Katherine Mansfield is traditionally located in English Modernism; however, she goes beyond the modernist perception of the "allotropic self" and approaches the endlessly split subject of postmodernism. This study selects the theoretical rationale of a number of postmodernist critics that validates a perception of Mansfield's treatment of the human subject as postmodernist, particularly in "The Garden-Party." Dennis Brown and Eric Mark Krame distinguish between modernism, as a platonic or monolithic movement that traces an essential identity beyond social chaos, and postmodernism, as a "heraclitan" and radically plural trend that ends up in an eternally split subject never to be systematized. Hence, this article departs from several postmodernist concepts to prove that Mansfield's narrative differs from traditional modernism in its closeness to these theoretical presuppositions that she preceded by several decades.

The Postmodern Katherine Mansfield: Beyond the Self of Modernism In "The Garden-Party"

Dr. Gerardo Rodríguez Salas
University of Granada, Spain
gerardor@ugr.es

Split Subject: Modernism and Postmodernism

Although traditionally located within the English modernist literary canon, Katherine Mansfield's fictional approach to the human subject seems to go beyond the modernist perception of a core subject, and to approach the endlessly split subject of postmodernism with its evanescent selfhood. To understand and recognize in Mansfield's fiction a divided postmodernist self as a complex, chaotic, and vast entity, we have to go back to the origins and definition of this critical movement. Thus, the materialization of these two initial aspects is only a mirage, whose conceptualization becomes a hopeless enterprise.

Proposed by Ihab Hassan, the term "indetermanence" refers to the intangibility of this movement and provides an introductory concept that leads to the explanation of the postmodernist split subject of this study. Hassan's term is a neologism that combines two basic meanings: indeterminacy and immanence. As this critic clarifies (93-94), the first meaning implies ambiguity, discontinuity, pluralism, and deconstruction, while the second one presupposes continuous processes and interactions. It is, therefore, a concept that combines fluidity and indetermination with a tendency to immanence, or the continuous repetition of that interaction. In this sense, postmodernist "indetermanence" presumes the impossibility to offer clear definitions, an endless deconstructive and subversive process, and the inexistence of categorical truths.[1]

The ambiguity that characterizes postmodernism as an intellectual movement materializes in its perception of the self, which is different from that of modernism. The departure point is the idea of essence and totality. It is a truism that, despite chaos and fragmentation, modernism transcends them in its search for an absolute truth, unique identity or essence; on the contrary, postmodernism accepts the chaotic identity of the subject, and it does not offer any answer about the existence of an idiosyncratic identity to each subject. Thus, this movement raises the question without providing a conclusive answer, and turns merely superficial aspects into its particular creed. Eric Mark Kramer (15-17) describes modernism as "platonic" or "monolithic," as opposed to the "heraclitan" or "radically plural" character of postmodernism.

As regards modernism, this study agrees with Alan Wilde's distinction between two modernist models (25): on the one hand, that represented by such figures as Cleanth Brooks, who traces some unity behind disorder; on the other hand, the model advocated by writers like T.S. Eliot and E.M. Forster, unable to locate this continuity. Wilde suggests that this last attitude is the general one in modernism, an idea that contrasts with the opinion of most critics, including myself, since we perceive in modernism a final totalizing aim. The general tendency among modernist writers is to consider the notion of the "self," or as D.H. Lawrence calls it, "allotropic self" (qtd. in Earnshaw 61), a stable and essential identity in each individual, regardless of the changes that he may experience in

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[1] Critics coincide in pointing out the impossibility of defining postmodernism, which becomes one of the most evanescent and versatile terms of our time. Tim Woods (3) calls it a "buzzword," stating that, in its wide popular reception, it is a vague and misty word used to refer to that which is "more modern than modern." Walter Truett Anderson (9), in turn, calls it "multiphrenia," considering postmodernism as "a puzzling, uppity term," a word that we use "until we have decided what to name the baby," while Monika Kilian (17) speaks of this movement as "[an] anything goes approach." Due to this impossibility to provide a definition, Linda Hutcheon (*Politics* 15) suggests to conceive postmodernism not so much as a concept, but as a "problem": a series of questions, heterogeneous but interrelated, characterized by offering not a unitary answer, but a multi-faceted one. Thus, she uses a dynamic term ("poetics") in her study of postmodernism (*Poetics* 13-14).

the learning process of life.[2] As Dennis Brown states (2): "The Modernist discourse of selfhood is haunted by the ghost of some lost self which was once coherent and self-sufficient."[3] Despite acknowledging the fragmentation and complexity of the subject, modernism aims to prove the existence of an essence inherent to the self and previous to any social influence; the idea that this essence may not exist implies a lifelong trauma. Postmodernism, however, seriously questions the existence of that essence and speaks of a conglomerate of social influences that create us.

