

Gönderim Tarihi: 20.06.2015 Kabul Tarihi: 23.06.2016

SUBVERSION OF THE BINARIES BASED ON CLASS AND GENDER IN KATHERINE MANSFIELD'S "THE GARDEN PARTY"

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KATHERINE MANSFIELD'IN "BAHÇE PARTİSİ" ADLI ÖYKÜSÜNDE SINIF AYRIMI VE TOPLUMSAL CİNSİYET ROLLERİ KONUSUNDAKİ İKİLİ KARŞITLIKLARIN YIKILMASI

Abstract

Katherine Mansfield's contribution to the development of short story genre in English literature is based on her use of narrative techniques, especially that of focalization. In her short story "The Garden Party" which recounts the story of the upper-class Sheridan family's garden party preparations, Mansfield challenges issues related to class and gender from the main character Laura's focalisation. In this initiation story, Laura starts questioning the roles attributed to an upper-class woman right after she meets the workers who come to make the preparations for the party. Her dilemma about her class comes to a climactic point when she learns the death of a working class neighbour, Mr. Scott, and visits his funeral home. Through the juxtaposition of these two classes from the viewpoint of a female adolescent, Mansfield not only criticises the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie, but also roles expected from a woman. The aim of this article, then, is to discuss Mansfield's "The Garden Party" with respect to the theory of deconstruction to show how the writer problematizes logocentrism by subverting the binary oppositions based on class and gender.

Keywords: Katherine Mansfield, "The Garden Party", Deconstruction, Narrative Techniques.

Öz

Katherine Mansfield bir karakterin düşünce ve gözlemlerine odaklanan anlatı tarzıyla İngiliz edebiyatında kısa öykü türünün gelişimine önemli katkıda bulunmuştur. "The Garden Party" (Bahçe Partisi) adlı öyküsünde Mansfield, zengin sınıftan Sheridan ailesinin bahçe partisi hazırlıklarını öykünün baş karakteri Laura'nın gözünden anlatır. Hazırlıklar için gelen işçilerle karşılaştığı andan itibaren, Laura sınıf ve cinsiyet ayrımcılığını sorgulamaya başlar.

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Komşuları olan alt sınıftan Mr. Scott'ın ölüm haberi ve Laura'nın cenaze evini ziyareti ile karakterin sınıf ayırımına dair sorgulamaları gittikçe artar. Zengin-fakir karşıtlığını genç bir kadının gözünden aktararak Mansfield yalnızca burjuva sınıfının ikiyüzlülüğünü eleştirmekle kalmaz, aynı zamanda kadına atfedilen cinsiyet rollerini de sorgular. Bu makalenin amacı, Mansfield'in "The Garden Party" adlı öyküsünü yapıbozum kuramı çerçevesinde inceleyerek, yazarın sınıf ayırımı ve toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri konusundaki ikili karşıtlıkları nasıl eleştirdiğini göstermektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Katherine Mansfield, "The Garden Party", Yapıbozumculuk, Anlatı Teknikleri.

1. Introduction

Katherine Mansfield's short stories which reflect the influence of Anton Chekhov's realism is regarded as one of the early examples of this genre in England. Rather than the narration of events in a chronological order, her "narratives centered on mood, rhythm, and sensory impressions" (Kaplan 1991: 82). She enters into her characters' minds and depicts their thoughts, conflicts and changes through the use of narrative techniques as well as the expansion of moments in life. In fact, what makes Mansfield a great short story writer is related to "her imaginative interaction with nineteenth-century precursors and her deconstruction of traditional conventions of fiction. . ." (Kaplan 1991: 86). "The Garden Party" is an initiation story of a young, upper-class girl, Laura Sheridan whose maturation is depicted during the family's preparations for a garden party. Having learnt the death of a young carter in the lower-class neighbourhood, Laura proposes to cancel the party to show respect for their loss, however, Mrs Sheridan and Laura's sisters, Meg and Jose insist on having the party regardless of the mourners' feelings. Through the juxtaposition of the Sheridans' garden party with the death of Mr Scott, Mansfield not only questions the values of the luxurious life of the bourgeoisie but also displays their hypocrisy. She also uses focalisation through the adolescent Laura in order to tell the whole story from a female perspective. Mansfield, in fact, deconstructs binary oppositions based on class distinctions and gender roles. For this aim, this paper will make use of Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction which destabilises logocentrism through the subversion of opposites/hierarchies as well as Gerard Genette's *Narrative Discourse*, to propose how Mansfield changes the established norms of Western philosophy by giving voice to a female adolescent.

