

# Literary Methods and Community Engagement: The Case of Katherine Mansfield's “The Garden Party”

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*This essay offers new ways of understanding the connection between literary studies and community engagement by focusing not just on the content of literary study, but on one of the central methods. I argue that the practice of “close reading” a literary text—Katherine Mansfield’s “The Garden Party” in particular—can illustrate the integral relationship between a discipline’s content, its methods, and its relationship to community engagement. Close reading pushes students to appreciate more than a literary text’s stories and themes; it impels them to be systematic about the ways in which they arrive at meanings, self-awareness, and social insights, and to recognize the cultural practices, assumptions, and rhetorical structures in which these emerge.*

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There is an appreciable amount of scholarly writing on the relationship between the humanities and community engagement in university undergraduate curricula since the 1990s. This is because the humanities have had to do a lot of legwork to explain their contributions and relevance to society

broadly, as well as in the specific context of undergraduate experiential learning. These explanations have been necessitated in part by the fact that the impact of the humanities cannot be easily quantified. But they are also a result of common doubts in society about the professional utility of degrees in the humanities. Additionally, a sense of “crisis” has become normalized among scholars and educators in the humanities—a perpetual language of siege, declension, and even imminent obsolescence. Indeed, “crisis” is the very word with which Martha Nussbaum (2016) begins her book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. And though this sense of crisis is not new, it is felt now as intensely as it ever has, especially given that the current political climate in the United States appears hostile to the creative and liberal arts. But there are also the broader historical shifts in higher education and society at large that have not been favourable to the humanities on the whole. These include the increasing vocationalization and corporatization of the university, the downturn of enrolment in humanities disciplines, and decreasing spending on the humanities in many places. But I also agree with Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber (2017) when they warn against the perils of overstating the putative crisis: “The discourse of crisis,” they argue, “creates a sense of urgency which makes us feel even more powerless in the face of overwhelming odds. It is ironic that [...] the discourse of crisis also inadvertently encourages passivity” (11). My intention in this essay is to highlight practices that can positively impact the way the humanities are situated, perceived, and used; I will answer the question “what do the humanities have to do with it?” from the perspective of the discipline in which I work, the English discipline. More specifically, I will answer that question by placing emphasis on the critical *methods* of English. I will demonstrate how the close reading of a particular literary text can be generative. I will model, explicitly and intentionally, how the close and careful reading of Katherine Mansfield’s (1922) “The Garden Party,” a widely anthologized and celebrated example of the short story form, can guide students through the very idea of community engagement and through the challenges of carrying intention over into productive action. I argue that this short story can provide students with a map for how to navigate the concerns, quandaries, hesitations, and missteps that are potentially a part of community engagement. So, besides comprising the disciplinary content of my community-engaged course, I find that using literature itself to

thematize community engagement is a great way to directly illustrate the relationship between literature and literary analysis and acting in the community.

In *Born Translated*, Rebecca Walkowitz (2017) states that there is no consensus on what exactly close reading is (49). But it can be broadly agreed that close reading is the inductive practice of arriving at larger interpretative conclusions about a text through attention to linguistic, rhetorical, and aesthetic details in the text *itself*, as opposed to proceeding from larger contextual, conceptual, and theoretical considerations. To engage in close reading is to engage in a form of poetics, which, among other things, is to identify and describe the effects of a text. Close reading illuminates the formal and aesthetic characteristics that are peculiar to one specific work of literature and that distinguish it from other works with which it may be bracketed. However, the minutiae and practice of close reading is something that is anaemic and even missing in a lot of otherwise important and valuable studies on the connection between English and community engagement. Even scholarship that acknowledges the importance of close reading does not demonstrate how, exactly, this happens, like Cathy Comstock's (1994) anchoring essay "Literature and Service-Learning: Not Strange Bedfellows," which argues that close reading is an important part of discourse analysis and "the ways meaning is made possible or excluded according to one's frame of reference" (84). On the other hand, Laurie Grobman and Roberta Rosenberg's (2015) recent collection, *Service-Learning and Literary Studies in English* includes works that recognize the specific role of literary analysis and close reading in the context of "service-learning." But much of the literature on the relationship between literary pedagogy and community engagement still tends to draw its energy from literary content, something that is necessary and that I am not discrediting here. Who can take issue with storytelling, narrative acts, themes, the artistic visualization of the world, and giving voice to the unheard? Nor do I shy away from the proposition that literature can and does have an ethical dimension, that it can inspire cultural curiosity and an empathic social consciousness.

