International Journal of Language and Literary Studies
Volume 7, Issue 6, 2025
Homepage : http://ijlls.org/index.php/ijlls

Conscience and Conformity: Societal Roles and Individual Actions in Katherine Mansfield's "*The Garden Party*" and George Orwell's "*Shooting an Elephant*"

Rabby Imam
Assistant Professor, Department of English, City University, Bangladesh
rabby.eng@cityuniversity.ac.bd

DOI: http://doi.org/ 10.36892/ijlls.v7i6.2396
APA Citation: Imam, R.(2025). Conscience and Conformity: Societal Roles and Individual Actions in Katherine Mansfield's "*The Garden Party*" and George Orwell's "*Shooting an Elephant*". *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies. 7*(6).191-199. http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v7i6.2396

Received:
20/09/2025

Accepted:
27/10/2025

Keywords:
Conscience, Conformity, Societal Roles, Class Privilege, Moral Conflict

Abstract

Through a comparative analysis of Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" (1922) and George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" (1936), this paper argues that both authors uncover how social conformity—rooted in class and empire—systematically suppresses moral autonomy and distorts human conscience. While Mansfield situates her critique within postwar English social hierarchies and Orwell within the structures of British colonial power, both reveal how societal expectations dictate behavior and distort moral agency. Through qualitative, interpretive, and comparative analysis grounded in modernist ethics and postcolonial criticism, the study argues that both authors expose the performative mechanisms by which social order sustains itself—through the silencing of conscience and the valorization of conformity. By juxtaposing Mansfield's domestic modernism with Orwell's colonial narrative, this research contributes to the broader literary discourse on morality and power by identifying a shared ethical trajectory between two seemingly disparate traditions. It reveals that class and empire operate as parallel systems of coercion that compel individuals toward moral compromise. The paper thus advances the understanding of early twentieth-century literature as a site where aesthetic form becomes an instrument of ethical inquiry, bridging modernist and postcolonial studies through the theme of conscience under constraint.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature has long served as a mirror to humanity's inner moral struggles, often exploring the tension between individual conscience and the social roles prescribed by political, cultural, and institutional structures. Writers across time have examined how the dictates of class, empire, and social convention compel individuals to suppress personal morality in favor of external approval. This conflict between authenticity and conformity lies at the heart of both Katherine Mansfield's *"The Garden Party"* (1922) and George Orwell's *"Shooting an Elephant"* (1936). Despite emerging from distinct literary traditions—modernist domestic fiction and anti-imperialist reportage—both works confront the universal dilemma of moral paralysis in the face of societal expectation.

In *"The Garden Party,"* Mansfield portrays Laura Sheridan, a young woman from a wealthy upper-class family in postwar England, whose momentary moral awakening exposes the fragility of empathy within rigid class hierarchies. The Sheridans' decision to host a sumptuous garden party despite the sudden death of a working-class neighbor becomes a moral test for Laura, whose instinctive compassion clashes with her family's complacent indifference. Her attempt to challenge the family's decision—"We can't possibly have a garden-party with a man dead just outside the front gate!"—is gently dismissed as childish idealism. Mansfield uses Laura's moral discomfort to expose how social privilege transforms sensitivity into naivety

and how upper-class decorum often disguises moral detachment. By the story's end, Laura's gesture of sympathy—a visit to the dead man's home—offers not resolution but revelation, a fleeting glimpse of conscience overshadowed by her inability to act beyond the confines of her class.

Orwell's *"Shooting an Elephant"* presents a parallel moral crisis within the vastly different context of British colonial Burma. The narrator, a colonial officer and representative of imperial authority, faces an ethical dilemma when pressured by a crowd of Burmese villagers to shoot an elephant that has gone must but has since calmed. Although he recognizes that killing the animal is unnecessary and morally wrong, he feels compelled to do so to preserve the appearance of control expected of him as a symbol of empire. "I had got to shoot the elephant," he admits, "the people expected it of me." This reluctant act of violence becomes a profound metaphor for the corruption of conscience under imperial power. Orwell's essay thus reveals the paradox of colonial domination: even the colonizer becomes enslaved by the expectations of the system he enforces, losing autonomy in the very exercise of authority.

