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An Intertextual Reading of *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Garden Party:* Female Consciousness, Social Ritual, and Symbolic Death

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Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party* exemplify the modernist exploration of female consciousness, narrative form, and social ritual in early 20th-century British literature. Their works engage deeply with themes of identity, gender roles, and symbolic death, employing innovative narrative techniques that challenge traditional storytelling. Ann L. McLaughlin (1978) highlights a profound professional and artistic connection between Woolf and Mansfield, quoting Mansfield's own words: "We have got the SAME job, VIRGINIA" – a testament to their shared literary aims despite the eventual cooling of their personal relationship (McLaughlin, 1978, p. 369). McLaughlin argues that both writers simultaneously explored new narrative territories, such as feminine sensibility, the perspective of the child, symbolic transformation, and the ambivalence toward adult responsibilities, that reveal the depth of their interrelated artistic visions. This essay builds on McLaughlin's insights to analyze how Woolf and Mansfield's works dialogically examine female identity as performative, the social function of the party as a ritual space, and the treatment of death as a symbolic rupture - illuminating the shared modernist aesthetics and socio-cultural critiques embedded in their narratives. Even though one text was written before the other, this intertextual reading is not just about one directly influencing the other. Instead, it looks at how both stories share similar themes and ideas, which helps readers to see how they reflect and shape each other. This deepens the understanding of how they deal with gender, ritual, and death.

In *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf and *The Garden Party* by Katherine Mansfield, both texts explore the complexities of female identity and self-awareness through modernist techniques such as fragmented narrative forms and shifting psychological perspectives. Rather than presenting characters as fully formed individuals, Woolf and Mansfield construct subjectivity through literary techniques, such as stream of consciousness, fragmented narration, and shifts in perspective, that reflect the instability of identity and the performative nature of social roles. From an intertextual perspective, these texts can be read as being in dialogue through their treatment of inner consciousness, especially in how they reveal tensions between public performance and private thought. This reading focuses on how meaning emerges through the connections, contrasts, and silences between the two narratives.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf employs stream-of-consciousness narration to represent Clarissa Dalloway's internal world. Her mind moves fluidly across time and memory, collapsing the present moment with reflections on the past. The well-known exclamation "What a lark! What a plunge!" (Woolf, p. 3) marks the beginning of this psychological journey, signaling the text's rejection of linearity in favour of experiential depth.The rhythm of the phrase - made vivid by the exclamations and the asyndetic structure – mirrors the sudden rush of memory and sensation. "Lark" evokes lightness and spontaneity, while "plunge" suggests a deep, immersive descent into memory. The juxtaposition of these images encapsulates the way Clarissa's consciousness oscillates between surface impressions and deeper introspections, inviting the reader to experience time as Clarissa does: not as a straight line, but as a series of emotional and sensory intensities.Woolf's prose resists neat categorisation of Clarissa as a coherent individual; instead, identity is shown to be contingent,

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shaped by fleeting impressions and fragmented recollections.

This is reflected in Woolf's use of shifting focalisationand disjointed syntax, as Clarissa's thoughts often trail off or are interrupted by sudden sensory inputs, such as when "she felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged" (Woolf, p. 8). The contradiction within this single moment – feeling "very young" and "unspeakably aged" simultaneously – exemplifies how Clarissa's sense of self is not stable but oscillates between conflicting impressions. The absence of quotation marks and the seamless blend of narration with Clarissa's inner voice are hallmarks of free indirect discourse, allowing readers direct access to her fragmented consciousness. The narrative mirrors flowing between memory and external events without fixed boundaries, illustrating identity not as fixed essence but as something always in process. The use of free indirect discourse here, especially in the fluid phrasing of "she felt" places the reader inside Clarissa's mind while maintaining a third-person perspective, highlighting the unstable nature of her selfhood. Elaine Showalter, as interpreted by Moira Ferguson, believed that Woolf's fiction "created a deliberate female aesthetic which transformed the feminine code of self-sacrifice into an annihilation of the narrative self" (Ferguson, p. 313). Clarissa is thus not merely a fictional person but a textual site where issues of gender, memory, and social performance intersect.