But these dimensions of literary scholarship and application must not come at the expense of its aesthetic integrity. Even as literature

can elicit what August Wilson has called “emotional understanding” in students, the practice of close reading ensures that the literary text be treated as a literary text first; this means ensuring that those things that make literature the discrepant way of knowing the world—one that differs from the way a historian, sociologist, or political scientist might know it—are not lost. Close reading facilitates the cultivation of empathy—to feel what another feels—because, among other things, it offers a way to read a character or narrator’s consciousness and emotional response to trying experiences like racism, marginalization, discrimination, war, exile, displacement, being stereotyped, suffering loss of a large magnitude, etc. Consciousness and emotional responses are not always lucid or self-evident in language and do not always make themselves readily available to the reader. They are often conflicted or cryptic, and may require more deliberative and methodical reading than the kind of reading one does to acquire information, distinguishing the anatomy of plots, etc.

Close reading is an important and widely employed method of literary analysis for all literatures regardless of genre, period, or literary tradition. But it can be especially crucial in approaches to multicultural, immigrant, LGBTQ, and women’s literature, whether in community-engaged courses or in other pedagogical contexts. Close reading can assuage the concern that these literatures are especially at risk for being reduced to political pamphlets. Having said this, I agree with Toni Morrison’s (2004) words in her preface to *Sula*, where she challenges the notion that “all politics is agenda” [and therefore] “taints aesthetic production.” Morrison facetiously responds that this “wisdom was not available to Shakespeare, Chaucer, Dante, Sophocles, Dickens, and Catullus” (xi). I believe, as Morrison does, that good literature can be political because of its aesthetic properties, not despite or in addition to them, for reasons that I will address throughout this essay. Julie Ellison (2006) writes that literature can provide “educated hope” as she underscores the double-meaning of “being moved” by art. “[Art] confronts us,” she writes, “with the history of words like ‘beauty’, ‘genius’, ‘inspiration’, and, yes, ‘soul’—a vocabulary consistent with a desire for [...] public practices” (465). This desire for “public practice” can be sharpened and purposed by close reading. This is because close reading can shed light—if we accept that there is a link between literary form and

social relationships—on the workings of power and hierarchies in society. Kenneth Burke (1974) has argued that literature, like proverbs, can have a “foretelling” quality and provide a “strategy for dealing with situations” (296). This is because “situations are recurrent in a given social structure [therefore] people develop names for them and strategies for handling them” (297).

I want to be clear that in focusing on close reading in the context of community engagement in this essay, I am not endorsing New Criticism and formalism over other schools of literary thought. I realize that the practice of close reading elicits some concerns, some of which I share. In his essay “Against Close Reading,” Peter Rabinowitz (1992) argues that close reading can privilege intensive reading over extensive reading, and that it can obscure the variety of significantly different activities that dubiously fall under the term of “reading” (232). In “Conjectures on World Literature,” Franco Moretti (2000) famously asserts that close reading is a “theological exercise” that serves traditional canonical thinking (57). In a similar spirit to Rabinowitz’s argument, Moretti claims that we read closely only if we believe that there are a few texts worth reading. So, close reading does not happen before worldview and ideological commitments. It is not a value-free and objective science, nor is it an uncontested or normative practice of all literary scholarship, and I do not mean to present it as such here. Having said all of this, close reading can cultivate certain habits of mind and inquiry in undergraduates that are invaluable for vigilance against the vagaries, generalizations, and categorical thinking that have regained rhetorical traction in national political discourse, and which can have damaging social and legal consequences for minoritized and vulnerable communities. Close reading fosters what John Duffy (2012) calls “reasoned rhetoric” and instills caution against presumption and paraphrase, and specifically against what I call “cultural paraphrase,” speaking for and representing other groups in curt and less than mindful ways. Close reading can condition a reluctance to begin from the general and find evidence of it in the particular. To engage in close reading is to see the difference between Mexicans and Syrians, for example, and *that Mexican, that Syrian*. Of course, close reading on its own does not automatically accomplish these outcomes, nor are these dispositions inevitable when a student close reads a literary work. Close reading happens in particular discourse communities, and in my case, this is an

advanced university undergraduate literature classroom built around narratives of exile, immigration, and displacement. Close reading in my class is also guided by wider frameworks of meaning-making: the learning outcomes on my course syllabus, the work that students do with community partners, and the mission of my university, which centers on the promotion of diversity, global consciousness, and social justice.

The critical and close reading of literature, like community engagement, is “work,” a kind of skilled labor. The diffuse and disputed category of lingual production that we call “literature” is not merely another way of packaging information. Even the least trained and most indifferent student recognizes that she must “do” something with a literary text. This is because literary texts, by which I mean creative and imaginative texts, do not legislate truth in any absolute sense. Rather, literature traffics in the truths of perspective, prejudice, limitation, and idiosyncrasy, as Virginia Woolf ([1929] 2001, 6) might put it, which are at least as interesting as the truths that facts offer. Nor do literary texts demand “correct” interpretations. But they certainly invite *good* interpretations, and these are often spawned by rigorous attention to language and form. For these reasons, students feel that they have a stake in the literary texts they read, and that they are more motivated to apply the lessons they learn from them outside of strictly literary and academic contexts.

