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Modernism Re-visited

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"AT THE BRINK OF A VISION": EPIPHANY IN THE SHORT STORIES OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD AND NADINE GORDIMER

Abstract: The main aim of the article is to discuss the influence of Katherine Mansfield's prose on the short stories of Nadine Gordimer. The article starts with an overview of short story criticism, concentrating on the theories of the modernist short story by Clare Hanson and Dominic Head. It is argued that the distinctive features of the modernist short story are its deemphasizing of plot, the preoccupation with the protagonist's thoughts and emotions, its use of epiphany, as well as its distinctive vision of man's identity. The first part of the article also provides a more detailed insight into the notion of epiphany. It is shown that the modernist short story often problematizes the notion of epiphany as a moment of spiritual illumination. The notion of "equivocal epiphany," introduced by Dominic Head in his analysis of Mansfield's "The Garden Party," is later applied in a close reading of Nadine Gordimer's story "A Company of Laughing Faces," included in her sixth volume of short stories, *Not for Publication* (1965). The juxtaposition of Mansfield's and Gordimer's stories shows a number of thematic and structural similarities which testify to the enduring influence of Mansfield's writing, as well as the strong hold of the modernist aesthetic over more contemporary writers.

Key words: the modernist short story, Nadine Gordimer, Katherine Mansfield

Introduction

In an interview she gave in 1963, the South African author Nadine Gordimer remarked that she was a "natural writer,"[1] by which she meant that it was not the circumstances of her life that led her to become an author, but that she did so because of a natural inclination to write. Gordimer started writing at the age of nine and continued until her death in 2014, eighty-two years later. What she called "my first story about adults"[2] was published in 1939, when she was only sixteen. There is no doubt that if Gordimer had devoted herself to writing short stories, she would have become famous as a short story writer, like Katherine Mansfield, Katherine Anne Porter or Eudora Welty – three writers she greatly admired. Throughout her life, Gordimer, however, was prolific in two genres, publishing fifteen novels and eighteen collections of short stories (including six volumes of collected stories). Her novels have always been favoured over her

1 John Barkham, "Author: Nadine Gordimer," in *Conversation with Nadine Gordimer*, ed. Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 9-11.

2 Nadine Gordimer, "A Bolter and the Invincible Summer," in *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, ed. Stephen Clingman (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 19-30.

short stories – and this tendency can be seen in the verdict of the Swedish Academy. Having awarded Gordimer the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1991, the Academy in their press release discussed her major novels, devoting only the last paragraph to her short stories. As the Academy observes, "the powerful novels should not make us forget the shorter works. Compact and dense, they are extremely telling and show Gordimer at the height of her creative powers."[3]

The main aim of this article is to discuss the influence of literary modernism on Gordimer's short stories. It will be argued that in her writing career, she was inspired by one modernist short story writer in particular: Katherine Mansfield. Gordimer's early stories show striking resemblances to Mansfield's work both in their choice of topics – many of them trace the evolution of a young woman's consciousness – as well as their technique, such as their masterly use of free indirect discourse and their use of epiphany. Before analysing Mansfield's and Gordimer's short stories, it is necessary to provide a brief summary of the characteristics of the modernist short story. The theoretical insights into the modernist short story will then be considered in the context of Gordimer's understanding of this genre, as described in her literary essays.

Critical perspectives on the modernist short story

In the introduction to her study of the short story from 1880 to 1980, Clare Hanson draws a distinction between two kinds of short stories. The first kind is based on the tradition of the oral tale, and dates back to the works of Boccaccio and Chaucer. The distinctive feature of this kind of writing is its emphasis on plot. As Hanson observes, "In the tale, significance tends to inhere more in a particular configuration of events than in an individual human nature or response."[4] In the other tradition of short story writing, the primary focus is not on action, but rather on the thoughts and motivations of the characters; in such works, "plot is subordinate to psychology and mood."[5] This latter kind of writing, which Hanson calls short *prose*[6] (to distinguish it from the former kind, which she refers to as short *stories*) was developed by such modernist writers as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield. Rather than focusing on action, the modernist short story is characterized by its interest in what Hanson

3 "The Nobel Prize in Literature 1991: Press Release," The Nobel Foundation, accessed December 6, 2017, https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1991/press.html.