In spite of the general distinction between modernist essentialism and postmodernist anti-essentialism, there is an endless existentialist debate within postmodernism itself. Two main tendencies within this movement can be distinguished: the nihilist one, which condemns the postmodernist subject to irreversible passivity, and the "too optimistic" one, which, very much in line with modernism, takes for granted the existence of a human essence. This study suggests an in-between position as a bridge that joins the previous two, which will be called "conciliatory."[4] In this sense, the aim of postmodernism is an unmasking tendency, not to passively accept such constructive character, but to make us aware of the social impact and to fight openly to improve our situation departing from a position of awareness. Woods clarifies that "Postmodernism is a *knowing* modernism, a *self-reflexive* modernism, a modernism that does not agonise about itself. Postmodernism does what modernism does, only in a celebratory rather than repentant way" (8-9).

Following this conciliatory line, the present study enhances the subject's ambiguity without presupposing its essence and, hence, it departs from two axioms central to postmodernism: the "sublime" and the hermeneutic code. The former derives from Lyotard, who takes the idea, in turn, from Kant and Nietzsche. The "sublime" refers to a reality that escapes human understanding and can only be intuited; it cannot be proved, nor can it be negated totally. Philip Brian Harper (8) defines it as a cognitive gap and the difference between our ability to conceive certain ideas and our skill to represent

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[2] Therefore, human essence is the keynote of modernist writers. See the example of Lawrence, who coins this concept, or T.S. Eliot, who speaks of "[a] substantial unity of soul" (qtd. in Brown 2).

[3] Stephen Earnshaw is more direct in his distinction between modernist essentialism and postmodernist anti-essentialism: "If modernist existentialism suggests that there are a number of possible selfs we can choose from as we search for our one authentic self, postmodernist existentialism does not, or cannot, countenance notions of authenticity. Postmodernist existentialism relativizes selfs and celebrates, or at least flaunts, this variety. There is (was) always the suggestion with modernist existentialism that inauthentic selfs were fraudulent copies of some original. The postmodernist existential outlook has copies of selfs without originals" (60).

[4] For a more detailed analysis of these three postmodernist positions as regards the split subject, see Gerardo Rodríguez Salas, *La marginalidad como opción en Katherine Mansfield: Postmodernismo, feminismo y relato corto*. Granada: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Granada, 2003 (77-84).

them. In line with the postmodernist concept of the "sublime," Roland Barthes (12) coins his "hermeneutic code," which basically involves raising questions and giving their answers; it seems, however, to be only partially found in postmodernism. This movement is characterized by what Barthes calls "dilatory morphemes" (62), especially two of them: the "suspended answer" and the "blocking." Here, Barthes connects with the opinion of other critics who consider postmodernism as a movement that poses questions without an answer, always leaving us with the doubt of whether there is or not a human essence.

"The Garden-Party"

As it has been anticipated, Katherine Mansfield seems to go beyond the modernist perception of the "allotropic self" of such authors as T.S. Eliot or D.H. Lawrence, and to approach the split subject of postmodernism with its evanescent selfhood. The choice of her story "The Garden-Party" in this analysis is to illustrate her postmodernist treatment of the human subject. The protagonist is Laura Sheridan, an upper-middle class young girl who is organizing an impressive garden party at her place, together with her parents, sisters, and brother. The day is perfect for the event and the excitement of all the family members is extreme. Suddenly, they are informed that one of their neighbours, Scott the carter, has fallen from a horse, dying instantly and leaving behind a wife and five children. Showing her human quality and sympathizing with her neighbours' sorrow, Laura suggests canceling the party, but her mother and sisters refuse and manage to persuade her to continue with the preparations. When the event comes to an end, Mrs. Sheridan sends Laura to the Scotts' house with a basket of leftovers, showing a false charity. Once there, the young girl goes beyond social hypocrisy and faces the dark side of life: poverty and death.