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

In this essay, I use the term “community engagement,” which signifies a specific kind of activity that is also known as “service learning” at many institutions and contexts. At my institution, however, “community-engaged teaching, learning, and research” is the preferred designation because many believe that (what I will henceforth call) “community engagement” signifies the reciprocity between course design and outcomes and work with the community. This designation is consistent with the rearticulation of community-engaged work as collaborative, recursive, and mutually beneficial whereby university undergraduate students work *with* communities toward specific goals that are articulated by community partners and the course syllabus learning outcomes alike.

One of the benefits of this rearticulation is that it steers students away from viewing the communities with which they work in terms of deficit, and it disabuses them of the mistaken notion that knowledge is produced exclusively in the academy and then applied to the supposedly passive receptacle of the community. Instead, students are meant to appreciate the intellectual synergy between learning in and from the community, and academic learning, which means recognizing that knowledge is also produced outside of the academy and in other discursive spaces. The knowledge that students gain in the community and from professionals working in the community is not supplemental or derivative, but sovereign and sanctioned by the community and the professionals who work in it. Even more, this knowledge can and often does ask rigorous and exacting questions of academic principles and priorities. Community-engaged work positions students as “thought partners” and co-actors with communities, rather than as saviors or mere empathizers.

## **MY COURSE AND CONTEXTS**

Most spring semesters, I teach an advanced community-engaged undergraduate literature course for English majors built around the theme of migration in all its forms. Early in the semester, students read texts about the idea, history, and practice of community engagement, like “Why Servanthood is Bad” (1989) by John McKnight, Keith Morton’s foundational “The Irony of Service” (1995), and Ernst Boyer’s “Higher Learning in the Nation’s Service” (1981). But the bulk of the readings are literary: novels, short stories, and memoirs that relate the experience and trauma of being an immigrant, exile, or refugee. Over the years, I have fostered relationships with several community partners in my metropolitan area. These organizations and agencies—The Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council and the Latino Family Center, to give two examples—are committed to resourcing and representing immigrants and refugees in our county and city, a task that has doubled in urgency since the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. There is a large cultural component in the work these organizations do, which is where my students come in. In a class of no more than fifteen students, three to five of them are assigned to each of the three organizations. Their work ranges from designing storytelling projects, accompanying non-English speaking clients to their various appointments around town, teaching their

own English-language learner tutorials in small groups, mentoring teens, and planning cultural events and activities, notably the city's annual Latino Festival and World Refugee Day, which happens in June, well after the semester is over.

Besides the analytical term papers student write on assigned literary texts, students also keep weekly journals of their work with their community partners. In these journals, they reflect on the ways literary readings and their community-engaged projects work together to deepen their knowledge of immigrant and refugee experiences—as opposed to the notion that literary texts merely “represent” social reality, or that student experiences in the community (dis)prove the literary narratives as if, as Laurie Grobman (2005) has put it, “there’s a one-to-one relation” between literature and life (135). The final formal paper in my course is an extended version of their journals, hybrid synthesis pieces that blend literary analysis with rubric-based and self-reflective first-person writing. A part of their task in these essays is to assess the impact that Mansfield’s “The Garden Party,” specifically had on the way they thought about themselves as actors in the communities with which they worked during the term. I will address some trends in their reflections later in this essay.

“The Garden Party” stages the potential gap between intentions and outcomes, and it describes what happens when one is unable to keep these things aligned. I assign this short story at the beginning of the semester to thematize community engagement through the literary imagination and to initiate those difficult conversations that—as Ann Green recommends in her essay “Difficult Stories”—a white professor teaching mostly white and middle/upper-class students must have (277). I also assign the text to engage the concerns and doubts some students might have about the importance and efficacy of community engagement. Some students harbor a degree of resentment toward having to do anything beyond what is required academically. This can be seen in many institutions of higher learning in the United States that require students to take one or more community-engaged classes, with many faith-based universities among them. This resentment tends to recede, however, the further up the curricular ladder community-engaged courses are offered. This is because the students who take these courses are older and more mature, and they elect to do so. Then there is the garden-variety

cynicism that extends to community engagement, but is not unique to it. It is generally un-pondered and habitual and can be rather easily vanquished. But this must happen gradually through a careful interplay of course materials and community engagement. My class is *not* a freshman composition course, which is the site of a lot of collegiate community engagement as well as the scholarly literature that has developed around the practice. It is an advanced literature course, which means that I am largely able to bypass having to “sell” students on the importance of literature and literary analysis. But this does not mean that the relationship between literary analysis and acting in this thing called the “real world” is self-evident to them.