4 Clare Hanson, *Short Stories and Short Fiction, 1880-1980* (London: Macmillan, 1985), 6.

5 Hanson, *Short Stories and Short Fiction*, 5.

6 Since Hanson's term *short prose* has not been widely adopted by short story critics, it will not be used in this article. The expression *modernist short story*, as used by Dominic Head in his acclaimed study, is preferable in the context of this discussion.

calls "the realm of human probabilities."[7] Since it rarely includes surprising plot twists, Hanson calls the modernist short story "plotless fiction."[8]

A further feature of the modernist short story is that it deals not with the fantastic or the improbable, but with the quotidian, seeking "that quality of the marvellous which is hidden within the mundane."[9] The marvellous lies within the individual consciousness and is revealed in a moment of epiphany. As defined by Joyce in his autobiographical novel *Stephen Hero*, epiphany is "a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself."[10] Morris Beja in his important study of this notion comments that the popularity of epiphany among modernist writers stems from the discovery that "character can often be more profoundly and powerfully revealed by our mental reactions to so-called trivia than by our external reactions to demonstrably important events."[11] As defined by Beja, epiphany is characterized by two criteria: the Criterion of Incongruity – the fact that epiphany is thematically unrelated to the event that triggers it – and the Criterion of Insignificance – that although epiphany offers a profound insight into one's existence, it is often brought about by an unremarkable incident. Robert Langbaum adds four more criteria for epiphany: the Criterion of Psychological Association, which stipulates that the epiphany is not the result of divine intervention, but arises from "a real sensuous experience"; the Criterion of Momentousness – the fact that "the epiphany lasts only a moment"; the Criterion of Suddenness – the fact that epiphany catches the character unawares; and finally, the Criterion of Fragmentation – as Langbaum writes, "the text never quite equals the epiphany";[12] in other words, epiphany always transcends the character's fragmentary and imperfect understanding. It follows that the significance of a given epiphany is created by the reader and the interpretation of this event depends on their sensitivity, as well as their reading experience.

It should be noted that the overview of the modernist short story discussed above constitutes only a very general outline of this special kind of prose narrative. Among the other features of the modernist short story we also find its self-reflexivity – in other words, its tendency to foreground its style and technique – as well as its distinctive understanding of human personality, based on what Dominic Head describes as "a consideration of the fragmented, dehumanized self."[13] This latter notion is by now

7 Hanson, *Short Stories and Short Fiction,* 6.

8 *Ibidem*.

9 *Ibidem*, 6-7.

10 Quoted in Morris Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1971), 14.

11 Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel,* 21.

12 Robert Langbaum, "The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature," in *Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany*, ed. Wim Tigges (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 44.

13 Dominic Head, *The Modernist Short Story: A Study in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 7-8.

an unorthodox one; indeed, most philosophers and critics agree that modernist literature (not only the short story, but also the novel and poetry) was often critical of the notion of a unitary self. Charles Taylor in his important philosophical study *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* argued that modernism, like romanticism, was a reaction against a mechanistic and utilitarian image of man, as created by the European Enlightenment. Unlike romanticism, however, modernism did not put faith in nature and man's creative powers as stable sources of self. On the contrary, the inward turn of the modernists led to what Taylor calls "a fragmentation of experience which calls our ordinary notions of identity into question."[14] Taylor's argument will be taken up in the conclusion of this article.

The four features of the modernist short story mentioned above – its deemphasizing of plot, the preoccupation with the protagonist's thoughts and emotions, its use of epiphany, as well as its distinctive vision of man – can all be found in the short stories of Katherine Mansfield and Nadine Gordimer. Indeed, the extent to which Gordimer shared the modernist outlook on man and literature – at least at the beginning of her career – may seem surprising when we consider the fact that her first collection of short stories was published only after the Second World War, in 1949. Yet it is interesting that Clare Hanson in her aforementioned study discusses Gordimer's philosophy of composition as an example of a modernist approach to literature.[15] What, then, is Gordimer's conception of the short story and to what extent was it influenced by the great modernists?