Despite their divergent settings—a genteel English household and a colonized Asian township—both texts expose the performative and coercive nature of social roles. Mansfield and Orwell reveal that conformity is not merely a social act but a psychological necessity shaped by fear—fear of ridicule, exclusion, or failure to meet the standards of one's community. Laura's quiet submission to her family's authority parallels Orwell's compliance with the collective will of the crowd. Each protagonist's moral surrender underscores the extent to which social order depends upon the suppression of individual integrity. While Mansfield illustrates how class privilege restricts genuine compassion and renders ethical feeling ineffectual, Orwell demonstrates how the colonial system entraps even its agents, compelling them toward actions that betray their humanity.

The central argument of this paper is that Mansfield and Orwell, through *"The Garden Party"* and *"Shooting an Elephant"* respectively, reveal how social structures—whether grounded in class hierarchy or imperial dominance—coerce individuals into prioritizing external expectations over personal morality. Both authors critique the illusion of moral autonomy in societies governed by appearance, decorum, and authority. By examining the historical settings, class relations, and moral tensions in these two works, this study situates Mansfield's modernist domestic realism alongside Orwell's colonial narrative to demonstrate how early twentieth-century literature interrogates the fragility of conscience under social pressure. In doing so, the paper underscores that both modernism and colonial discourse converge in their critique of conformity and their portrayal of the human struggle to remain morally authentic within oppressive systems.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a **qualitative, interpretative, and comparative literary analysis** methodology to examine how Katherine Mansfield's *"The Garden Party"* (1922) and George Orwell's *"Shooting an Elephant"* (1936) portray the conflict between individual conscience and societal conformity. The study is rooted in **close textual analysis**, supported by **theoretical frameworks from modernist ethics, postcolonial criticism, and sociological discourse theory.** The objective is to understand how both authors reveal the pressures exerted by class and imperial structures upon individual moral agency.

In sum, the methodology explores how Mansfield and Orwell portray the suppression of conscience within societal structures. Through modernist, postcolonial, and sociological

frameworks, the research identifies the shared moral trajectory of both protagonists—where personal authenticity is subordinated to the performance of social roles. This qualitative approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how literature reflects, critiques, and internalizes the moral costs of conformity.

3. HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

3.1.Katherine Mansfield and the Social World of "*The Garden Party*"

"The Garden Party" was written by Katherine Mansfield in the years following World War I, when class divisions were still quite evident in English society but were also starting to be challenged. Mansfield herself had a dual perspective because of her colonial upbringing in New Zealand. She was both an insider to the affluent European world and a critical outsider who saw its shortcomings.

The strict class divisions of early 20th-century Britain, where the wealthy retained both financial luxury and cultural isolation from the working poor, are reflected by Mansfield in "The Garden Party" (1922). The death of a local working-class worker becomes an uncomfortable interruption to the Sheridans' lavish garden party, which represents upper-class relaxation.

According to scholars like Vincent O'Sullivan, Mansfield frequently emphasizes "the small fractures in the surface of social life where empathy or alienation flicker for a moment" (O'Sullivan, 1999, p. 74). Laura's momentary moral uneasiness illustrates these rifts, demonstrating how even the youngest members of the privileged class are raised to maintain appearances rather than challenge the status quo.

Mansfield also incorporates literary modernism's concerns, especially its emphasis on fractured consciousness, transient perceptions, and nuanced criticisms of social norms. Even if it is only temporary, Laura's internal turmoil—the conflict between her own viewpoint and the social narrative that her family has imposed—reflects a modernist sensibility.