Mansfield’s “The Garden Party” is a vital part of making the relationship between literature and the “real world” more lucid in my class. It is a rich resource for initiating the process of calling students’ attention to the various and overlapping communities to which they might belong, their assumptions about other communities, as well as their motives for reaching out to and working with those other communities. While class consciousness is one of its central tropes, Mansfield’s short story is also valuable for initiating discussion of other subjectivities (like race, nationality, etc.) because it is a story about encountering “difference.” The story occasions students to think about whether and how their memberships in these communities affect the way they perceive and experience the social world, and to proceed from what Gregory Jay (2008) calls “consciously articulated subject positions” (262). In what follows, I will show, in an integrative way, how a close reading of Mansfield’s short story generates a map for some of the definitional, practical, and experiential discussions that characterize community-engaged learning.

## CLOSE READING OF MANSFIELD’S “THE GARDEN PARTY”

Mansfield’s (1922) “The Garden Party” examines and critiques class consciousness mainly through irony, though there are other literary devices in the short story that close reading unlocks. “The Garden Party” centers on Laura, the young daughter of the affluent and overweening Sheridan family. At the beginning of the story, Laura finds herself drawn to the working-class laborers who are helping her family prepare a lavish evening garden party at their residence. At some point, news reaches the Sheridan family of the accidental

death of Mr. Scott, a workman who had fallen from his horse. The reactions of Laura's sister and mother are insensitive and reinforce Laura's sense that she does not belong in her own family. She is fundamentally unable to understand her family's indifference to the news about Mr. Scott. Before these events, Mansfield's narrator wastes little time conveying the Sheridan family's conceit, which she does in the opening line through a subtle syntactical move: "And after all the weather was ideal. They could not have had a more perfect day for a garden-party if they had ordered it" (184). Starting the story with "And after all..." captures the Sheridan family's conceit and self-involvement, which exceeds Mansfield's fictional world and affects the reader, who is not privy to what happened before she entered that world. The Sheridans even perceive the weather as something to be commanded or to be purchased, as the word "ordered" suggests. But starting the story with "And after all..." also has the meta-textual function of reminding the reader that her reading of the story—and perhaps her entry into the community—is not the beginning of other narratives, but only the beginning of her involvement with them.

In the first couple of pages of the story, the reader learns about Laura's dispositions and her temperament. She is happy, guileless, and kind. But she is also a beneficiary of a socio-economic order that she does not fully understand. This is not to say that she is entirely unaware of class divisions; the narrator relates that Laura disliked "absurd class distinctions" and "despised social conventions" (186). What Laura lacks, however, is the self-reflexivity to acknowledge and confront where she is positioned in relation to these divisions. This is why she is pleasantly surprised, for instance, when one of the workmen momentarily stops working to enjoy the scent of lavender. This surprise quickly turns into romanticization, idealization, and even a sense of identification with the workers:

"How extraordinarily nice workmen were, she thought. 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" (186).

In fact, Laura “felt just like a work-girl” (186). The irony here is thickened by the brooding song that Laura’s sister Jose sings, “This life is weary.”

This life is Wee-ary  
Hope comes to Die.  
A Dream—A Wa-kening (189).

The song is silly coming from someone who enjoys the privileges of the Sheridan family, someone who “loved giving orders to the servants,” and who thinks “they loved obeying her” (188).

It is important that I digress here to call attention to the fact that a certain demographic of students is being invoked by the assigning of this short story. Duquesne University is attended by predominantly (about three-quarters) white middle and upper-class students. Moreover, in the college of liberal arts, where I hold my professorship, female students outnumber males by a considerable margin. In community-engaged classes, female students outnumber males by an even larger margin. Of course, positing to students that they are variants of Laura, privileged and detached from social inequities, is patently the wrong approach for priming them for community-engaged work, not least of all because this story is likely to be met quite differently by students who do not come from economic privilege, regardless of their racial or cultural background. Mansfield’s short story provides students with a safe figurative space to assess whether Laura’s attitudes and/or circumstances resonate with them, whether they remind students of their own attitudes and perspectives, or those of their families, friends, etc. Mansfield’s short story allows students to be at what I call an “intimate distance” from their own social stations and communities. So, some students may feel implicated, but not incriminated. And if they do see congruencies between themselves and Laura, which is often, they have a blueprint for more conscientious ways of approaching community engagement. I do not see Mansfield’s short story as a profile of students’ minds, values, backgrounds, or intentions. Rather, it is a document against which they can crystallize their thoughts, identify impulses or assumptions they *may* have about a community that differs from the

ones to which they belong, and to understand the way a literary text itself interacts with the close and critical reader to inform action.