Throughout her writing career, Gordimer commented on her novels and short stories, evolving what may be called a philosophy of composition. In the case of the short stories, one of the most important texts is an essay titled "The Short Story in South Africa" (1968). In this essay Gordimer juxtaposes the short story with the novel, pointing to one important difference between the two genres. As she writes, the tasks of the novelist and the short story writer are completely dissimilar in that the former has less freedom than the latter. The novelist creates characters whose thoughts and behaviour are by definition consistent over time. This is, in Gordimer's understanding, a limitation because this "consistency of experience (…) does not convey the quality of human life, where contact is more like the flash of the fireflies, in and out, now here, now there, in darkness. Short-story writers," she adds, "see by the light of the flash; theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of – the present moment."[16] The short story is, as Gordimer writes, ideally suited to writing about modern man: "The short

14 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 462.

15 Hanson, *Short Stories and Short Fiction,* 57.

16 Nadine Gordimer, *Telling Times: Writing and Living, 1954-2008* (New York: Norton, 2010), 170.

story is a fragmented and restless form, a matter of hit or miss, and it is perhaps for this reason that it suits modern consciousness – which seems best expressed as flashes of fearful insight alternating with near-hypnotic states of indifference."[17]

Gordimer's essay is impressionistic in its use of imagery – one is reminded of Virginia Woolf's "Modern Fiction" – but at the same time precise in identifying the central issue, namely the short story's concentration on the present moment. To Gordimer, our understanding of the surrounding world and of the bonds we create with other people is both dynamic and intermittent; dynamic because it evolves over time, intermittent because we do not at every point of our life fully realize the nature of our relationships with people and our place in society. This realization comes to us only during a brief moment of insight, which Gordimer calls "a discrete moment of truth"[18] and "flashes of fearful insight,"[19] both of which are clear references to epiphany. Modern consciousness, Gordimer suggests, understands the world in the mode of epiphany.

While the notion of epiphany is crucial to an understanding of Mansfield's and Gordimer's prose, readers should be wary of depending excessively on it. First of all, it should be noted that not all of Gordimer's stories make use of epiphany. Indeed, one may even contest the general statement offered by Thomas M. Leitch, who argued that "all short stories, we might say, proceed to a revelation that establishes a teleology, a retrospective sense of design, informing the whole story."[20] The comment is true, no doubt, but not in the case of all short stories, and not even all those that concentrate on the workings of the human mind; after all, not every psychological portrait of a character has to proceed to a moment of revelation, understood as a suddenly-acquired self-understanding. Analysing Gordimer's oeuvre, it becomes clear that even her early short stories (in such short story collections as *Face to Face* (1949), *The Soft Voice of the Serpent* (1952) and *Six Feet of the Country* (1956)), which were the most heavily influenced by modernism, were not all concerned with analysing the characters' interiority. From the beginning of her career, Gordimer was not only a prolific, but also a diverse short story writer: her stories do not only follow the modernist mode of writing, but are also inspired by the tradition of the classical short story (in the tradition of Boccaccio and Maupassant), with its close dependence on plot and narrative resolution. Nevertheless, as Robert F. Haugh rightly points out, Gordimer's "best mode is the lyric and vividly impressionistic";[21] it seems that her stories are at their most impressive when she writes

17 *Ibidem*, 170-171.
18 *Ibidem*, 170.
19 *Ibidem*, 171.
20 Thomas M. Leitch, "The Debunking Rhythm of the American Short Story," in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, ed. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 131.
21 Robert F. Haugh, *Nadine Gordimer* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974), 80.

in the tradition of Chekhov and the great modernists that followed him. The influence of the proto-modernist and the modernist short story is clearly visible in Gordimer's early short stories, many of which concentrate on the epiphanies experienced by its characters.[22] This is also the case in "A Company of Laughing Faces": Gordimer's short story, which will be analyzed later in this article.