3.2.George Orwell and Colonial Burma in "Shooting an Elephant"

George Orwell's "*Shooting an Elephant*" (1936) emerges from the context of British colonialism in Burma, where Orwell served as a police officer in the Imperial Police from 1922 to 1927. This autobiographical essay reveals the psychological complexities of empire, not only for the colonized but also for the colonizers themselves. Orwell describes the colonial officer as caught in a paradox: outwardly projecting dominance, but inwardly constrained by the need to maintain appearances before the colonized population.

The historical backdrop of *Shooting an Elephant* is the late phase of the British Raj, when colonial authority was increasingly challenged by rising nationalist sentiments in Asia. As Edward Said notes in *Culture and Imperialism*, imperial authority relied heavily on performance and spectacle: "Empire functioned not merely through economic exploitation, but through cultural displays of dominance" (Said, 1993, p. 198). Orwell's narrator exemplifies this logic; his decision to kill the elephant stems not from necessity but from the burden of performing strength in front of the crowd.

Orwell's essay also resonates with broader critiques of empire as morally corrupting. As critic Jeffrey Meyers observes, the story shows that "the imperialist is as much a prisoner of empire

as those he dominates" (Meyers, 1975, p. 121). The Burmese expect Orwell to act as the figure of colonial power, and he, fearing humiliation, surrenders to their expectations despite his moral judgment.

3.3.Shared Contextual Concerns

Although Mansfield and Orwell wrote in different contexts—post WWI English society and colonial Burma, their works share a preoccupation with how social structures dictate individual action. Mansfield situates Laura in a class-bound society where her identity is shaped by the Sheridan family's expectations. Orwell situates himself in a colonial system where his identity as a British officer is tied to the spectacle of power. In both contexts, the individual's authenticity is compromised by the roles imposed by social institutions— whether family, class, or empire.

4. CLASS, POWER, AND SOCIAL CONFORMITY

4.1. Class Privilege and Conformity in "*The Garden Party*"

In Mansfield's "The Garden Party", Laura Sheridan finds herself in a wealthy society that not only expects but also accepts adherence to social norms. Laura briefly tries to combat the moral blindness caused by the Sheridans' affluence, which shields them from the hardships of the working class. Laura automatically believes that the party should be called off in observance of the passing of her working-class neighbor, Mr. Scott: *"People like that don't expect sacrifices from us. And it's not very sympathetic to spoil everybody's enjoyment as you're doing now"* (Mansfield, 1922, p. 87). Her mother's contemptuous attitude frames Laura's compassion as improper, emphasizing that societal order must take precedence over pity.

Laura's impulse to call off the party, according to critics, is a moment of "ethical rupture" (Fullbrook, 2010, p. 45), but the pressure of class conformity swiftly neutralizes it. Her new hat, which represents her status as a member of the upper class, serves as a diversion as well as a sign of her renewed commitment to her work. Mansfield exposes how class structures control people in this way, making sure that moral desires don't undermine the appearance of privilege. This tension between personal ethics and societal expectations illustrates the pervasive influence of class on individual behavior. Ultimately, Mansfield critiques the ways in which these structures not only shape identities but also dictate the choices that individuals make, often at the cost of their true selves.

4.2. Colonial Authority and Conformity in "*Shooting an Elephant*"

Conformity in Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" results from the demands of power rather than from privilege. As a colonial officer, the narrator is constrained by the authority he must project in front of the Burmese populace. Despite his own opinion that the elephant shouldn't be killed, he is forced to shoot it because of his public position: *"I had got to shoot the elephant. The people expected it of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly"* (Orwell, 1936, p. 4).

