

Margaret atwood's death by landscape and a buldingsroman

Literature



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English Literature: Margaret Atwood's "Death by Landscape" and Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" English Literature: Margaret Atwood's "Death by Landscape" and Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" I.

Atwood's "Death by Landscape" is a story about Lois, an old woman who reminisces her earlier years. With her kids all grown-up already, she moves in to a different and smaller apartment that she decorates with various pictures she had collected over the years. At first, one would wonder why she wants the pictures that give her no peace. Atwood writes, "She does not find them peaceful in the least. Looking at them fills her with a wordless unease" (n. d., n. p.). One would later realize that the pictures hold the conflict of the story. The conflict is man versus nature. Lois wants peace, or at least something similar to it. At the onset of the story, Atwood writes, "She is relieved not to have to worry about the lawn,...or about strange noises. This building has a security system,..." (n. d., n. p.). The pictures she keeps, however, do not provide her the peace and quietness she wants --- but the exact opposite. The pictures hold the story of her previous loss, and perhaps guilt, over the tragic disappearance, and maybe death, of her friend Lucy at Camp Manitou many summers ago. This conflict of man versus nature is clearly shown in Atwood's following words: How could you ever find anything there, once it was lost? Maybe if they cut it all down, drained it all away, they might find Lucy's bones, sometime, wherever they are hidden. A few bones, some buttons, the buckle from her shorts. (n. d., n. p.) Nature is also used as in the story's symbolism. At the onset of the story, Atwood describes the pictures that Lois keeps, the "convoluted tree trunks on an island... of a lake...of a vivid river shore...[and] of a yellow autumn woods"

(n. d., n. p.). They all symbolize the wilderness into which Lois lost Lucy. Surrounding herself with these pictures also symbolizes how Lois' life has been surrounded by the haunting images and memory of Lucy's disappearance. The mixture of unease and comfort, plus guilt, that the pictures give Lois symbolize, as well, the summary of emotions that Lois has always felt ever since Lucy's disappearance in the wilderness. Furthermore, the pictures are perhaps symbolical of Lois' way of searching for Lucy, especially because she was the last person to be with her before Lucy disappeared. However, the pictures will not really give Lois peace, nor will it help her find Lucy, which again brings the readers back to the conflict of man versus nature. Aside from conflict and symbolism, nature is also utilized as the overall theme in the story. In looking at the story at a deeper angle, one would see that Lois lead a life dictated by the guilt enforced on her by society. Minus all these trappings, Lois is left with only questions as to where her friend disappeared. Now that Lois is in her golden years, she muses "... there's a tangle, a receding maze, in which you can become lost almost as soon as you step off the path" (n. d., n. p.). She tried to be a mother, a friend, and a wife, and she tried to forget the questions left unanswered until now. However " Now that the boys are grown up and Rob is dead" (n. d., n. p.), stripped of every social role she played, she is left to reflect on the core of her loss. It is like when the forests are removed, the tainted image of the world is exposed. II. Mansfield's " The Garden Party" can be considered a bildungsroman because the main character, protagonist Laura, goes through an experience that changes her stance about life. This single-day experience takes Laura to a journey from idealism to maturity and dream life to

actuality. Right from the beginning of the story, one can deduce that Laura comes from an upper-class family, the Sheridans. On that day, a garden party is being set-up on the Sheridans' lawn and every servant and workman are busy preparing for the party. At first, Laura is so engaged in helping out with the preparations. She even asks, "Where do you want the marquee put, mother?" (Mansfield, n. d., p. 1). However, as the story progresses, Laura's perception of how she fits in her society changes. She also realizes many things about herself and her social class. The first sign is when she goes over to the workmen and thinks, "They looked impressive" (Mansfield, n. d., p. 1). However, her upper-class upbringing is still contradicting her want to build rapport with ordinary workmen. Mansfield writes, "She mustn't mention the morning; she must be business-like" (n. d., p. 3). This shift in thoughts goes on up until Golber's man tells them that a man, living just outside their garden, just died. Laura wants to stop the party because she is concerned that the gaiety in their garden would be cruel for their mourning neighbors. Laura tells her mother, "Of course, we can't have our party, can we?... The band and everybody arriving. They'd hear us, mother;..." (Mansfield, n. d., p. 11). The party goes on anyway, yet Laura is sent to the house of the dead man with a basket of leftover food from the garden party. Laura goes there in her party dress and hat, looking so strikingly different from the people and surroundings outside their lawn. It could have been intentional for Laura's mother to send her in that attire. She must probably want to send the message across to Laura that she is different from those people she sympathizes with. However, contrary to her mother's intentions, Laura becomes fully aware of the realities of the life she lives. She is affected by

and confused of the impoverished life of the people she sees. When she is taken to see the dead body of the man, the realities of life struck her even more. Prior to this experience, Laura knows nothing of death. She even describes the dead man as “wonderful, beautiful” (Mansfield, n. d., p. 17), as if that description would provide an excuse for the merriment on their lawn earlier. However, she could not help but cry. Deep inside her, she realizes she could not take the scene anymore and “She found her way out of the door, down the path, past all those dark people” (Mansfield, n. d., p. 18), but not before she paid respects to the dead man with a sob saying, “Forgive my hat” (Mansfield, n. d., p. 18). Mansfield ends the story with Laura snatched away from the innocence of childhood and sheltered life. Even though Laura could not really explain what she experienced, as evident when she says “Isn’t life,... isn’t life—...” (Mansfield, n. d., p. 18), it can be said that this confusion of being unable to explain what life is anymore means that Laura matured from that one experience in a flash.

References Atwood, M. (n. d.). *Death by landscape*. Retrieved from [https://www. byliner. com/margaret-atwood/stories/death-by-landscape](https://www.byliner.com/margaret-atwood/stories/death-by-landscape)

Mansfield, K. (n. d.). *The garden party*. Retrieved from [http://www. eastoftheweb. com/short-stories/UBooks/GardPart. shtml](http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/GardPart.shtml)

Explanations: 1) That is a good point as Lois is really struggling within herself. However, if you look at the story in general, her inner conflict began due to a force of nature. In fact, if one would look at it closely, young Lois should not be feeling guilty over Lucy’s disappearance had Cappie not tried to “blame” her for Lucy’s disappearance. You are right, though, that we can use the man vs. self conflict, but using “nature” as the common subject for the conflict, along

with the other elements we discussed (symbolism and theme), makes this analysis more cohesive. 2) I am also left with the feeling that she will continue to receive pressure from her family. There will always be a possibility that she will abide by her social class' standards. However, I doubt that she will continue to do so with the same indifference and blindness as the others belonging to her social class. As you can remember, Laura apologizes to the dead man for her hat. This is not a simple gesture. Her hat is symbolical of the social class she represents. Even at the middle part of the story, the hat is a big reason for Laura to forget the tragic death just outside their garden. The hat is also mentioned as very becoming for a young upper class female like her. The hat is also strikingly different from what the others wear as she is walking down the lane. She even thinks "...if only it was another hat!" (p. 15). When Laura apologizes for her hat, she is apologizing for everything it represents --- the selfishness, the social class division, and the class arrogance. When her brother Laurie questions her in a way that seems to say Laura should not be sad for the death of a poor man, Laura's action is not of agreement, but one of a child who is starting to realize that she is unable to explain what life is anymore, perhaps because she also realizes that death is universal and it knows no social class.