Linguistic Structure and Rhetorical Resolution in Katherine Mansfield "The Garden Party"

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What happens when a young woman attempts to cross the boundaries that divide the upper-class world that she inhabits from the lower classes surround her? Katherine Mansfield’s most famous work, “The Garden Party,” explores that question from a decidedly Modernist perspective. First published in February 1922, the short story follows the wealthy Sheridan family as they prepare for an afternoon fête. The narrative focuses on Laura, the "artistic" daughter who argues that the party should be cancelled out of respect for Scott, a poor neighbor who has just been killed while working as a carter. After her lobbying fails to move Mrs. Sheridan, the party takes place as planned, and Laura becomes the centerpiece of the event, thanks to a striking hat that her mother has given her. The party over, Laura visits Scott’s family with a basket of leftover food. Unfortunately, she still wears her prized bonnet, which is now garishly inappropriate. Feeling out of place and ashamed, she pleads before his casket “Forgive my hat” and then heads back to her upper-class world. When her brother Laurie meets her outside the family estate and inquires about her journey, she mouths the words “isn’t life – ” but then speaks no further (296 – 297).

For over fifty years, that lapse into silence has been the focus of much critical debate, for it denies the reader access to what presumably would be a final, authoritative pronouncement regarding the outcome of the day’s events. All agree that “The Garden Party” raises questions of class identity and social hierarchy. Laura’s visit to Scott’s home and her interaction with the workers who set up the party lead to comments about “those absurd class distinctions” and arguments with her own family about social roles and proper behaviors (284). The text’s attitude toward those issues, however, appears to be – at least at first glance – unclear. Does the story offer a sincere and scathing attack on the inequities of the class structures that separate the Sheridans from the members of the
lower classes who support them, or is it lightly mocking the reformist pretensions of a privileged girl who is utterly immersed in the very social system she questions?

3 Warren S. Walker opened discussion on the topic with his 1957 essay “The Unresolved Conflict in ‘The Garden Party’.” His study concludes that the text fails to develop a coherent rhetorical perspective on the “clash of basic social attitudes” between Laura and Mrs. Sheridan and “no hint of any answer... is to be found in the conclusion (355, 357). That assessment has cut a wide and deep critical wake. Numerous scholars have examined the story’s symbolism, psychological underpinnings, temporality and spatiality in an effort to discern the thematic resolution that Walker suggests is missing. Some, such as Nicholas Nownes, have joined Walker in asserting that the text's stance on class-based issues resists interpretation: “‘The Garden Party’... defies the traditions of an ordered, unified text. As the story unfolds, themes are introduced, developed to one degree or another, then abandoned essentially unresolved... [the reader is] unable to pin down conclusively narrative meaning” (50 – 51).

4 Unfortunately, these analyses have overlooked the aspect of “The Garden Party” that holds the key to its thematic unity – its linguistic structures. The two events that dominate its climax – Laura’s plea for forgiveness and her reversion to silence – are speech acts. Not surprisingly, the “hint” that Walker seeks rests in the conversational patterns of the story’s narrator and its characters. Along with its spatial boundaries, language serves as a marker of class affiliation in the text and acts as a barrier that must be crossed when interaction between social strata occurs. Both the narrator and the upper class characters employ speech patterns that rest upon denial and negativity. Through the repeated use of tag-questions, they establish a hierarchy of expectation that limits choice and prevents challenge. Affirmation and assertion are scarce; denial and repression are the rule. Conversely, members of the lower classes espouse affirmation and take action. Because they do not recognize the social expectations that the upper-class linguistic strategy rests upon, they do not play by the “rules” that the Sheridans unconsciously embrace. As such, they challenge the wealthy environment which borders them and in which they work.

5 Laura’s final two speech acts must be read against this broader, structural backdrop and not just as individualized events because as Janet Holmes notes, “accurate interpretation of the meaning of linguistic forms will always require consideration of contextual factors” (49 – 50). Doing so establishes the “The Garden Party” as a narrative of displacement: the development and progression of Laura’s speech patterns mirrors her spatial movement in the last portion of the text. Having stepped out of the upper-class world of the Sheridan’s estate and into the lower-class world of Scott’s community, she makes a simple and direct request that is in accord with the language of her surroundings. Afterward, she meets Laurie in a liminal space: the road that divides the two communities. Caught between worlds, Laura is also caught between language, and she does not know how to speak. The experiences of the day, however, have made it clear how not to speak, and her halt in mid-sentence is an act of self-censorship. She stops herself to avoid reverting to the upper-class linguistic paradigm that her family embraces.