In this story, Mansfield departs from the omnipresence of artificiality and social imposition, which represent the dominant viewpoint. From the beginning, she tries to show the inescapable force of society and its asphyxiating effect on individuals, to the extent that it is difficult to discover whether there exists an essence before such a social influence. The social mask will be the keynote in the women of the story, obliged to adopt an identity forged from outside. To illustrate the brainwashing of the women, Mansfield makes use of Laura's mother. Mrs. Sheridan is the most direct transmitter of social prejudice and represents the prototype of the woman who internalizes patriarchal values to become her most fervent defendant. Protected by the precepts of the system, Mrs. Sheridan exerts a powerful influence on her daughters Meg and Jose, and even on

rebellious Laura, who ends up obeying and imitating her ("'Good morning', [Laura] said, copying her mother's voice" [Mansfield, *Collected Stories* 246]).[5]

To show the triumph of the social side, the story suggests a disdain towards poorer classes, which we automatically attribute to Mrs. Sheridan's point of view. To illustrate women's social artificiality, Mansfield chooses her, the epitome of theatricality and social hypocrisy. Her surname seems to have been carefully selected, as it reminds us of the Irish playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816), famous for his comedies of manners, very much in line with the eighteenth-century mentality and the social appearances of this historical period, which Laura's mother shares. However, this social imposition does not only affect women like Mrs. Sheridan, loyal to the system, but also rebellious figures like her daughter Laura. As a good spokesperson for the system, Mrs. Sheridan obliges her daughter to put on the hat—a traditional symbol of social artificiality in Mansfield's fiction:

> Mrs. Sheridan got up and came over to her, carrying the hat. Before Laura could stop her she had popped it on. "My child!" said the mother, "the hat is yours. It's made for you. It's much too young for me. I have never seen you look such a picture. Look at yourself!" And she held up her hand-mirror. "But, mother," Laura began again. She couldn't look at herself; she turned aside. (*CS* 252)

The imposition of the hat against Laura's will is evident. The fact that the hat has been "made for her" indicates its artificiality, together with the idea of the "picture" that destroys any trace of naturalness, as it suggests a pose. Laura displays her rebellious attitude when she refuses to look at herself in the mirror. However, social weight is stronger and, in the end, she gives up when, some minutes later, she enters her bedroom and "the first thing she saw was this charming girl in the mirror, in her black hat trimmed with gold daisies and a long black velvet ribbon. Never had she imagined she could look like that. Is mother right? She thought. And now she hoped her mother was right" (*CS* 256). This image emphasizes that the hat, which symbolizes artificial femininity imposed on women, is catchy and beautiful, but black and mournful, foreshadowing the funeral of women and their personal annihilation.

Nevertheless, despite this invasion of social values, Mansfield sets a clear contrast between civilization and nature, between the social and the personal, reconsidering the possibility to trace some human essence beyond society limits. Here, she poses the existential debate that we have been discussing. Mansfield plays with our

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[5] From now on, this work will be cited parenthetically with the abbreviation *CS* (*Collected Stories*).

expectations throughout the story, suggesting a distinctive space for the self that could exist beyond social influence. The very title, "The Garden-Party," points at the key issue—the mask/essence, society/nature relationship—which is central to the narrative. "Party" refers to a social event artificially prepared, where a group of people gather to socialize; "garden," in turn, suggests a link with nature through the diverse plants that grow in it. In the title, "party" is the head of the noun phrase, while "garden," despite being a noun, performs an adjectival role, predetermining the head. Mansfield, therefore, gives the social and artificial element of the party a higher importance. However, also in order to highlight this artificiality, she selects a scenery that, even when it is directly related to nature, communes with the social side, since the garden has always been conceived—as opposed to the forest—as an artificially created nature, for it reproduces natural vegetation, but such naturalness is imaginary, the result of human intervention. From the beginning, then, the author suggests with this image the similarity between the human being and the garden, as both are linked to nature and instinct, but always through a social filter.

This is the answer that Mansfield anticipates in the story. In fact, she uses a gradation to indicate the final social triumph, when Laura awakes from her rebellious dream and returns, like a tame sheep, to the sheepfold of sophistication. After being summoned by a telephone call, which represents the call of the system through a completely artificial tool, the young girl answers obediently—"Coming!"—and we read: "Away she skimmed, over the *lawn*, up the *path*, up the *steps*, across the *veranda* and into the *porch*. In the *hall* her father and Laurie were brushing their *hats* ready to go to the *office*" (*CS* 248, emphasis added). There is a progressive retreat from nature to society, with the subsequent final triumph of the latter.