In this case, compliance is about upholding imperial authority rather than maintaining family honor or class appearance, as in Mansfield. Orwell's choice illustrates how colonialism turns people into symbolic leaders whose morality has little bearing on upholding the status quo. Colonial authority relies on "mimicry and spectacle, a constant performance of dominance," as critic Homi Bhabha argues (Bhabha, 1994, p. 90). This is embodied by Orwell's narrator, who,

despite feeling weak and morally conflicted on the inside, plays the part of the strong colonizer. This internal struggle highlights the complexities of identity and power dynamics within a colonial framework. The narrator's facade becomes a tragic commentary on the dehumanizing effects of imperialism, wherein the role of the oppressor is often more about survival and conformity than genuine authority or respect.

4.3.Parallels in Conformity

Both stories illustrate the devastating effect of societal positions on personal agency, despite the different settings— Mansfield's bourgeois England and Orwell's colonial Burma. Class politeness smoothes over Laura's brief disobedience against her family, while the crowd's expectations overcome Orwell's hesitation to kill the elephant. In both situations, conformity results from a fear of social rejection rather than from a sincere belief in the behavior.

Orwell illustrates how authority itself turns into a prison that forces people to sacrifice their consciences, while Mansfield shows how privilege and riches are upheld through subtly potent demands to fit in. According to both pieces, power, whether it comes from an empire or a class, enslaves both those who have it and those who are held in it.

5. PERFORMANCE AND THE SELF

5.1. Appearance and Performance in "*The Garden Party*"

Katherine Mansfield highlights the performative nature of class identity through the Sheridan family's obsession with appearances. The garden party is itself a performance— a spectacle of refinement, beauty, and privilege. Laura briefly resists this performance when she feels compassion for the Scotts, but her family redirects her into her "proper role." The moment her mother presents her with a fashionable hat, Laura's moral hesitation is absorbed into a performance of class femininity: *"Never mind. You're looking quite nice. Go and find Jose"* (Mansfield, 1922, p. 88). The hat, a superficial object, becomes a symbol of conformity, reminding Laura that her true function is not to challenge social divisions but to embody the grace and charm expected of a Sheridan daughter.

Critics such as Angela Smith argue that Mansfield's story shows how "women in the upper-class family are trained to act as ornaments of privilege rather than agents of moral choice" (Smith, 2000, p. 132). Laura's crisis of conscience is framed as a childish mistake precisely because it threatens to disturb the family's carefully staged social image. Thus, Laura's "self" is mediated by her role in maintaining appearances— the performance of class decorum outweighs the authenticity of empathy.

5.2.The Spectacle of Authority in "*Shooting an Elephant*"

Orwell makes explicit the performance required by colonial authority. His role as a British officer is not defined by his private moral reasoning but by how he appears to the Burmese spectators. The narrator confesses: *"I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool"* (Orwell, 1936, p. 6). The fear of humiliation, rather than any genuine necessity, drives his decision.

The killing of the elephant is therefore staged as a spectacle of dominance, illustrating Edward Said's point that colonial power "relied as much on the theater of authority as on actual coercion" (Said, 1994, p. 205). Orwell's narrator, trapped by this theater, becomes both actor and victim. He knows that sparing the elephant would undermine the image of empire, so he

performs brutality even against his will. Here, the self is entirely subordinated to the colonial role— performance eclipses authenticity.

5.3.Comparative Perspective

Societal expectations reduce the self to a role, a performance designed to preserve larger social structures in both the stories. For Laura, this performance involves maintaining the appearance of upper-class femininity, expressed through charm, fashion, and obedience. For Orwell, the performance involves embodying colonial authority, expressed through violence and decisiveness.

In neither of the texts individuals are free to act on their moral instincts because they are watched, judged, and defined by others. Laura is watched by her family and society; Orwell is watched by two thousand Burmese. Both characters internalize the gaze of others and surrender to the need to perform their expected roles. Authenticity becomes impossible under the weight of performance.

