could look like that. Is mother right? she thought. And now she hoped her mother was right. Am I being extravagant? Perhaps it was extravagant" (206). The appeal of her own beauty shifts Laura's priorities. She decides she can postpone her concern for Scott's family: "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" (206). Seeing herself as a picture, framed in a mirror, Laura also views Scott's family as a representation. While Laura's reflection of herself creates a vivid portrait, the image she conjures of Scott's family is safely "blurred" and "unreal."

This scene indicates that Laura not only finds herself persuaded by the allure of new things, but that she also feels a sense of confusion about her impressions. As her appreciation for beautiful moments folds into conspicuous consumerism, Laura does not fulfill Pater's recommendations for aesthetic education, a process that results in the ability "to distinguish, to analyze, and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture, a landscape, a fair personality in life or in a book, produces this special impression of beauty of pleasure" (xxx).

As Laura's sensitivity, or artistic temperament, begins to support the type of consumerism practiced by her family, her ability to describe and analyze her impressions diminishes. Thus, at the end of the story, she can only express a partial insight into her experiences: "She stopped, she looked at her brother. 'Isn't life,' she stammered, 'isn't life—' But what life was she couldn't explain" (210).

Costumed in her new hat, Laura becomes like her two sisters, characterized in the beginning of the story by their dress. Meg "sat drinking her coffee in a green turban, with a dark wet curl stamped on each cheek. Jose, the butterfly, always came down in a silk petticoat and a kimono jacket" (197). As the preparations for the party reveal, Jose and Mrs. Sheridan tend to approach life as an ongoing stage performance. For instance, Jose "loved giving orders to the servants, and they loved obeying her. She always made them feel they were taking part in some drama" (201). Mrs. Sheridan also includes the servants in her cultivation of a dramatic scenes. For example, she asks Jose to "pacify cook" because she is "terrified of her this morning," but the reader soon discovers that the cook "did not look at all terrifying" (202). Both Jose and Mrs. Sheridan treat the servants as props in their performances. Early in the story, Laura, too, attempts to perform. Approaching the workmen, she greeted them, "copying her mother's voice. But that sounded so fearfully affected that she was ashamed, and stammered like a little girl" (198). After the party, after she experiences unification through an alliance with her class, she treats the working class individuals like props in a drama centered on her. Having spent the party hearing "how well" she looked and "[w]hat a becoming hat" she wore, Laura has experienced being the center of attention. Thus, when she arrives at Scott's house, she feels, as the "group" in front of the door "parted," that it was "as though they had known she was coming here" (208).

When Laura views Scott's body, she does indeed aestheticize his corpse by describing him as "wonderful, beautiful" (209).

She transforms his death into a state of "dreaming" (209). He was "happy" (209). Even as Laura erases Scott's individual identity as she sees him as a beautiful "marvel," she discovers that in death material objects no longer matter. As she declares, "What did garden-parties and baskets and lace frocks matter to him? He was far from all those things" (209). As she leaves the room, she felt "she couldn't go out of the room without saying something to him," and what she says is "Forgive my hat" (210). On one hand, then, Laura consumes Scott's body with her gaze in the same manner as she consumes the bread and butter, the cream puffs, and the party. However, she also seems to disavow materialism as she finds his transcendence through death admirable. By saying "forgive my hat," Laura indicates that she, too, does not really (or at least in this moment) care for the things that her family uses to convey status. At this moment, Laura would seem to follow Pater in affirming that it is the quality of the experience rather than the quantity of things that matter. Although she is temporarily shocked out of her consumerist mindset, her aesthetic development is arrested. Despite her disavowal of materialism, Laura in fact affirms the status quo. Viewing Scott's body does not radically change her or her society as she notes that "This is just as it should be" and that Scott was "content" (210).

If the narrative presents a struggle between aestheticism and consumerism, it also illustrates the slipperiness between these two orientations toward material reality. For Laura, the end of the story suggests that the pleasures associated with consumerism deplete the potentially disruptive effects of the practice of an aestheticism affiliated with Pater. "The Garden Party" affirms the necessity of beauty and art, but it also illuminates the shortcomings of an artistic sensibility that can be co-opted by an empty consumerism. As Laura views Scott's body, she seems to align herself with her family's habits of consumerism. Yet her curiosity about the world outside of the Sheridan garden as well as her sensitivity toward moments that are fleeting and uncontrollable

intimate that Laura's coming-of-age has many more chapters. The story represents, after all, only one day.

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