Continuing with the image of the title, Mansfield offers a similar parallelism within the story between the karaka trees, associated with a wild nature, and the marquee that the workers are setting up for the party, which represents the social side. When one of the workers proposes to place the marquee in front of these trees, the narrative voice, filtering Laura's viewpoint, explains:

> Against the karaka trees. Then the karaka trees would be hidden. And they were so lovely, with their broad, gleaming leaves, and their clusters of yellow fruit. They were like trees you imagined growing on a desert island, proud, solitary, lifting their leaves and fruits to the sun in a kind of silent splendour. Must they be hidden by a marquee? They must. (*CS* 247)

The contrasted images are highly meaningful. These trees with a Maori name suggest a distinctive identity, alien to the eurocentrism from which Mansfield writes. The writer aims to trace a human essence and, for that, she describes these trees that she presents as isolated, lonely, and silent, since they flower in the wild. This essence is "annihilated" by society, here represented by the marquee that does not allow for the blooming of the allotropic self, as it "must" cover it—the modal verb of obligation is very meaningful. Therefore, Mansfield implies the existence of that essence, but she does not prove it, and is clear about the idea that its highest verification is intuition.

To illustrate this, the author makes use of Laura's figure, who represents the split/dialogic subject. She is torn between social impositions and her intuitive personality, which allows her to sympathize with social outcasts. There are some traits that differentiate her from the rest of her family and society, turning her into a visionary endowed with special sensitivity and an enormous potential to change her environment. Hence, we are informed that Laura has an artistic vein (*CS* 246), and her rebellion against the system can be particularly seen in her transgression of social classes, preferring to be in touch with workers and not with the boring and hypocritical members of her social caste: "Why couldn't she have workmen for friends rather than the silly boys she danced with and who came to Sunday night supper? She would get on much better with men like these" (*CS* 247). Thus, she considers class distinctions and social conventions "absurd" and "stupid"; "for her part, she didn't feel them. Not a bit, not an atom" (*CS* 267-8). The same can be said of the sympathy for her dead neighbour and his family, when she asks to stop the preparation of the party, exclaiming that "they're nearly neighbours!" (*CS* 255).

As opposed to the social sophistication suggested by the garden party and the hats, Mansfield prefers the introspection into human essence through the rejection of these conventions, getting closer, therefore, to the poor and their more direct connection with drives and the primitive stage of the self. The author submerges the protagonist in a trip to the underworld of instincts in her desperate attempt to go away from society and its conventions and to work out whether there actually exists a human essence. As the story clarifies, "a broad road ran between," separating the social world of the party and the primitive underworld of poverty (*CS* 254). Laura dares trespass that frontier and, as Patrick D. Morrow states, her walk to carry the basket to the dead man's family, going down the hill and getting into the slums, "seems to symbolize an inward voyage of discovery into undiscovered areas of herself" (75-76).

Mansfield uses symbolism to suggest the idea of an essence. The brightness of the day while the party was taking place contrasts with the end of it, and the sun, traditionally a symbol of knowledge and clarity, contrasts with the twilight, implying that

Laura will face a dark reality difficult to understand: “And the perfect afternoon slowly ripened, slowly faded, slowly its petals closed” (*CS* 257). The girl is about to discover a new reality (death), but the fact that the petals close foreshadows that the petals of Laura’s knowledge will end up closing too, without full comprehension of the experience that has taken place. Thus, in total shadow, she starts her descent to the subconscious world. This underworld, with the exception of the dead man, is fully inhabited by women, who are presented as if they were witches:

> This was the house. It must be. A dark knot of people stood outside. Beside the gate an old, old woman with a crutch sat in a chair, watching. She had her feet on a newspaper. The voices stopped as Laura drew near. The group parted. It was as though she was expected, as though they had known she was coming here. (*CS* 259)

To emphasize the image of the witch, one of the women in this place is shown as “smil[ing] queerly.” These women seem to posses a superior knowledge that they do not express, but whose energy is mysteriously apprehended by Laura. Very wittily, Mansfield chooses the topic of death that goes beyond our comprehension, and equates our effort to look for an explanation with that of getting to know our innate identity. Until this moment in the story, human essence seems unattainable, a secret carefully kept by these witches that is about to be deciphered.