6. INDIVIDUAL CONSCIENCE VS. SOCIAL OBLIGATION

6.1.Laura's Muted Conscience in "*The Garden Party*"

Laura Sheridan's initial response to the news of Mr. Scott's death is guided by conscience rather than duty. She instinctively feels it would be wrong to continue the party, remarking, *"We can't possibly have a garden party with a man dead just outside the front gate"* (Mansfield, 1922, p. 87). Her conscience pushes her toward empathy and respect for the working-class family. However, her social obligation as a Sheridan - to uphold appearances, to fulfill her role as hostess, and to avoid "spoiling" the event - overrides her instinct.

The symbolic gesture of putting on the hat illustrates how her conscience is muted by obligation. Critics such as Claire Hanson argue that Laura's moral awakening "is deliberately contained, reshaped by her family into a fleeting sentiment rather than a revolutionary act" (Hanson, 2013, p. 66). Mansfield shows how privilege suppresses conscience: Laura may feel sympathy, but the entrenched expectations of class ensure she remains compliant.

6.2.Orwell's Betrayal of Conscience in "*Shooting an Elephant*"

George Orwell's narrator faces a sharper and more consequential conflict between conscience and obligation. He recognizes that the elephant is no longer dangerous and should be spared: *"I knew with perfect certainty that I ought not to shoot him"* (Orwell, 1936, p. 3). His conscience dictates inaction. Yet his obligation as a colonial officer — a role performed under the scrutiny of thousands — forces him into betrayal of his better judgment. To maintain the façade of imperial authority, he sacrifices conscience for duty.

This act illustrates what Jeffrey Meyers calls "the moral inversion of empire" — a system in which "the conqueror is enslaved by the expectations of conquest" (Meyers, 2000, p. 123). Orwell shows how the colonial role is not only oppressive to the colonized but also corrosive to the colonizer's integrity, compelling him to commit acts he privately condemns.

6.3 Comparative Analysis

The central difference between Laura and Orwell lies in the scope of their compromise. Laura silences her conscience through passive conformity, while Orwell actively violates his conscience through violence. Yet in both cases, the outcome is the same: societal obligation triumphs over personal morality.

For Laura, social obligation is familial and cultural — the duty to sustain the illusion of upper-class superiority. For Orwell, obligation is political and imperial — the duty to sustain the illusion of colonial dominance. Both characters demonstrate how conscience can be subordinated when individuals are trapped in roles where deviation threatens social stability or personal reputation.

Thus, Mansfield and Orwell converge in their suggestion that social structures do not merely guide human behavior but actively deform it, forcing individuals into moral compromises. Whether through silent conformity or public violence, the individual self is sacrificed at the altar of societal expectation.

7. COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS

When read together, Katherine Mansfield's "*The Garden Party"* and George Orwell's "*Shooting an Elephant"* present two powerful explorations of how social structures force individuals to compromise conscience for the sake of conformity. Despite their differences in setting, style, and scope — one a modernist short story set in upper-class England, the other a colonial essay set in Burma — both texts reveal striking parallels in the way society disciplines the individual.

7.1.Contextual Parallels and Divergences

Mansfield's Laura operates in the insulated world of privilege, where wealth and leisure function as silent enforcers of conformity. Her "duty" is to appear graceful, charming, and untroubled by the suffering of others. Orwell's narrator, by contrast, functions in a context of political domination, where his "duty" is to embody the strength and decisiveness of empire. Both settings involve hierarchies — class in Mansfield, empire in Orwell — that demand performance over authenticity.

Yet there is also a key divergence. Mansfield critiques the *passivity* of privilege: Laura's moral hesitation is erased not through active brutality but through social trivialization and distraction. Orwell critiques the *violence* of authority: the narrator's moral hesitation collapses under the active demand for spectacle and force. Both demonstrate social coercion, but Mansfield emphasizes its subtlety while Orwell emphasizes its brutality.