“The Garden-Party” pivots with Laura’s reaction to the news of Mr. Scott’s death. Horrified by the news, she instinctually asks her family to stop the party. Her sister, Jose, is confounded at the notion and responds by telling Laura to not be so “extravagant” (191), a curious word that is also used by Robert Lupton (2012) in *Toxic Charity* to described wasteful and impact-less practices that were well-meaning (17, 39). The word “extravagant” here acts as shorthand for a variety of questions that have historically been asked of community engagement, volunteerism, charity, etc. Are they forms of excess? Are they born of privilege? What are the motives behind them? In her dismissal of Laura’s horror and consequent suggestion, Jose casts her own inaction and indifference as social sobriety and humility. Again, the narrator intervenes with irony by saying that Laura is indeed being extravagant because the row of cottages where the dead workman lived is at the “bottom of a steep rise that leads to the [Sheridan’s] house,” suggesting that it is too far and cumbersome to go there (Mansfield 1922, 191). The social topography in this description is clear; the Sheridans not only live above the workman, but the rise is steep, meaning that the economic gap between the Sheridans and their neighbors is sharp and perhaps unbridgeable. The narrator continues:

They were far too near. They were the greatest possible eyesore, and they had no right to be in that neighbourhood at all. They were 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. (191)

The contempt in the narrator’s language—which at this point is the Sheridans’—includes a reference to the fact that their houses are painted the color of human waste.

The class rhetoric intensifies when Jose tells Laura, “You won’t bring a drunken workman back to life by being sentimental” (192), a statement that conflates being poor with being prone to vice and

intemperance. Mrs Sheridan is even more callous than Jose, as her sole concern is whether Mr. Scott died on the Sheridans' grounds. After being told that he had not, she breathes a sigh of relief: "Oh, what a fright you gave me!" (192). The reason for Mrs. Sheridan's impassivity is, as she tells Laura, because "people like that don't expect sacrifices from us" (193), something Mrs. Sheridan feels entitled to assume *a priori*. The narrative does temper its description of the Sheridan family, however, through Mr. Sheridan, who intones some fleeting compassion for Mr. Scott and his family. "The chap was married," he says. "Lived just below in the lane, and leaves a wife and half a dozen kiddies, so they say" (194). Mr. Sheridan does faintly view Mr. Scott as a neighbor, as the word "just" signifies proximity, though it is quite clear that all he knows about Mr. Scott is second-hand. In any case, his compassion ends there. Mr. Sheridan's is a brief and perfunctory pity that one might expect of a "well-bred" gentleman.

Finally, Mrs. Sheridan proposes that Laura take the surplus sandwiches and pastries for Mr. Scott's family as a gesture of sympathy and condolence. Laura objects to this and asks, "But mother, do you think it's a good idea?" (195). Mrs. Sheridan becomes frustrated by Laura's reluctance and perceives it as a contradiction. "What's the matter with you today? Just an hour or two ago you were insisting that we be sympathetic, and now—" (195). By not elaborating on Laura's meaning when she asks whether it is a good idea to deliver a basket of pastries to the bereaved Scott family, the narrative indicates that Laura herself may not know what, exactly, is wrong with the idea. Laura feels and intuits, but does not *know* the reason. This is a consequential moment in the narrative because it presents Laura as a character with the right instincts and right predispositions, and who—like many students—is standing on the cusp of doing something conscientious and transformative for others and for herself. Toward the end of the story, Laura reluctantly goes to Mr. Scott's home with the basket of food in one hand and, in the other, some arum lilies because, as Mrs. Sheridan tells her, "People of that class are so impressed by [them]" (195). Again, Mrs. Sheridan feels entitled to characterize the workmen, even though there is nothing in the narrative to indicate that she has had any intimate experience or interactions with them.

Once at Mr. Scott's house, Laura finds his grief-stricken wife surrounded by friends and neighbors. Convinced that "something" is indeed quite "wrong" in her presence there beyond any doubt, Laura begins to panic: "It was a mistake to have come; she knew all along it was a mistake" (195). Despite this, she decides to carry on with the plan to deliver the goods until she is finally overcome by the need to flee, to leave the basket that her mother had arranged, and extract herself from the situation as quickly as possible. Here, the narrative is communicating something about the gap between intention and action, and how quickly the best of intentions can potentially run aground when acted upon without critical self-awareness or proper conceptual scaffolding. It also is painting a picture of "charity" that goes awry, both for the giver and the recipient. This is an opportunity to segue from the reading itself and deepen student understanding of the hermeneutics of "charity," a term that has fallen on hard times and which commonly carries negative baggage. Charity is often described as "hit-and-run," episodic, condescending, and the activity of those who are driven more by the need to allay guilt. And while charity is not the activity in which my students are involved, they still often recognize their own inner emotional and psychological experiences in Laura's attempt at charity.