2. Theoretical Background

Since Plato, Western philosophy has been based on logocentrism which “refers to a culture that revolves around a central set of universal principles or beliefs” (Wolfreys, Robbins & Womack 2002: 52). According to Derrida, the Western thought is logocentric “related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center [which] have always designated an invariable presence – *eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia, aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth” (1989: 84). He is not against the idea of centralization, yet he attempts to show the inefficiency of this system by claiming that there is always an opposite of a specific centre. In his essay, “Structure, Sign, and in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”, he emphasizes the importance of multiple meanings by saying that “the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure” (1989: 83). The centre of a structure not only governs but also limits the structure. Therefore, for Derrida, once we get rid of the centre, we open the structure to infinite play which extends the meanings of a text. He also destabilizes the idea of centralization by focusing on the fact that “the centre is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it. The centre is at the centre of the totality, and, yet, since the centre does not belong to the totality, the totality has its centre elsewhere” (1989: 84), so the centre is no longer the centre. Hence, Derrida suggests deconstruction of logocentrism through the reversal of opposites/hierarchies which are essential structural elements in logocentric thinking. In his essay titled “Différance”, Derrida claims that “a determination or an effect within a system which is no longer that of presence but of difference, a system that no longer tolerates the opposition of activity and passivity. . .” (1989: 129) plays a significant role in deconstructing the opposites. M. H. Abrams states that Derrida proposes deconstruction “as a way of reading all kinds of texts so as to reveal and subvert the tacit metaphysical presuppositions of Western thought” (1999: 59). Similar to Derrida’s theory of deconstruction, Mansfield’s world, reflected in her stories, as underlined by Julia van Gunsteren, “is depicted as fragmentary, momentary. It lacks a centre. . . Mansfield’s ironic use of juxtaposition and contrast suggests that man’s experience of the world is multi-faceted. . .” (1990: 121). Throughout “The Garden Party”, Mansfield questions the class distinctions and the gender roles through several key binary oppositions: upper-class/working-class, light/dark, dream/reality, innocence/experience, and life/death.

3. Text Analysis

After the story opens *in medias res* with “And after all the weather was ideal” (Mansfield 1981: 245), the description of the garden introduces the reader to the wealthy Sheridan family. The heterodiegetic narrator unfolds:

They could not have had a more perfect day for a garden-party if they had ordered it. Windless, warm, the sky without a cloud. Only the blue was veiled with a haze of light gold, as it is sometimes in early summer. The gardener had been up since dawn, mowing the lawns and sweeping them, until the grass and the dark flat rosettes where the daisy plants had been seemed to shine. As for the roses, you could not help feeling they understood that roses are the only flowers that impress people at garden-parties; the only flowers that everybody is certain of knowing. Hundreds, yes, literally hundreds, had come out in a single night; the green bushes bowed down as though they had been visited by archangels (Mansfield 1981: 245).

The words used such as “blue sky”, “light gold” emphasize the beauty of the day for the Sheridans and “daisy plants”, particularly “roses” are indicators of their high life standards as opposed to the garden of the poor family which I will discuss later. In addition, the idea of ordering a perfect day for a garden-party and the gardener’s cutting the grass “until the grass. . . seemed to shine” is a suggestion, as Marvin Magalaner puts it, of “the unnaturalness of what is to occur in a natural setting” (1971: 113). The Sheridans lead a confined life within the limits of the garden by separating themselves from the lower part of the neighbourhood. This isolation, however, will not prevent them from getting into the lives of the Scotts.

