

# Key garden

Literature



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Kew Gardens is a short story by the English author Virginia Woolf. It was first published privately in 1919, then more widely in 1921 in the collection *Monday or Tuesday*, and subsequently in the posthumous collection *A Haunted House* (1944). Originally accompanying illustrations by Vanessa Bell, its visual organisation has been described as analogous to a post-impressionist painting. Plot summary

Set in the eponymous botanic garden in London on a hot July day, the narrative gives brief glimpses of four groups of people as they pass by a flowerbed. The story begins with a description of the oval-shaped flowerbed. Woolf mixes the colours of the petals of the flowers, floating to the ground, with the seemingly random movements of the visitors, which she likens to the apparently irregular movements of butterflies. The first group to pass by are a married couple, and the man, called Simon, recalls his visit fifteen years earlier when he begged a girl called Lily to marry him, but was rejected. Again Woolf centres the apparent randomness of the decision on the flitting of a dragonfly, which if it stops would indicate that Lily would say 'yes', but instead it kept whirling around and around in the air.

The woman who became Simon's wife, Eleanor, has a different memory of the gardens, a much earlier one, when she and other little girls sat near the lake with their easels, painting pictures of the water lilies. She had never seen red water lilies before. Someone kissed her on the back of the neck, the experience of which has remained with her ever since: the "mother of all kisses". The couple with their children move out of vision and the narrative now focuses on a snail in the flowerbed. It appears to have a definite goal, and the narrator describes the vista before it and the journey it has to tackle.

The focus pulls back again. Two men stand at the flowerbed, a younger man called William and an older, somewhat unsteady man who is unnamed. The older man talks about heaven and makes oblique references to the war. He then appears to mistake a woman for someone in his thoughts, and prepares to run off to her, but is apprehended by William who distracts the older man by pointing out a flower. The old man leans in close to the flower as if he is listening to a voice inside it. The older man talks on, William's stoical patience grows deeper. Next to approach are two elderly women the narrator describes as being lower middle class. They are fascinated by the old man's actions, but they cannot determine if he has mental health problems or is simply eccentric.

The narrator recounts apparently isolated words and phrases: " he says, she says, I says", " Sugar, flour, kippers, greens". The stouter of the two women becomes detached from the conversation, and drowsily stares at the flowerbed. Finally, she suggests that they should find a seat and have their tea. The narrative returns to the snail, still trying to reach its goal. After making a decision on its progress, it moves off as a young couple approaches the flowerbed. The young man remarks that on Friday admission to the gardens is sixpence, to which she asks if it is not worth sixpence. He asks what " it" means. She replies " anything." As they stand at the end of the flowerbed, they both press the young woman's parasol into the soil. His hand rests on top of hers.

This action expresses their feelings for each other, as do their insignificant words. The narrator states that these are words with " short wings for their heavy body of meaning." Their feelings are evident to the two of them as

well as others. The young man speaks to the young woman, Trissie, telling her they should have their tea now. She asks where they have tea in the garden. As she looks over a long grass path, she quickly forgets about the tea and wants to explore the gardens. One couple after another moves through the gardens with the same aimlessness. Woolf's narrative now dissolves the snatches of conversation into flashes of colour, shape and movement, wordless voices of contentment, passion, and desire. Children's voices echo freshness and surprise. Finally the focus pulls out beyond the gardens, contrasting the murmur of the city with the voices and colour of the gardens. " Kew Gardens"

A Global Thematic Interpretation by Virginia Woolf I. A Structural Analysis: The story is naturally divided into six parts: 1. Opening description; 2. Young married couple; 3. Two men; 4. Two lower-class women; 5. Young couple; 6. Conclusion (city noise encroaching).

1. The imagery begins with descriptions of the flowers in the oval bed as having ' heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves', but soon the metaphors become more daring. The most significant of these at the beginning is the treatment of light as a kind of liquid that stains, falls, expands, settles, and spreads, achieving identification with the water droplets under the flowers before it is once again ' flashed into the air above'. Light is the transition between the flower bed and the people who move past it like butterflies.

2. Between the young married couple, the man is recalling his first love, a girl named Lily (thus linking her with the flowers in the bed, which from the description could be lilies) whom he remembers chiefly as a shoe with a silver buckle at the toe, while his emotions resembled the dragonfly that

hovered round a leaf. His wife recalls an old woman's kiss, 'the mother of all my kisses', and describes the present people lying under the trees as ghosts of the past. The effect of these images is to unite light and water, the human world with the natural, the past with the present.

3. Between the two men, one is young, materialist, and quiet, the other old, mystical, and animated. Their movements form a contrast, for 'The elder man had a curiously uneven and shaky method of walking' that resembles the 'high-stepping angular green insect' that the snail encountered. The old man, who may be crazy or merely eccentric, bends his ear to a flower and seems to hear a voice. Thus, flowers hitherto associated with light and the visible, become part of the audible world. This witty comparison is echoed in the following section.