In his cornerstone essay "The Irony of Service," Keith Morton (1995) argues that charity is not an elementary form of community engagement, the first stage in a continuum of community engagement that culminates in social change, but a distinct paradigm of outreach that has its own interior logic and its own worldviews. This view of charity was made lucid for my students when I invited a guest speaker from Catholic Charities, which also has a refugee services division, in the spring of 2015 to speak about the organization's broader mission principles. Inviting coordinators from various community organizations—besides introducing students to the organization's work—also has the function of helping me frame the course and its learning outcomes. It also potentially impacts student reading of the course's literary texts. The representative unapologetically emphasized the word "charity" in her organization's name and the pressing need to give essentials to those who do not have them. The self-assuredness of her statement was a great instructional moment for my students because they saw someone actively casting charity in an affirmative light. They saw that it is a legitimate and much

needed form of social action, and that they should not be scornful about charity as they think about what makes their work different. At a Catholic university, like the one with which I am affiliated, charity, *caritas*, the love of others, is a core value. It is a simple but radical principle that does not confuse dearth for defect, and that calls for giving with no expectation of reciprocity or even recognition.

It is not necessarily charity itself that is a doctrinal problem in “The Garden Party,” but the brand of charity that the Sheridans offer, which is disinclined and self-important. The executor of that charity is a young woman who seems to have the right instincts, but who lacks the vocabulary, sometimes quite literally, with which to articulate the terms and contingencies of her social self. This, in turn, translates into misguided action. Just before she leaves Mr. Scott’s house at the end of the story, Laura comes across Mr. Scott’s body lying in repose, which causes her to let out a sob. She apologizes to Mr. Scott’s family, not for sobbing, but for the ornate hat she is wearing. Laura’s “big hat with a velvet streamer” (Mansfield 1922, 195) is a signifier that connects her with her class station in the eyes of the working people, despite her intentions. The inarticulacy that confronts Laura is considerable, which is why Simon During (2015) writes that the “signifying systems [of Mansfield’s characters]—whether gesture or style or, most importantly, speech—do not meaningfully connect their experiences to one other” (43). At the very end of the narrative, Laura is incapable of expressing her unsettled feelings and thoughts to her brother, Laurie. “Isn’t life,’ she stammered, ‘isn’t’ life—’ But what life was she couldn’t quite explain. No matter. [Her brother] quite understood” (Mansfield 1922, 197). The story ends with the same irony that drives it, as the reader faces the smugness of Laura’s brother, who takes it upon himself to speak for his sister and who presumes to know what is ailing Laura, even as the reader knows that he does not.

Mansfield’s enigmatic short story is a cautionary tale. It is not a blanket condemnation of charity, other forms of community outreach, or the need to forge relationships with communities other than one’s own. Nor is its intention to hold wealthy people up to reductive caricature. It is, rather, to shine light on the social and psychological complexities of recognizing inequities and injustices, but being unsure about how to convert that recognition into effective

action. Mansfield's story refuses prescription and withholds a final epiphany from its main character. In fact, it remains unclear whether Laura ever really does learn to un-think the thoughts that she initially had of the working classes, whether her experiences move her past seeing the working class as anything other than idyllic. Upon seeing Mr. Scott's dead body, Laura thinks:

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 closed eyelids. 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. (197)

If anything, the last sentences suggest that perhaps Laura has *not* grown and continues to idealize Mr. Scott; she wills a consciousness onto him that would ease her back into her social orbit and affirm her status quo.

The irony in Mansfield's story guards against being read as a simple moral treatise. It is a calculated risk that gambles on the reader's detection and assent. If the reader does indeed detect and assent, she is better poised to take on literature's quality of *onwardness*, meaning that she will continue reading it and deploy its lessons into a way of being in the world that Laura could not. Laura's intentions and values do not burgeon into meaningful and impacting action—what for students would be community engagement—because she lacks a community of engagement. Her social environment does not provide her with the sensibilities she would need to act conscientiously in the wider community.

"The Garden Party" is difficult to dislodge, not only because it is the first text that students read in my community-engaged class, but also because of its economy, its poignancy, and the productively unsettling effect it can have on its readers. Even in its hyperbolic moments, which are neither numerous nor erratic, it remains measured in its craft and its portraiture of class sentiment and behavior. For these

reasons, students return to it in their reflection journals, in their formal papers, and their subsequent textual analysis, including how they analyze their community-engaged experience, which is also a text. I cannot measure outcomes in a fully scientific sense because I do not have a controlled environment over a long period of time. However, student commentary in their journals and final papers indicates that the close and critical reading of Mansfield's short story and its intersection with community engagement does have an impact on students, in ways that I will summarize.