In contrast to patriarchal family structure which centers on the authority of the father figure, this story underlines the dominance of the mother who directs all the actions in the daily practice of family life. Although Mrs Sheridan is “determined to leave everything to [her] children this year and wants to be treated as an honoured guest” (Mansfield 1981: 245) during the party, she cannot stay outside the events. Mansfield deconstructs the mother as center through Laura’s questioning of her mother’s values. Since Laura is “the artistic one” (Mansfield 1981: 246) among the children, she is responsible for arranging the garden-party by giving orders to the workmen. Despite her effort to appear “business-like” and copy “her mother’s voice” (1981: 246), Laura “has an easy, natural relationship with these men and is terribly uncomfortable trying to sustain the proper, inculcated one”

(Weaver 1998: 80). She is in-between the two worlds; on the one hand, she tries to act in accordance with the norms she was brought up, which requires a distant relationship with the workers, on the other hand, she is attracted by their natural behaviors and tries to understand them. When she meets the four workers in the garden, she feels embarrassed due to “holding that piece of bread-and-butter” (1981: 246), which paves the way for her to question the class distinctions between upper-class and lower-class imposed upon her by Mrs Sheridan. Being impressed by the “easy” and “friendly” smile of one of the workmen and having realised his odour of “a sprig of lavender”, she thinks “how extraordinarily nice workmen were” and “why couldn’t she have workmen for friends rather than the silly boys she danced with. . .” (1981: 247). Laura’s insight into the lives of the workmen causes her to despise “these absurd class distinctions [which] she didn’t feel. . .not a bit, not an atom” (1981: 248). At this point, Mansfield shows the basic dichotomies of life through the confrontation of the naive adolescent Laura with class distinctions and deconstructs the logocentric Western culture which privileges the upper-class represented by the mother figure over the working-class by telling the story from Laura’s focalisation.

A second deconstruction of privileging occurs when Saddy, the cook tells the news of a dead man: “A man killed! . . . name of Scott, a carter. His horse shied at a traction-engine, corner of Hawke Street this morning, and he was thrown out on the back of his head . . . He’s left a wife and five little ones” (Mansfield 1981: 253). According to Magalener, “such detailed categorization is essential to the breaking down in Laura of the vague barrier between class and class” (1971: 116). As soon as Laura learns the accidental death of Mr Scott, she suggests cancelling the party, yet the first rejection comes from her sister Jose who finds Laura to be “so absurd” and “so extravagant” (Mansfield 1981: 253). Like Jose, Mrs Sheridan refuses Laura’s offer saying, “It’s only by accident we’ve heard of it. If someone had died there normally- and I can’t understand how they keep alive in those poky little holes-we should still be having our party” (1981: 255). Even though working-class people are non-existent for the Sheridans, Laura is different from them in her attitude to life and class distinctions as well as in her reaction to the events in which she finds herself in conflict. To divert her attention from the dead man, Mrs Sheridan wants Laura to wear a hat, a symbol for her social status. Though Laura resists looking at the mirror, when she accidentally sees her reflection, she thinks how attractive she is. Immediately after her brief concern for the Scotts, the family of the dead man “seemed blurred, unreal, like a picture in the newspaper” (1981: 256) and she turns back to the party. In this occasion, Laura seems to be acting in accordance with the social views of her upper-class family, yet in the

course of events she awakens from a dream restricted by the norms and values of bourgeoisie when she visits the Scotts in their own surrounding.