Equivocal epiphany in Mansfield's "The Garden Party" and Gordimer's "A Company of Laughing Faces"

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, an important thematic similarity between Mansfield's and Gordimer's short stories is that many of them describe the development of a young woman's consciousness. This is also true in the case of the two stories which have been chosen for this discussion: Mansfield's "The Garden Party," published in her third collection of short stories, *The Garden Party and Other Stories* (London, 1922), and Gordimer's "A Company of Laughing Faces" from her sixth volume of short stories, *Not for Publication* (London, 1965). There are striking resemblances between the two works. First of all, Mansfield's and Gordimer's stories concentrate on young women (Laura Sheridan and Kathy Hack, respectively) on the brink of adulthood, who experience a crisis, leading to a moment of intense awareness, which can be described in terms of an epiphany. What is more, in the case of both stories, the crisis, as well as the resulting epiphany, is brought about by their encounter with the unknown, as they are confronted with the death of other characters.

In Mansfield's story, the death of the Sheridans' working class neighbour constitutes a great shock to Laura, who initially argues that it is indecent for them to have a garden party in such grave circumstances, but who is then won over to her mother's point of view that their working class neighbours do not expect any sympathy from them. After the party successfully draws to a close, Laura collects the leftover food and, with a basket in her hand, visits the house of the grieving family, where she is invited to look at the deceased man. It is at this point that she experiences her epiphany. Looking at the dead man, she imagines him to be "fast asleep" and is moved by the image of peacefulness: "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."[23] Having experienced this moment of epiphany, Laura finds herself confused and overcome by emotion: she comes back home crying, and, when asked about her

22 Robert F. Haugh analyses several Gordimer short stories which are modernist in their use of epiphany: "A Bit of Young Life, "Check Yes or No," "The Gentle Art," "Charmed Lives" etc.

23 Katherine Mansfield, "The Garden Party," in *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 2006), 209.

visit, gives a short and vague answer: "It was simply marvellous."[24] It seems that she is unable to verbalize her thoughts.

No doubt, one of the most interesting and insightful analyses of Mansfield's story is that offered by Dominic Head. His argument is that the epiphany experienced by Laura involves a keen, if momentary awareness of the complexity and the disparity of life,[25] but that this epiphany is "compromised"[26] in that its insight is transformed into a superficial aesthetic impulse (Laura's appreciation of the calm indifference which she reads in the face of the deceased man). Head's interpretation concentrates on the workings of ideology and its impact on Mansfield's protagonist. Laura is seen as both heavily influenced by her mother's materialistic and superficial philosophy of life, which is informed by the desire to compartmentalize, i.e. to impose order on diverse and disparate events. The impulse towards "social conditioning,"[27] as Head calls it, is powerfully conveyed in the way that Mansfield uses space in her story. The garden is an enclave of the wealthy Sheridan family, separated from the poor working-class neighbourhood. The news of the tragic death of one of the workers is considered by the Sheridans – with the notable exception of the main protagonist – as a threat to the peacefulness of the house. This short fragment from a conversation between Laura and her mother is significant:

> 'Mother, a man's been killed,' began Laura.
> 'Not in the garden?' interrupted her mother.
> 'No, no!'[28]

Behind Mrs. Sheridan's spontaneous response is the conviction that since the tragic death did not happen in the garden, then it need not concern them. Laura too is shocked at the prospect of a tragedy within the peaceful and secure realm of the family garden.

Head analyses Laura's behaviour – her initial doubts about the garden party, as well as the decision to visit the home of the grieving family – as an attempt to transcend her mother's superficial and egoistic ethics, and offer genuine sympathy uninformed by social distinctions. Her impulse towards the aestheticization of death is seen as a recourse to the philosophy of compartmentalization, and thus her failure to embrace the disparity of life. As Head writes, "Laura has arrived at the brink of a vision, but her

24 *Ibidem*, 210.

25 Head argues that this awareness is precisely what Mansfield wanted to express in her story. He quotes Mansfield's commentary on the story, in which she stated that the main aim of "The Garden Party" was to convey "the diversity of life and how we try to fit in everything, Death included. That is bewildering for a person of Laura's age. She feels things ought to happen differently. First one thing and then another. But life isn't like that. We haven't the ordering of it" (Quoted in Head 132).

26 Head, *Modernist Short Story*, 136.

27 *Ibidem*, 133.

28 Mansfield, "The Garden Party," 205.

Sheridanese is inadequate for rendering the experience."[29] While Laura is no doubt endowed with a more sensitive and emphatic predisposition than her mother, her way of thinking and communicating ("her Sheridanese"), as revealed in the free indirect discourse of the narrative, does not seem to offer any vocabulary for thinking about the suffering and misery of others. It is as if her sensitivity and empathy have been channelled into a self-gratifying aesthetic appreciation of the world.