6 The upper-class characters in “The Garden Party” use language as a primary means for establishing control over their environment. They employ linguistic structures that should guarantee the outcome they desire. This strategy is evident from the very outset of the text as the preparations for the party take shape. The fête is a communal event,
and in theory, the family is working together to make sure that it runs smoothly. Nonetheless, the decisions that are reached on planning issues represent symbolic exertions of power, for each time a family member transforms a personal suggestion into action, his or her own control over the party is affirmed. The Sheridans, however, rarely propose anything directly. Instead, they shape their commentary and suggestions as questions: "Oh, I do love parties, don't you?" (285); "Isn't it a perfect morning?" (285); "Bank them up, just inside the door, on both sides of the porch... Don't you agree?" (286); "Now, if we put this chesterfield against the wall and move everything out of the room except the chairs, don't you think?" (286); "Aren't I in good voice mummy?" (287); "It looks like mice. It can't be mice, can it?" (288); "Don't they carry one back to all one's parties?" (288); "If some one had died there normally... we should still be having our party shouldn't we?" (291); "...can't the band have something to drink?" (293). None of these questions are open-ended or unqualified. Instead, the majority of these solicitations constitute tag questions, and they represent a defining feature of upper-class speech in this text.

The Sheridans’ use of tag questions creates a façade of open dialogue by giving the appearance of soliciting opinion and presenting choice. In reality, however, these structures obtain assent by reducing the likelihood for challenge. As Robin Lakoff argues in Talking Power, tag questions “strongly presuppose one answer” and are “less a true question than a declarative statement plus a suggestion of camaraderie” (267 – 268). The question “Don’t you think?” assumes that either the speaker’s audience does think that way, or if they do not, at least they will be unwilling to give voice to a dissenting opinion for fear of having transgressed a social expectation. Even when upper-class characters employ questions that are not tag questions in the strictest formal sense, they still avoid open dialogue and challenge at all costs. For instance, when Laura’s sister Meg seeks evaluation of her singing ability, she does not ask Mrs. Sheridan, “What kind of voice am I in?” Such a query could elicit an honest and potentially unwelcome response. Her mother could say, “You sound rather rough today.” To avoid that possibility, Meg puts forth a specific option that she expects her audience to accept: “Aren’t I in good voice mummy?” (287) Although not formed as a tag question, its has the same impact. The language of the Sheridans attempts to force their audience into agreement by removing all other options.

The language of the upper classes – both its character and its limitations – comes into sharpest relief when brought into direct contact with lower-class voices because the sense of shared social identity that the Sheridan’s linguistic strategy requires is missing. As Lakoff suggests, “camaraderie” is an essential component of the tag-question and a key to its rhetorical success. The Sheridans as a whole demonstrate neither the desire nor the ability to empathize with individuals below them. They fix their attention only upon their social equals, and as Iversen argues, “Sympathy and tact, as the words occur and recur in Mrs. Sheridan’s and Jose’s vocabulary, only apply to people of their own class” (11). Thus, when Laura suggests to her sister that the party be stopped because of Scott’s death, her reaction is incredulous: “Stop the garden party?... don’t be so absurd.... Nobody expects us to” (290). Her mother responds in essentially the same manner: “People like that don’t expect sacrifices from us” (291). The two women do not reject the demands of those from the lower classes; they fail to even recognize that any such demands might exist. Since the Sheridan family can imagine no bond with the workers who set-up the party, any linguistic strategy that relies upon such a connection is destined for failure.
Early in the story when her mother dispatches her to oversee the placement of the marquee, Laura experiences this rhetorical failure firsthand. At this point, she is completely immersed in the language of her familial environment, and so, she offers a suggestion in the traditional Sheridan manner: “what about the lily-law? Would that do?” The response of the “tall fellow” is simple, authoritative and utterly ignores the answer implied within the question itself: “I don’t fancy it” (283). His answer represents a linguistic paradigm to which Laura is unaccustomed and the narrator notes her surprise at hearing it. After another possible location is dismissed, the “tall fellow” takes control of the situation by asserting “Look here, miss, that’s the place. Against those trees. Over there. That’ll do fine” (284). This time, the content of the claim and its form dismays Laura because the worker’s plan will keep the karaka trees with their “broad, gleaming leaves, and their clusters of yellow fruit” out of sight. Laura responds to this challenge in the only way that she knows: “Must they be hidden by a marquee?” As before, her audience fails to notice the hint. Therefore, he cannot and does not take it: “They must” (Ibid.) This scene enacts Ole Togeby’s assertion that “linguistic interaction can be seen as an ongoing regulation of the mutual social relation between the interlocutors, a regulation of the ‘pecking order’” (69). Here however, that “pecking order” gets turned on its head because the influence of social expectation that is so central to the effectiveness of the upper-class linguistic strategy disappears.