On her way down the path to the Scotts, Laura gets nervous when she realises that people are looking at her attractive hat. Rhoda B Nathan claims that “Laura’s party hat is the vehicle for her false values, and it becomes the vehicle for her true self, even for her salvation” (1988: 44). Although she is brought up with patriarchal values which confine her to definite gender roles such as dealing with the household issues and organizing parties within the domestic sphere, Laura discovers her true self by exceeding the boundaries and questioning the established norms. Through her interaction with the working-class, she attains a wider perspective to reevaluate the relationship between the two classes, which will contribute to her personal development. She realises that she is being gazed at by the working-class people, a sign for the reversal of roles, as the upper-class is privileged in the role of the gaze over the lower-class. While Laura is gazed by the family of the dead man, she also gazes them in their poor dwellings. In fact, Mansfield uses gazing as a reciprocal activity. The Scott’s home is described “at the bottom of a steep rise” (Mansfield 1981: 254) as opposed to the description of the Sheridan’s garden with positive collocations such as “blue sky” and “light gold”. The poor dwelling is depicted in a dark atmosphere as

little mean dwellings painted a chocolate brown. In the garden patches there was nothing but cabbage stalks, sick hens and tomato cans. The very smoke coming out of their chimneys was poverty-stricken. Little rags and shreds of smoke, so unlike the great silvery plumes that uncurled from the Sheridan’s chimneys (Mansfield 1981: 254)

and a broad road separates the two neighbourhoods. The vegetable and hen in Scotts’ garden suggests that unlike the decorative garden of the Sheridans, the poor family uses the garden for practical reasons. Through the juxtaposition of the two families’ physical environment, Mansfield pretends to conform to the norms of Western society based on class distinctions, yet she deconstructs this dichotomy by reversing the privileging of dream and innocence over reality and experience. Laura moves from her alienated world of dream within the limits of upper-class neighbourhood to the reality of the lower-class, meanwhile, transforms from an innocent adolescent to an experienced one. According to Kate Fullbrook, Laura “acts as an intermediary between the two worlds – that of privilege and gaiety, and that of hardship, death, and sorrow. . .” (1986: 120).

Laura's exposure to the world of the dead workman plays a crucial role in her awakening from the trivialities of upper-class life. She first sees Mrs Scott sitting by the fire, and "her face, puffed up, red, with swollen eyes and lips, looked terrible" (1981: 260). As a sensitive young girl, Laura feels the sorrow of the woman deeply. When she is introduced to the dead body of Mr Scott, she loses her innocence and attains some kind of experience through the juxtaposition of life and death. The narrator describes the moment as follows:

There lay a young man, fast asleep – sleeping so soundly, so deeply, that he was far, far away from them both. Oh, so remote, so peaceful. He was dreaming. Never wake him up again. His head was sunk in the pillow, his eyes were closed; they were blind under the closed eyelids. He was given up to his dream. What did garden-parties and baskets and lace frocks matter to him? He was far from all those things. He was wonderful, beautiful. While they were laughing and while the band was playing, this marvel has come to the lane. Happy . . .happy . . . All is well, said the sleeping face. This is just as it should be. I am content (Mansfield 1981: 261).

By saying "Forgive my hat" (1981: 261), Laura shows her disapproval of the bourgeois values and subverts the class distinctions. The privileging of life over death is also reversed in relation to her analogical description of the dead body as happy. Laura's focalization of the dead body emphasizes the dignity of the working-class and arrogance of upper-class through the words of Mr Scott, "all is well" and "I am content" which shows his acceptance of class distinctions in a gracious manner. Magalener states that "Scott now transcends class. . . His is the classless world of death to which Mrs Sheriden and Mrs Scott and Jose and Laura – everyone – must eventually come" (1971: 116). The world of death is the only place where people from all social classes become one and equal. Laura is ashamed of the basket full of leftover party food, as she realises that although the Scott family is poor, they have dignity. With the experience of death, Laura achieves a more comprehensive conception of life questioning all binary oppositions based on upper-class/working-class, light/dark, dream/reality, innocence/experience, and life/death.