It should be noted that Head's analysis of the equivocal epiphany in "The Garden Party" is part of a more general case he makes for the modernist short story. The critic challenges the notion of epiphany as a spiritual revelation, arguing that "if one agrees that a 'worthwhile' story involves some kind of 'moral or ethical' challenge, one might also argue that the significant moment in modernist fiction can, with worthy intent, challenge the concept of momentary understanding itself."[30] Head convincingly shows that characters in the short stories of Joyce, Woolf, and Mansfield often fail to grasp the significance of the epiphanies that they experience. Whether or not this insight can also be applied to Gordimer's "A Company of Laughing Faces" will be discussed below.

As mentioned, there are several similarities between Mansfield's and Gordimer's stories, the most important of which is that they both concentrate on the psychological development of young women who are unexpectedly confronted with sudden and tragic deaths. As is the case in "The Garden Party," death in Gordimer's story disrupts a peaceful and leisurely atmosphere – this time, not of a garden party, but of a holiday on the South African coast, where Kathy Hack – the main protagonist – and her mother are spending their Christmas vacations. During their two-week stay at a resort on Ingaza Beach, the seventeen-year-old Kathy meets her peers, starts a clandestine romantic relationship with a boy (the romance ends abruptly as the boy scares her away by his aggressive sexual advances), and, most importantly, befriends a nine-year-old boy, who, towards the end of the story, dies in an accident, as he falls off a cliff and strikes his head on a rock. Kathy is the first person to discover the dead boy, at the sight of whom she experiences a moment of insight, not unlike that described in Mansfield's story.

"A Company of Laughing Faces," like "The Garden Party," concerns a close mother-daughter relationship, but, unlike in Mansfield's story, this relationship is at the core of Gordimer's story. There is no doubt that the seventeen-year-old Kathy Hack is under the absolute influence of her mother: as we learn from the first paragraph of the story, Kathy is a cherished only child, who "had led her mother's life"[31] in that she followed her to various parties of the privileged white middle classes in South Africa. Since Kathy

29 Head, *Modernist Short Story*, 136.
30 *Ibidem*, 21.
31 Nadine Gordimer, "A Company of Laughing Faces," in *Not for Publication* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1965), 31.

leads a life of isolation, as she is separated from her peers by her overprotective mother, she constructs an idealised image of the life which awaits her once her mother allows her to live among her peers. Awaiting their arrival at the seaside resort where she and her mother are to spend their holidays, Kathy eagerly anticipates the moment when she will join the other teenagers and discover for herself the joys of leading an adult and independent life: "the idea was lit up inside the girl like a room made ready, with everything pulled straight and waiting . . . Soon – very soon now, when they got there, when it all began to happen – life would set up in the room. She would know she was young."[32] The picture of the room conveys Kathy's unrealistic hope that on entering her adulthood she will find her life as ordered and transparent as it was during her childhood. As with Mansfield's story, there is the underlying expectation that life will follow a set plan, taking the young woman through such socially accepted stages of adulthood as courtship, marriage, and children. When Kathy finally meets a boy, their casual friendship gives rise to some vague preconceptions concerning the male-female relationship, as well as the nature of physical love: "She and her mother were great readers of novels and she knew, of course, that there were a large number of caresses – hair, and eyes and arms and even breasts – and an immense variety of feelings that would be attached to them."[33] It is surprising to her that the boy's caresses are at first casual, non-committal, and devoid of any deeper significance. When she is invited by him for a romantic tryst – the implications of which she does not anticipate – she is surprised that the "bare little room,"[34] "dim and forgotten,"[35] with the "male smell of dead cigarette ends and ironed shirts,"[36] has any place in the comfortable, seaside hotel. The room, so unlike that inhabited by Kathy and her mother, is the place where she is confronted with the aggressive sexual advances of the boy (unlike the tender and meaningful caresses she read about in romantic novels) and where she discovers – and is scared by – her own passion. That mutual passion can take the form of an egoistic impulse, leading to aggression, is an insight that Kathy is not ready to confront, as her understanding of physical love is informed by the concepts of reciprocity and meaningfulness.