In *The Garden Party*, Mansfield explores the construction of female consciousness through a subtle formal strategy. The story opens with a sensorially rich depiction of an upper-class household preparing for a garden party, filtered through the perspective of Laura Sheridan. Rather than directly stating Laura's inner conflict, Mansfield implies it through narrative juxtaposition and tonal dissonance. After hearing of a working-class carter's death, Laura looks "in front of the mirror" and sees "a beautiful girl in the mirror, in her black hat and dress, who looked like she was playing at being someone else" (Mansfield, p. 10). This sense of "playing" suggests Laura's discomfort with her role and identity, especially as her mourning clothes clash with her youthful, pretty appearance. The moment of death makes her confused and signals a shift in her perception of self and society. As Adam J. Sorkin notes, Mansfield immerses readers "into a richly textured and vividly suggestive world" (Sorkin, 1978, pp. 444–445), capturing the nuanced emergence of female awareness.

When read intertextually, *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Garden Party* both challenge traditional notions of female identity by exposing the constructedness of interiority itself. Clarissa and Laura are not simply characters with inner lives, but textual enactments of modernist concerns about the fragmentation of self and the performance of gender roles. Both texts foreground the contrast between external appearances and internal dissonance. Woolf's syntax mirrors Clarissa's disjointed thought patterns, while Mansfield's careful control of tone – 'shifting from joy to discomfort'– embodies Laura's psychological tension. In this way, narrative form becomes a means of representing consciousness as provisional and shaped by language.

While both texts explore interior consciousness and identity, they also use the setting of the party to symbolise broader social themes. In *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf and *The Garden Party* by Katherine Mansfield, the party becomes a symbol of performance, social identity, and the fragile beauty of appearances. Clarissa Dalloway and Laura Sheridan are both central figures in their respective social events, yet neither woman is simply a hostess; instead, they embody the tension between individual emotion and the expectations of polite society. Clarissa's preparations for her grand evening party dominate the structure of the novel. From the very beginning, her emotional attachment to the event is clear. In one reflective moment, Woolf writes, "She felt somehow very like him, the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away… He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun" (Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway, p. 186). Although this line connects to Clarissa's emotional awareness, the focus remains on the 'beauty' and 'fun' of the event, the very reasons she throws parties in the first place: to give meaning and rhythm to life. As *Clarissa Dalloway's Party, Consciousness* observes, Clarissa's role at the party is "a carefully

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staged performance where the boundaries between social expectation and personal feeling must be delicately managed" (p. 58). The party becomes a ritual of elegance and grace, where social order is maintained through refined manners and sensory beauty: music, clothing, conversation, flowers. The narrative captures Clarissa's awareness that "the event is held together by a fragile thread of appearances, which she must tirelessly maintain even as her own inner certainty wavers" (p. 62). This thread represents the delicate control Clarissa maintains to ensure everything goes smoothly, even while her inner world churns with uncertainty. The party, though outwardly festive, is a fragile construct that both defines her and conceals her.

Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" mirrors this symbolic use of the party as performance, though from the more youthful and inexperienced perspective of Laura Sheridan. Laura is not yet a full adult like Clarissa, but she is entering the world of womanhood through her involvement in a similar kind of upper-class ritual. The story opens with bright, sensual detail: "The lawns were freshly mown, the roses blooming, and everything was ready for the band" (Mansfield, p. 1) –creating a painterly image of elegance and comfort. Laura is enchanted by it all, taking pride in mimicking her mother's composure and authority. She comments on the perfect day, saying, "It's all so delicious!" (Mansfield, p. 2), echoing Clarissa's delight in crafting a perfect social environment. Laura's sense of responsibility is mostly based on aesthetic details, howthings "look" and "feel", rather than any deep sense of purpose. As Clare Hanson observes, "It is also stressed in *Prelude* that there are two distinct sides of the garden... The image of the weed counterpoints that of the flower throughout Katherine Mansfield's work," symbolizing the tension between outer grace and inner conflict, and the illusion of self-perfection (Hanson, p.34-35). This duality also defines the garden in *The Garden Party*, which becomes a site where both celebration and death coexist. The same space that holds the party also stands in uneasy proximity to the working-class man's death just down the lane.

When examined intertextually, *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Garden Party* engage in a dialogic relationship that constructs femininity through parallel symbolic frameworks, revealing the performative nature of social rituals. Both use the party to highlight the fragile balance between outward composure and inner disruption. Mansfield's garden and Woolf's drawing room act as spaces where class, gender, and order are both displayed and unsettled. This intertextual reading is valuable because it shows how the texts dialogue with existing cultural narratives about femininity, reframing traditional ideals and exposing the tensions beneath social performances. It deepens our understanding of how these stories challenge inherited views on gender and class. Through rich sensory language and modernist fragmentation, both authors reveal how feminine identity is textually mediated rather than inherently possessed. This intertextual alignment suggests that the stability of social identity, particularly for women, is always under strain, upheld by ritual.