Many students recognized the potential for close reading, paired with community-engaged work, to bring about self-realization. The most common insight was learning what it was like to be "other" or on the "outside" when around refugees or communities that spoke the same language—Spanish, Arabic, Nepali, etc., and who knew one another well. After the initial frustration receded, students consistently noted a recurring sense of self-decentering. One student said that she identified intimately with Laura because like this fictional character, she discovered that she did not know everything about herself, and she surprised herself with what she took away from her experiences. More specifically, she shared how she probably gained more from her community experience than the Latina who she accompanied on her appointments and errands around town on a weekly basis:

Although I never felt arrogant, I went into [the community-engaged work] thinking I would be the one doing the helping. Now I know it is the other way around. I know I made a small impact on M----- by helping her through her future appointments at the doctor's office, conversations with her landlord, and even how to converse with other mothers at her child's school. However, these things I have done with her she will forget over time and soon move on with another tutor. For me though, I will never forget her story about how pained she was that she missed a door decorating contest at her son's school because she misunderstood the time the teacher announced.

Another student indicated that close reading Mansfield's story made him see the importance of not only "reading" other people closely—he referred to it as "close listening"—before forming ideas and

articulating observations about them, but also of reading his own intentions and assumptions closely. He related that we are all stories and we all must read one another carefully:

As the semester began, my conception of the lived readership started evolving. Soon the fallacious act of casting myself as the only reader became apparent. Before this semester, my identity seemed so fixed. Now my life appears as a text, a narrative read by others.

Other students took away more conceptual lessons from their close reading of Mansfield's short story. One student, who worked with adult English-language learners during the term, wondered what lessons about (mis)communication could be gained from Mansfield short story when working with peoples who do not speak English. This student expressed doubts about whether speaking a common language is even necessary for understanding the community thoughtfully and working with that community effectively, especially as a shared language does not forestall Laura's miscommunication with Mr. Scott's family or with her own family for that matter.

Another student insisted on calling herself a "translator" and explored the verb "translate" in her analysis of "The Garden Party." She was concerned with how she was "translated" by the Latino clients with whom she worked: "When I began working with the refugees and immigrants at the Latino Family Center, I was concerned how my actions would translate to them." She also characterized close reading as a means of translating a literary text into community consciousness and action, into a way of anticipating people and situations: "Literature allowed me to create their likeness in my head."

One student with Hmong heritage wrote of her confusion in how she positioned herself between Mansfield's text and her community experience with refugees: "I was Laura in Mansfield story. But what made it hard was, there were many times in my life when I was the poor dead man's family, being awkwardly helped by some privileged white person."

Finally, a couple of students took away lessons about the institutional and structural dimensions of community engagement. One student

articulated that she had a productive experience with Latino immigrant children because she had structures in place such as the classroom, the university, and the community organization with which she worked. In other words, she had a community *of engagement*. This stopped her from judging Laura harshly, who was thrust into Mr. Scott's community with no conceptual or practical resources or preparation.

The confluence of close reading, community engagement, and the conceptual framing of Mansfield's short story fostered the conditions for students to be more willing to articulate and own their fears about working with immigrant and refugee communities, and to be able to justify moving past those fears. This means that students realized that it was not necessary for them to deny their backgrounds or "shed" their privilege in order to act responsibly and conscientiously in their communities. Mansfield's "The Garden Party" also "foretells" in the Burkean sense insofar as it animates a set of conditions and inner experiences that students often recognize in their own community work and which they are, as a result, often able to skillfully navigate.

I would like to return, by way of closure, to the question of the "crisis" of the humanities. It is worth remembering that a longitudinal view of the matter will show that there has always been an inherent relationship between community engagement broadly understood and literary studies. Ernst Boyer (1981), a pioneer in the scholarship of teaching and learning, relates that from the earliest days of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Harvard's charges were unambiguous: "train a literate ministry, educate future lawyers and civic leaders, and, more generally, perpetuate the tradition of humane learning in the New World" (9). Other colleges like Princeton, Yale, and William & Mary followed suit. In *The Evolution of College English*, Thomas P. Miller (2010) also discusses higher education in the early American colonial period at length, placing emphasis on the association between humanistic learning and public and civic service. Oratory, rhetoric, and "disputation" were at the heart of curricula in North American colleges and universities, Miller points out, and were crucial to producing clergymen during the Great Awakening—the Christian revival in Britain and its North American colonies in the middle of the eighteenth century. Subsequently, Miller explains, the English discipline was central to cultivating statesmen and fostering

popular republican consciousness through literacy in the newly independent and forming United States in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Viewed in this light, the English discipline and its various organs (literary studies, rhetoric, composition, *belles-lettres*) were understood to have a natural public and civic function during the country's infancy.