It is against the background of her painful experience that the subsequent events of the story should be viewed. After she escapes from the unsuccessful rendezvous with the boy, she runs to the beach of her holiday resort, where, for the first time during her stay, she looks out into the sea: "The glare from the sea hit her, left and right, on both sides of her face: her face that felt battered out of shape by the experience of her own passion. She could not go back to her room because of her mother; the idea

32 Gordimer, "A Company of Laughing Faces," 32.
33 *Ibidem*, 39-40.
34 *Ibidem*, 40.
35 *Ibidem*, 41.
36 *Ibidem*.

of her mother made her furious."[37] The fragment describes a brief moment of insight experienced by Gordimer's protagonist. Not unlike the brief and imperfect moments of self-understanding described in modernist short stories, Kathy's insight into her thoughts and emotions is based on a realization that she is not ready to accept; in fact, her growing awareness of sexual desire is described as if it was an attack on herself: we learn about "the glare from the sea" which "hit her."[38] The word "glare" is especially important insofar as it acquires a symbolic significance in this passage. It seems that Gordimer is playing here with the idea of illumination, understood as a moment which enables one to understand obscure (and in this sense 'dark') thoughts and motivations. The moment of illumination experienced by Kathy, compared to the glare of the afternoon sun, is so overwhelming that she is not ready to accept it; this sudden realization of her sexuality is described as if it was an assault on her identity. Viewed from a psychological perspective, the reason why Kathy is not ready to reflect upon her newly-realized impulses is that she experiences acute embarrassment on making this discovery. It seems that this keen feeling of embarrassment stems from the unrealized awareness that her sexuality, which she has now recognised as a powerful driving force of her emotions, is a transgression of the widely-accepted moral standards represented by her mother. In other words, what Kathy finds deeply unsettling is not only that she was attacked by the boy, but also that she became aroused by his sexual advances. The sense that her passion has lingered in her body despite her disgust and outrage at the boy's actions is a discovery she is unable to accept.

In its first moments, Kathy's flight from her newly-acquired self-knowledge takes the form of an imaginary return to her childhood, as she joins a nine-year-old boy – the one who dies in a tragic accident at the end of the story – at his childish and innocent games on the beach. After this meeting, she rejoins the company of her peers; this time without the sense of alienation that she experienced before:

> Certainly Kathy was no longer waiting for a sign; she had discovered that this was what it was to be young, of course, just exactly this life in the crowd that she had been living all along, silly little ass that she was, without knowing it. There it was. And once you'd got into it, well, you just went on.[39]

Kathy's decision to join in the carefree holiday life of her peers is connected with her discovery that it is possible – indeed, necessary – to embrace the superficial existence favoured by her peers. The immediate reward of this life is the reassuring sense of being part of the crowd, not only in the immediate, physical sense, but also in the sense of uncritically accepting the norms and attitudes of others. What Kathy does not

37 *Ibidem*, 42.
38 *Ibidem*.
39 *Ibidem*, 43.

realize at this point is that this kind of behaviour is not only characteristic of youth, but is also part of adult life; indeed, the kind of superficiality and social conformity that she learns during her holidays have been mastered to perfection by her mother.

If Gordimer's story ended at this point – leaving Kathy testing her newly acquired social skills in the "company of laughing faces" – it would be an elegantly-written and ironic commentary on the kind of superficiality and social conformity that a young girl has to acquire in order to find her place in society. The story, however, does not end at this point; like many stories that focus on the protagonist's interiority it proceeds to an inner revelation, which can be discussed in terms of an epiphany. Kathy experiences this unexpected moment of insight when she is confronted with the body of the nine-year-old boy. She is the first of the search party to find who finds the dead child. The moment of coming across the body, submerged in a small pond underneath a waterfall, is described as a private or even intimate encounter between the two:

> What she felt was not shock, but recognition. It was as if he had had a finger to his lips, holding the two of them there, so that she might not give him away. The water moved but did not move him; only his little bit of short hair was faintly obedient, leaning the way of the current, as the green beard of the rock did. He was as absorbed as he must have been in whatever it was he was doing when he fell.[40]

