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The Importance of Style and Setting in "Kew Gardens"

"It happens so often—or so seldom—in life, as we move along the trees, up and down the known and unknown paths, across the lawns and into the shade and out again, that something—for no reason that we can discover—gives us pause. Why is it that, thinking back upon that July afternoon, we see so distinctly that flower-bed? We must have passed myriads of flowers that day; why do these particular ones return? It is true, we stopped in front of them, and talked a little and moved on. But though we weren't conscious of it at the time, something was happening—something..." (Mansfield 1501).

What is that "something" that Katherine Mansfield writes about in her essay on Virginia Woolf's "Kew Gardens"? With her "wise smile," (Mansfield 1502) Woolf transports her readers to a beautifully constructed world where flowers and bugs are of greatest importance and humans become the oddities. The longer the reader remains in quiet observation of this scene, the louder Woolf's message rings out. Human invasion cannot rob nature of its beauty and significance. In contrast, the author illustrates that the exposure to natural beauty will have a meaningful effect on the human psyche. Because of this, the brilliance of this story doesn't rely on traditional "human-important" conventions of plot or developed characterizations. Woolf employs style and setting to impress her important message upon her reader.

Woolf's employs two different modes of style in "Kew Gardens" that work in unison to create a brilliant effect. First, her mode of diction creates a detailed picture of a beautiful garden scene. Intensely colorful and filled with light and shape, her focused style paints an intricate picture in the mind of the reader. Large portions of the story are given to the garden's description. This emphasizes the importance of the garden and its contents. An unchanging frame of reference embodies Woolf's second stylistic convention. The reader sits in an immovable seat beside the flowerbed. This single frame of reference underscores the significance of nature's message and unabashedly puts side

blinders on the reader. All must observe the garden's beauty. Woolf's readers purposely have no other choice.

The setting of "Kew Gardens" is essential to Woolf's message. Each of the thumbnail character sketches contains an impromptu occasion of pause and physical contact with their surroundings. A family first enters Kew with "the man six inches in front of the woman, strolling carelessly, while she bore on with greater purpose, only turning her head now and then to see that the children weren't too far behind" (1390). As both are reminded of past loves, the husband and wife admire the flowers and watch the couples sitting beneath the trees. The family pauses and continues to reminisce as they connect with the idyllic scene. Leaving the reader's frame, they walk away, not separated from one another, but "four abreast" (1391) and united in the satisfaction that derives from sharing the past. Next, two men wander into the garden needing a distraction to ward off an Alzheimer's moment. The younger man "touches a flower with the tip of his walking-stick in order to divert the old man's attention"(1392). The beauty of the flower distracts the older man from his dementia driven rant. The elder then symbolically bends down and places his ear next to the bloom to listen to its wisdom. A third pair wanders into the reader's frame so overcome by the beauty of the gardens that they decide to take tea right then and there. This couple's conversation turned from noisy dialogue to a reverent silence. The final couple stops at the edge of a flowerbed making small talk. With her parasol pressed into the earth and his hand resting on top of hers, some sort of a deep connection to the earth is protracted. This small physical interaction between the couple and the garden become a significant moment for this last pair.

In the final lines of the story, Woolf develops a multi-layered picture of the city of London that creates a type of hierarchy within the scene that is reminiscent of a great chain of being. At the bottom the cars run noisily. A bit higher, the human voices are "crying aloud" while "petals of myriads of flowers flashing their colours into the air" (1394) rise above it all. Once more, Woolf's theme of humankind's inability to rob nature of its beauty and significance shines through. The style and setting continue to validate this message, leaving the reader with a strong sense of this work's importance. Whether a vague "something" or concrete emotional experience is gained from a visit to Woolf's

masterfully constructed garden, all are left with a sense of awe and great respect for the beauty that is observed in her writing and in her world.

Works Cited

Mansfield, Katherine. "Review of Woolf's "Kew Gardens". The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction. Ed. Ann Charters. 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/ St.Martin's, 1999. 1500-1502.

Woolf, Virginia. "Kew Gardens". The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction. Ed. Ann Charters. 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/ St.Martin's, 1999. 1390-1394.