7.2.The Role of Performance

Social roles are fundamentally performative as highlighted in both of the stories. Laura is dressed, adorned, and placed into her role like an actress on stage, with the party itself as the performance. Orwell, too, describes his actions in theatrical terms, noting that he killed the elephant "to avoid looking a fool" before his audience. In each case, authenticity is subordinated to performance: Laura must perform as the dutiful daughter of wealth, and Orwell

must perform as the decisive officer of empire. The gaze of others — the Sheridan family in one case, the Burmese crowd in the other — becomes the ultimate arbiter of action.

7.3.Conscience Silenced

The protagonists recognize, privately, what conscience demands. Laura feels that respect for the Scotts outweighs the family's party; Orwell knows the elephant should be spared. But both characters betray their conscience in different ways: Laura through silence, Orwell through violence. This contrast highlights two modes of societal coercion: the soft silencing of dissent through trivialization (Mansfield), and the hard coercion of violent expectation (Orwell). Both are effective, and both reveal the individual's vulnerability when roles are rigidly defined.

7.4.Shared Critique of Power Structures

Finally, both texts critique the systems that make such compromises necessary. Mansfield critiques class privilege, showing how wealth not only divides society but also suppresses genuine moral awareness within the privileged themselves. Orwell critiques empire, showing how colonialism corrupts even the colonizer, entrapping him in the need to perform domination. Taken together, the two works form a transhistorical commentary on the ways in which power — whether social, economic, or political — shapes and distorts individual action.

By juxtaposing Laura Sheridan's muted empathy with Orwell's coerced brutality, readers can see how both authors illuminate the costs of societal conformity. Mansfield exposes the quiet moral blindness of privilege, while Orwell dramatizes the violent moral compromises of empire. Both affirm the same truth: that social roles, far from being neutral, exert a coercive power that bends individuals away from conscience and toward complicity.

8. CONCLUSION

Katherine Mansfield's "*The Garden Party"* and George Orwell's "*Shooting an Elephant"* demonstrate how societal roles and expectations exert powerful influence over individual actions, often at the expense of conscience and authenticity. Mansfield portrays a society of privilege, where Laura Sheridan's moral instincts are muted by family expectations and class decorum. Orwell depicts a colonial context, where the narrator's moral judgment is overridden by the demands of imperial authority and public performance. Despite their differing contexts, both works reveal a shared insight: social structures — whether grounded in class, family, or empire — compel individuals to conform, often requiring them to sacrifice personal morality or authenticity.

Through the lens of performance, both texts show that human behavior is frequently dictated not by internal conviction but by the gaze of others. Laura's hesitation and Orwell's reluctant violence illustrate that the individual self is subordinated to societal expectations, whether through subtle socialization or coercive power. Furthermore, both authors critique the larger systems that sustain these pressures: Mansfield critiques the moral insularity of the upper class, and Orwell critiques the corrupting effects of imperial authority.

Ultimately, these works illuminate the universal tension between conscience and duty, highlighting how social pressures shape behavior across time, culture, and context. Mansfield and Orwell suggest that while society may demand conformity, literature has the capacity to expose the compromises, conflicts, and ethical dilemmas that arise from these demands. In doing so, both texts encourage readers to reflect on the ways in which societal roles influence

their own actions and to consider the cost of prioritizing appearance, authority, or tradition over conscience.

REFERENCES

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). The location of culture. Routledge.

Fullbrook, K. (2010). Katherine Mansfield and modernist ethics. Cambridge University Press.

Hanson, C. (2013). Moral awareness and social class in Mansfield's short stories. *Journal of Modern Literature, 36*(2), 60–78.

Mansfield, K. (1922). The garden party and other stories. Alfred A. Knopf.

Meyers, J. (2000). Orwell: Wintry conscience of a generation. W. W. Norton.

Orwell, G. (1936). Shooting an elephant. New Writing, (2), 1–7.

Said, E. W. (1993). Culture and imperialism. Vintage Books.

Smith, A. (2008). Modernism and moral consciousness in Katherine Mansfield. Palgrave Macmillan.