What is reminiscent here of Mansfield's story is that death is described as a state of peacefulness; the calm and focused face of the child seems to bear no trace of his violent death. The almost perfect immobility of the child's body, which Gordimer conveys masterfully by referring in detail to the moving strand of his hair, likens him to an artifice; he has become a work of art which fills Kathy with wonder, rather than dread. This interpretation is borne out by the last sentence of the story, in which we learn about Kathy's emotional reaction to the macabre discovery in the lagoon: "the sight, there, was the one real happening of the holiday, the one truth and the one beauty."[41]

A close reading of Mansfield's and Gordimer's stories shows striking parallels between "The Garden Party" and "A Company of Laughing Faces." First of all, the epiphanies experienced by Laura and Kathy are informed by a strong aesthetic impulse, which, in both cases, can be analyzed as a subconscious attempt to channel negative feelings of dread and apprehension into a romanticised reaction based on awe and aesthetic appreciation. There is a sense that the young women are unable to confront the death of others, as well as the sadness and mourning that surrounds its finality. This is even more pronounced in the case of Kathy: as we learn, after discovering the dead boy, she "looked at him, for a minute, and then she clambered back to the shore

40 *Ibidem*, 46.
41 *Ibidem*, 47.

and went on with the search."[42] Kathy's failure to inform the others about her discovery can be seen as a reluctance to break the terrible news to the boy's family, but also as an extreme (and successful) attempt to ward off the awareness of death. It is as if she decided to enter into the conspiracy of silence offered by the boy: as we learn from the fragment quoted, she imagines the boy holding a finger to his lips, as if he was asking her to keep his death a secret. Like Laura, Kathy is either reluctant or unable to talk about her discovery; the only reference to the tragic incident that she conveys is the childlike comment addressed to her mother: "I don't like this place,"[43] which terminates their holidays.

Viewing Kathy's response to the drama of death as an example of an "ambivalent epiphany" leads to a new, more nuanced interpretation of Gordimer's story. As mentioned, the notion of "ambivalent" or "equivocal epiphany" is discussed by Dominic Head in his study of the modernist short story. Analysing Mansfield's "Miss Brill," Head notes that in the short story, "a revelation of self-awareness has been offered,"[44] but that this newly acquired self-awareness is instantly effaced by the main protagonist, leading to an "ambivalent 'epiphany,'"[45] which highlights "the character's own internal conflict between awareness and delusion."[46] It can be argued, using another phrase of Head's, that both Mansfield's and Gordimer's protagonists find themselves "at the brink of a vision,"[47] whose insight they are either reluctant or not ready to fully confront.

Conclusion: the complexity of life and the fragmentation of the self

Juxtaposing "The Garden Party" and "A Company of Laughing Faces," it can be argued that they share a distinctly modernist way of viewing the notion of identity. In this context it is worth coming back to Charles Taylor's important comment on the modernist aesthetics of fragmentation. Taylor claims that what underlies the literary works of the modernists is the contention that "an escape from the traditional unitary self was a condition of a true retrieval of lived experience."[48] The notions of a unitary self, favoured both by writers of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, distort the complexity of life, which simply cannot be conveyed in a work narrated or focalized by a rational and unitary consciousness. It is perhaps due to this belief that many modernist short stories, as well as those which have been influenced by modernism, concentrate on

42 *Ibidem*, 46.
43 *Ibidem*.
44 Head, *Modernist Short Story*, 111.
45 *Ibidem*.
46 *Ibidem*.
47 *Ibidem,* 136.
48 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 462.

moments when the characters' consciousness, confronted with the complexity and indeterminacy of the surrounding world, is splintered into dynamic, and at times, contradictory impressions. In other words, it can be argued that both Mansfield and Gordimer focus on individual consciousness at the very moment when its seeming unity is being undone in the act of perceiving the multifarious reality of life. In both stories the truth is that which cannot be contained and thus escapes all attempts at being verbalized. The fact that Gordimer used the modernist aesthetic to describe what she called "modern consciousness,"[49] and did so both in her early and later stories, shows that the modernist outlook on human identity continues to be important for more contemporary writers.

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49 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 170-171.