

Marxism in mansfield



In Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden-Party", the socioeconomically-derived false consciousness discussed by Michael Bell in "The Metaphysics of Modernism" initially blinds the protagonist Laura from viewing the world in any context outside of her household. While the story's pivotal actions do not change Laura's physical existence and setting, they drastically alter her metaphysical social awareness in such a way that the depth of her "awakening" underscores the extent to which her social context initially shielded her perception of the world. Immediately, Katherine Mansfield paints an almost painfully idealized image of a garden party: the weather is flawless, the lawn is trimmed to perfection, the flowers and plants are blooming with an almost divine beauty. Extrapolation sets the story in some sort of socially-advantaged household, where the extent of the children's worries stretches no further than the problem of locating an optimal setting for a marquee. The almost absurd nature of this idealized setting gives the reader the impression that this Modernist story is, in fact, accenting the ignorance of the family in question. This is a point that Bell emphasizes in his discussion of Marxist appearances in modernism: "Marx had analyzed the external realm of social and economic process and laid bare the 'false consciousness' by which the advantaged classes unwittingly rationalized their own condition" (Bell 9). Indeed, Laura initially seems to regard social class as a prerequisite for casual conversation, as her reaction to the Bourgeoisie workman's informal conversation would suggest: "Laura's upbringing made her wonder for a moment whether it was quite respectful of a workman to talk to her of bangs slap in the eye" (Mansfield 853). As the conversation continues, Mansfield maintains the socioeconomic distinction between Laura and the workmen, but simultaneously allows Laura's esteem

for the workmen and their alien nature to slowly elevate her perception of the world outside of her social class. The subsequent change in Laura's social perception seems to exemplify Bell's contention regarding the Marxist hermeneutic of a human life: It is not just that external appearances, and the commonsensical or rational means of understanding them, are limited and fallible. It is that such appearances and reasoning may be actively disguising contrary truths to which, by definition, there is no other access. (Bell 10) An important aspect of Laura's experience with the workmen is that her exposure to their informality leaves her lighthearted; her only frustration stems from the fact that she doesn't "have workmen for friends rather than the silly boys she danced with and who came to Sunday night supper" (Mansfield 854). Bell's commentary suggests that Laura's interactions may have challenged the paradigm inherent in her social class: "modernist literature is often concerned with the question of how to live within a new context of thought, or a new worldview" (Bell 10). Shortly thereafter, Mansfield juxtaposes a new situation that forces Laura to defend her blossoming social perceptions. While Laura's family is somewhat unresponsive to the news that a man from the infamous alley across the street has died, the evidence of Laura's interaction with the workmen from earlier that day quickly manifests itself. She sees something as serious as death as legitimate grounds for canceling the party, out of sensitivity for the family. She notes that her family does not view the death as an important event: as her mother coldly explains, "People like that don't expect sacrifices from us" (Mansfield 859). The obvious distinction between these two reactions highlights Laura's novel perceptions in a new contextual world, while underscoring her family's preference for Marx's "false consciousness"

(explained vicariously through Bell). In order to fortify Laura's "awakening", Mansfield has Laura visit the family of the deceased man. The readers, and likely Laura's family, expect Laura to feel uncomfortable in this foreign setting, particularly considering her reason for visiting. Of course, Laura does initially feel uncomfortable: her hat, which had garnered her a plethora of complements at an earlier party, suddenly seems ridiculous and socially burdensome. However, upon beholding the "young man, fast asleep" (Mansfield 862), the depth of Laura's change in perception becomes evident. She asks Em's sister to forgive her hat, but in fact she seems to be asking forgiveness for the ignorance of her social origin. Laura has evidently answered Bell's question regarding metaphysical self-perception, but her brother Laurie, who sees melancholy in her tears instead of marvel, demonstrates the continuation of her family's false consciousness. Continuing his discussion of modernity, Bell cites Martin Heidegger's contention that "the fact that the world becomes a picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age" (qtd. in Bell 12). The most important transition in Mansfield's "The Garden-Party" is Laura's ability to change from seeing the world physically to considering the world metaphysically; she can now see herself not only in first-person perspective, but also as a contextual object from a third space. Consequently, Mansfield herself seems to complement modernity's overarching search not only for answers, but for new methods for considering existentialist questions.