4. The two lower-class women use a complicated a dialogue. The thinner woman does most of the talking, to which the stout one listens at first with a kind of numbed attention. Then she loses all interest: 'She stood there letting the words fall over her, swaying the top part of her body slowly backwards and forwards, looking at the flowers'.

5. The young couple, with their hands joined on her parasol as they push it into the soft soil, become one with the atmosphere of the garden, but there is an additional metaphorical unity that they achieve: 'The action and the fact that his hand rested on the top of hers expressed their feelings in a strange way, as these short insignificant words also expressed something, words with short wings for their heavy body of meaning, inadequate to carry them far and thus alighting awkwardly upon the very common objects that surrounded them and were to their inexperienced touch so massive...' Here

Woolf is not only using language to create a reality but is commenting on the insubstantiality of both language and reality themselves.

6. Finally, the park dissolves in the heat to a motionless composition, reminding one of a painting. This passage, is replete with metaphysical images: a thrush is described as mechanical; butterflies flying one above the other become a ‘marble column’; roofs resemble umbrellas; colors and shapes become people; voices are like flames from candles. Silence is revealed to be sound, the steady roar of the city around Kew Gardens, is like a ‘vast nest of Chinese boxes’.

II. Generic Categorization Short Story: ‘Kew Gardens’ is often seen as a short story despite its obvious lack of plain story line. In a sense, it is a literary short story because it presents an experience in a particular setting that involves a process of human actions. Although none of these actions give rise to any meaningful result, the narrative flow does depict an episode of life that triggers readerly imagination and offers food for thought. Viewed as an example of modernist short fiction that repudiates open plots, ‘Kew Gardens’ exemplifies that kind of experimentation that short story writers were engaged in near the beginning of the 20th century.

Lyrical Poetry: The way the flowers are described in ‘Kew Gardens’ is nothing if it’s not lyrical and poetic. What we experience while reading the descriptions is a contingent of images that are precisely represented and body forth a lushness of nature. The following descriptions of visitors impress us as segmented impressions that do not connect but are just what they are.

They evoke, suggest and speak to us about something else. Impressionistic Painting: Woolf’s sister, Vanessa, who later became an artist, read the story

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and was presumably interested in the vividness of colours presented through the use of words. She drew a picture of Kew Gardens on the basis of the verbal descriptions. And her work, too, made a name in the artistic circles.

### III. Thematic Interpretations

Is it a story about Man & Nature? Or is it a Modernist Manifesto? Interpreting 'Kew Gardens' is no easy thing. Some have understood the story as a critique offered of modern civilization, believing that Woolf was totally put off by the fact that human beings are becoming increasingly more unhealthy while nature remains just as vital as before. The conclusion of the story confirms such a perception. But the story also makes a comment on writing. Woolf seems to poke fun at the kinds of traditional realistic and naturalistic approach to fiction writing. Focus on external realities does not get readers anywhere in their attempt to understand people and the meaning of life. Modernism understands that and, therefore, argues for the necessity of moving inward to the human psyche in order to get at the ultimate realm of human reality.

### IV. New Perspective on Language and Reality

"Kew Gardens" & Functional English: Woolf is a master of English, and her ability with the use of the English language is clearly manifested in the vivid descriptions of Kew Gardens and the visitors. Nothing is terribly avant gardist in the way she dealt with nature and the human world. In each of the sections, we read the most accessible and functional language conceivable. Woolf on the Relationship between Language & Reality: In section 4, the two lower-class women use a complicated a dialogue. Here one finds an implicit

comment on language. The thinner woman does most of the talking, to which the stout one listens at first with a kind of numbed attention. Then she loses all interest: ‘ She stood there letting the words fall over her, swaying the top part of her body slowly backwards and forwards, looking at the flowers’.

In section 5, a young couple, with their hands joined on her parasol as they push it into the soft soil, become one with the atmosphere of the garden, but there is an additional metaphorical unity that they achieve: ‘ The action and the fact that his hand rested on the top of hers expressed their feelings in a strange way, as these short insignificant words also expressed something, words with short wings for their heavy body of meaning, inadequate to carry them far and thus alighting awkwardly upon the very common objects that surrounded them and were to their inexperienced touch so massive...’ Here Woolf is not only using language to create a reality but is commenting on the insubstantiality of both language and reality themselves. To Woolf, it seems to us, language does not simply refer to the reality. There is a gap and hiatus between the two. A simple mixture of words and things confuses and blurs our understanding of the world that we inhabit.

V. Conclusion: At a time when English learning is made possible by a variety of materials presented to us through multiple media, literature retains a special significance for English learners. Writers as difficult as Woolf help us in a way that goes beyond merely providing us with good reading materials, because they teach us something about the nature of language in general. Getting to know about that, of course, helps to sharpen our understanding of the process of language learning.