In contemporary times, these linkages might be latencies, but they exist nonetheless. At the level of skills alone, the study of English equips students, by way of close and analytical reading, with the ability to recognize the rhetorical strategies and conventions that comprise what David Foster Wallace, in his 2005 commencement address to Kenyon College, called "belief templates," the default views and values that shape the ways individuals see others, the world, and their own place in it.

The paradigm of community-engaged teaching and learning in higher education is perhaps the most powerful learning experience students can have when it is done effectively, which is not something the instructor always controls. In fact, the verb *do* is a bit imprecise in my own experience, wherein the verb *happen* rings truer. This may sound rather mystical and even a little passive, but it is the most candid way I can characterize my most successful experiences with community-engaged teaching and learning. Of course, I play an active role by building my course with specific aims and shaping student consciousness through course content and the community partners with whom I choose to collaborate. However, often the timing of a class, its collective personality, the nature of the relationships between the instructor, the university, and community partners, as well as the larger social and political climate, can all intersect in ways that fall flat, or in ways that can generate a positive and empowering switch for students that is abiding in its effects. I use the word "switch" because as optimistic as I am about the rewards of community-engaged teaching and learning, "transformation" is a little too grand, premature, and, rather immeasurable. As I indicated earlier, I do not have a controlled environment over an extended period. The switches that I have observed in my students include the nascent ability to "know with the heart," as the Sufis would say, something that can have long-term transformative social and political consequences.

## Notes

1. I would like to thank the following for their role in shaping this essay—all the students in ENGL 451 at Duquesne University in the spring semesters of 2015 and 2016; Duquesne’s Center for Community-Engaged Teaching and Research for the Gaultier Fellowship, which gave me the chance to articulate this project; Casa San José, Latino Family Center, and the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council; last but certainly not least, I would like to thank Dr. Erin Rentschler (Duquesne’s Center for Teaching Excellence) and Dr. James Purdy (Duquesne’s English department and Writing Center) for their superb reading and input.
2. Alvin Kernan’s edited collection *What’s Happened to the Humanities?* (1993) illustrates that the “crisis” is now at least two and a half decades old, if not older. Michael Bérubé traces this phenomenon about the humanities back to the 1960s and 1970s. See *The Employment of English: Theory, Jobs, and the Future of Literary Studies* (1998) and *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics* (1994).
3. See James Côté and Anton Allahar’s *Lowering Higher Education: The Rise of Corporate Universities and the Fall of Liberal Education*.
4. Close reading does not “belong” exclusively to literary studies. It has analogues in the practice of “thick description” in cultural anthropology (Geertz 1973), as well as in sociological observation.
5. Nicholas Gaskill (2016) makes a clear distinction between “aesthetic form” and “logical form” in his essay, “The Close and the Concrete: Aesthetic Formalism in Context.” The latter is arrived at through “generalization,” but can still tell us something about the particular.
6. See, for example, Elizabeth Parfitt’s (2015) essay, “Teaching Literature to Raise a Voice in a First-Year Writing Course” engages in some close reading of Robert Frost’s poem “Mending Walls.”

7. Justin Stover offers a loose and vague scepticism toward the “ethical” aspects of a liberal arts education in his March 4 2018 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, “There Is No Case for the Humanities.”
8. In his interview with Bill Moyers in 1988.
9. I used the term “minoritized” instead of “minority” to shift attention away from numbers and statistics, and toward *conditions* and practices that are inflicted on certain groups.
10. John Duffy’s 2012 piece “Virtuous Arguments” emphasizes first-year college writing courses as a deterrent to toxic political rhetoric and the means to developing civil and civic discourse.
11. My institution recently shifted from “service learning” to “community-engaged” teaching, learning, and research, per the recommendations of an external review of our program. This change happened for philosophical reasons, but also for a practical reason. The term “service” at my institution refers specifically to serving on committees, chairing programs and departments, and other administrative work.
12. Duquesne University has recently de-compulsorized community-engaged courses. One curricular result of this is that they are no longer tethered to freshmen composition courses and are being encouraged and offered at higher levels of undergraduate study.
13. It is also worth mentioning that women faculty members are disproportionately more involved in community-engaged teaching, learning, and research at my institution, a trend that is national, according to statistics.
14. See Robert Lupton’s (2012) *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Can Help Those They (And How to Reverse it)*.

15. Grobman and Rosenberg's introduction to *Service Learning and Literary Studies in English* also provides a concise history of the relationship between literary studies and political action and involvement.
16. See also Nussbaum's (2010) *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*.

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