In addition to the deconstruction of class values in content, Mansfield also makes use of narrative techniques to subvert the gender roles through the focalisation of the adolescent Laura rather than telling the story from the perspective of a male character. For instance, the only moment Mr Sheridan, as the representative of patriarchy, is involved in the narration is

at the end of the party by bringing forward the “beastly accident that happened to-day” which annoys Mrs Sheridan since “it was very tactless of father” (Mansfield 1981: 258). Among the four categories of Genette’s narration discussed in his *Narrative Discourse*, Mansfield’s use of “extradiegetic-heterodiegetic” (1988: 248) narrative “where there is a first degree narrator who tells a story s/he is absent from” (Uzundemir 1996: 12) helps to maintain the so called objectivity in the story. However, in most parts of the story, the narrator does not tell what s/he sees, but what is perceived by Laura as the focaliser. Genette states that “the reader watches with the character’s eyes and will, in principle, be inclined to accept the vision presented by that character” (1988: 104). Mansfield deliberately uses “internal focalisation” (1988: 105) where “events are told through the character’s point of view” (Uzundemir 1996: 9) to contribute to the meaning of reversed gender roles. The scene in which Laura goes down to the dead man’s cottage is significant in identifying Laura’s focalisation and Mansfield’s use of free indirect discourse. As Gunsteren puts it “FID is subordinate in status to the narrator’s objective judgment” (1990: 99), yet by telling the events from his perspective, Mansfield concentrates on the female vision of the world and through the narrator’s discourse in disguise, she shows the hypocrisy of the upper-class people. When Laura says, “but we can’t possibly have a garden-party with a man dead just outside the front gate” (Mansfield 1981: 254), she is interrupted by the prejudiced ideas of her own family. The extradiegetic narrator presents the fact that “they [the Scott family] were the greatest possible eyesore and they had no right to be in that neighbourhood at all” (Mansfield 1981: 254) “from within and sometimes from without, in an interplay between narrator and focalisers” (Gunsteren 1990: 98). The extradiegetic narrator changes focalisation and degree of insight by stating the views of the Sheridan family as well as Laura and her brother Laurie, saying, “They were forbidden to set foot there [the working-class neighbourhood] because of the revolting language and of what they might catch. But since they were grown up Laura and Laurie on their prowls sometimes walked through” (Mansfield 1981: 254).

Mansfield demonstrates the maturation of Laura through a journey into the working-class neighbourhood to visit the funeral home where she questions the meaning of life. The story ends with Laura’s meeting with her brother Laurie waiting for her outside the dwellings of the poor. While talking about her experience of death and reality, in confusion, Laura stammers and says that “it was simply marvellous” (Mansfield 1981: 261). Then, she tries to express her awe and questioning mind to Laurie with an incomplete question, “Isn’t life. . .” but Laurie understands by saying, “Isn’t it darling?” (Mansfield 1981: 261). The inconclusive reply of the brother to Laura’s question paves the way for an open end for different interpretations and

conclusions. Similar to Derrida's theory of deconstruction which puts emphasis on the center without "a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play" (1989: 84), Mansfield ends her story without a definite conclusion in order to "extend the domain and the play of signification infinitely" (1989: 85).

4. Conclusion

To conclude, as one of the prominent writers of the twentieth century in England, apart from her power to represent the class distinctions of her time through the juxtaposition of binary oppositions, Mansfield also contributed to the development of short story writing in terms of narrative techniques. Through the portrayal of upper-class and lower-class lifestyles from the perspective of naive adolescent Laura, Mansfield shows the discrepancy between the two distinct classes. To criticize the bourgeois values which underestimate the working-class people, Mansfield makes use of Derrida's theory of deconstruction by reversing the binary oppositions. Besides, she tells the whole story through Laura's focalisation to subvert the gender roles in relation to Gerard Genette's narrative techniques. Thus, Mansfield alters the traditional way of writing based on logocentrism, by extension, introduces new perspectives and interpretations.

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