Nevertheless, Mansfield makes use of the postmodernist concept of the “sublime” and of Barthes’s hermeneutic code, displaying Hassan’s postmodernist “indetermanence.” In the topics of the human essence and death, Laura experiences certain inner peace that suggests her intuition about a transcendental reality, but she never proves its existence, only intuits it, like the postmodern sublime. This is the moment she directly confronts the idea of death:

> 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 had come to the lane. Happy… happy…. All is well,

> said that sleeping face. This is just as it should be. I am content. (*CS* 261)

Laura is unable to verbalize what she feels while observing the dead man. The feeling is so strong that the only words she can utter are the typical clichés that we use when we run out of words: "wonderful" and "beautiful." Her connection with the "sublime" is overwhelming. In her comparison of death with the topic of human essence, Mansfield insists in how far we are from understanding a reality that is out of reach: "he was far, far away," "so remote," but at least Laura seems to have understood the artificiality of the system when, before running away from that place, she excuses herself by saying: "Forgive my hat" (*CS* 261), the symbol of social artifice. Mansfield underlines that we can intuit transcendental meanings, but never utter or understand them. At least, to recognize the falsity of the system is a step forward in our fight against it.

At the end of the story, we discover that Laura is rescued by her brother "[a]t the corner of the lane" (*CS* 261). With this, Mansfield highlights the in-between zone where the conscious and the unconscious intersect, and where, theoretically, it would be possible to verbalize the latter. Laura tries to explain to her brother Laurie what she has just contemplated. When he asks Laura whether her vision was horrible, she cries, says no, and continues: "'It was simply marvellous. But Laurie—' She stopped, she looked at her brother. 'Isn't life,' she stammered, 'isn't life—' But what life was she couldn't explain. No matter. He quite understood. '*Isn't* it, darling?' said Laurie" (*CS* 261). The story ends with these words. Laura keeps using clichés to define her experience ("marvellous") and is unable to verbalize what she has undergone—she just stutters. Laurie seems to understand her, also being incapable to utter his thoughts, as he uses an assertive question tag. The fact that Laurie is Laura's favourite sibling and the similarity of their names suggest that they are the masculine and feminine side of the same person, hence their mutual understanding. However, although this boy seems to understand, our impression is that actually none of them is totally aware of this transcendental meaning. Laura especially seems to be in a hypnotic state, as if her mind had received an impact stronger than she can bear. Therefore, Mansfield insists that this is the maximum discovery we can do as regards human transcendence.

Mansfield suggests writing as a powerful weapon of social awareness. She employs the traditional image of the sun as an illuminating element, and uses it to point at the path for rebellion against the system: "And there were two tiny spots of sun, one on the inkpot, one on a silver photograph frame, playing too. Darling little spots. Especially the one on the inkpot lid. It was quite warm. A warm little silver star. She could have kissed it"(*CS* 249). On the one hand, the sun illuminates the inkpot, implying that one of

the ways to knowledge is writing; on the other hand, the photograph calls our attention to the sense of sight and the necessity to realize the artificiality that surrounds us, symbolized by the picture frame. The material of this frame (silver) could allude to the colour of the moon and, therefore, to an alternative writing that takes us to the feminine one that Mansfield defended implicitly.[6] In this sense, Mansfield parodies the traditional use of the sun; she uses it to prove the absence of a truth. By means of a feminine writing, mainly characterized by the parody of the dominant system to dismantle its tricks, we discover the lack of a supreme truth and learn to coexist with that system.

"Rainbows and crystal glasses"

Mansfield defends an endlessly fragmented subject more in line with the eclecticism of postmodernism than with the unitary intention of the modernist allotropic self. In her journal she expresses this idea openly: "I am in love with rainbows and crystal glasses. The rainbow fades and the glass is splintered into a thousand diamond fragments. Where are they scattered, in the immensity of the sky, to the four winds of heaven—gone?" (*Journal* 121). Rather than adopting a pessimistic stand, Mansfield seems to rejoice in the mysterious possibilities that a postmodernist subject offers. She was ahead of her time, overwhelmed by a sublime into which she delved herself, like Laura, in silence.

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[6] See Gerardo Rodríguez Salas, *La marginalidad como opción en Katherine Mansfield: Postmodernismo, feminismo y relato corto*. Granada: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Granada, 2003 (355-60).

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