Another key thematic concern in both texts is the presence of death – not as narrative closure, but as a symbolic rupture that destabilizes the surface realism of each story. In an intertextual reading of *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Garden Party*, death interrupts the social world, exposing the tension between internal consciousness and outward appearances. Both Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield embed moments of death within domestic and social settings to foreground modernist concerns with fragmentation, silence, and the inadequacy of social rituals. These moments are formally disruptive rather than emotionally resolved. In *Mrs Dalloway*, the announcement of Septimus's suicide punctures the smooth continuity of Clarissa's party. As Woolf writes, "She felt somehow very like him... She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away" (Woolf, p. 186). This line, situated late in the novel, does not invite moral judgment but instead initiates what can be read as a textual doubling: Septimus's radical break from the world mirrors Clarissa's submerged anxieties, creating what Richard Pearce calls a "necessary counterweight to the glittering superficialities of Clarissa's world" (Pearce, 1987, p.

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94). The party and the suicide are interwoven through Woolf's shifting narrative voice and internal monologue, creating a kind of narrative palimpsest where private trauma coexists with public performance. From an intertextual perspective, Mansfield's *The Garden Party* offers a resonant echo of this structure. Laura's confrontation with death, when she views the body of the working-class man, is placed directly after the party scene, creating a structural juxtaposition that invites comparison. The body is described not with horror but with visual reverence: "He was wonderful, beautiful... this marvel had come to the lane" (Mansfield, p. 15). Like Woolf, Mansfield resists narrative closure, instead allowing Laura's emotional response to remain suspended. She does not speak or process the event fully; the text ends with ambiguity.

This shared withholding is part of both authors' modernist aesthetics: death is not explained but rendered through textual dissonance. Literary critic Ian A. Gordon emphasizes Mansfield's deep autobiographical method, noting that she "put her own experiences into her stories" and that her work functions as a *recherche du temps perdu*-a remembrance of things past rooted in the colonial world she left behind (Gordon, 1971, p. 9). This quality finds a textual parallel in Woolf's refusal to narrativize Septimus's suicide through Clarissa's direct experience. The intertextual resonance lies not only in theme but in narrative strategy. Both texts operate in a dialogic mode, allowing the reader to move between registers of celebration and loss, surface and interiority, without resolving the contradictions. In this way, the moments of death enact what might be called *symbolic interruptions* – they fracture the narrative temporality and expose the constructedness of the surrounding social worlds.

In both texts, then, death functions not simply as an event but as a formal gesture which is a shared modernist device that opens a space of uncertainty. Through parallel uses of fragmentation, silence, and sensory imagery, Woolf and Mansfield resist sentimentality while emphasizing the instability of identity and meaning. Intertextually, these moments become textual mirrors: each death scene disrupts bourgeois order and aesthetic beauty, forcing both protagonists and the reader to glimpse what lies beneath the surface of modern life. This technique aligns with what Ernest Hemingway famously termed the "Iceberg Theory," where meaning is generated through absence rather than explanation – what is withheld carries as much weight as what is revealed (Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*, 1932).

In conclusion,In both *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Garden Party*, Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield reimagine the boundaries of narrative form and feminine subjectivity, using modernist techniques to interrogate the rituals and ruptures that define early 20th-century life. Their portrayal of female consciousness resists fixed identity, revealing the self as a fluid interplay between social performance and internal fragmentation. Through the symbolic and aesthetic functions of the party, both authors explore how femininity is performed and policed within ritualized social spaces, exposing the fragile illusions underpinning bourgeois decorum. Death, finally, emerges as a narrative interruption - formally and thematically destabilizing the ordered world and compelling a confrontation with the unspoken, the ambiguous, and the real.

By reading Woolf and Mansfield intertextually, the shared resonance between authors works becomes evident – not merely in theme, but in structure, tone, and narrative philosophy. Each author places women at the center of aesthetic and existential uncertainty, using fragmentation, silence, and sensory imagery to challenge conventions of plot, identity, and resolution. Authors narratives offer no easy answers, but in their very openness, they articulate a profound critique of gendered experience and social ritual. In doing so, theycarve out a distinctly modernist space for feminine interiority, not as fixed essence, but as shifting, performative, and powerfully unresolved.

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