Although Laura cannot meet the workmen on their own linguistic terms, she clearly learns from the encounter and over the course of the story, she begins to explore the rhetorical possibilities of the speech patterns of the lower classes. Crossing these boundaries, however, puts her singularly out of step with the other members of her family, especially her mother. After the party, as the Sheridans begin to discuss the death of Scott, Mrs. Sheridan decides that a token gesture of goodwill toward the bereaved family is needed: “Let’s make up a basket…. it will be the greatest treat for the children. Don’t you agree?” (293). As usual, she employs a tag question in an effort to ensure the assent of her children. Laura’s response, however, comes as a shock. She asks simply, “do you really think it’s a good idea?” (294). Although not unbiased, the question’s direct form is clearly more neutral than the Sheridan’s normal linguistic structures because it does not overtly preclude any particular answer. That structure immediately sets Laura apart from the family. The narrator notes that “she seemed to be different from them all.” Her objection also raises her mother’s ire: “What’s the matter with you to-day?” (Ibid.). The displeasure in these responses obviously stems in large part from the content of Laura’s question, but it also reflects upon the distinctive form that she employs.

Laura’s final two speech acts in the story – her apology before Scott’s body and her unfinished question before Laurie – transform the fissure with her family into a complete break. The first of these is unequivocal in its rhetorical implications. She pleads, “Forgive my hat” (296). The statement is much more than a simple apology for a poor choice of accoutrements, however. It constitutes a rejection of the object that dominates the second half of the text and defines Laura’s identity during that period. The hat first appears immediately after Laura approaches her mother and attempts to convince her that the party should be stopped because of Scott’s death. Mrs. Sheridan rebukes her daughter for the silliness of her suggestion, but then gives her a new hat because “It’s made for you. It’s much too young for me” (291). Eventually, Laura and the object become one: “the first thing she saw was this charming girl in the mirror, in her black hat trimmed with gold daisies, and a long black velvet ribbon. Never before had she imagined
she could look like that” (292). The use of third person serves to dramatize the extent of the transformation. Instead of seeing herself in the mirror, Laura beholds “this charming girl.” At least on the outside, she has become a new person, thanks entirely to her new hat. The various comments about her appearance by the guests and her family reaffirm her judgment. They all express a mixture of admiration and surprise at her new look: “My word, Laura; you do look stunning” (292). No longer merely the “artistic one,” she becomes an object of desire: “Laura, you look quite Spanish. I’ve never seen you look so striking” (293). Laura earns attention, and indeed becomes the center of it, because of the hat.

The reactions of the other characters to Laura’s new appearance are, of course, superficial and based solely upon an article of clothing. But, the text goes even further and suggests that the hat has a more fundamental effect upon her. While admiring herself in the mirror, Laura quickly loses sight of the death of Scott, which up until that moment has been dominating her thoughts: “Just for a moment she had another glimpse of that poor woman and those little children, and the body being carried into the house. But it all seemed blurred, unreal, like a picture in a newspaper” (292). The vision returns to her momentarily and she resolves to speak with Laurie, her brother, about it. But, as soon as he compliments her “absolutely topping” hat, she forgets to tell him.

With the banishment of Scott from the internalized world of her thoughts, Laura becomes a purely externalized figure whose focal point is her hat. The object itself connotes a crown, a connection reinforced by the fact that Mrs. Sheridan actually places it on Laura’s head. Marvin Magalaner reads that act as a “coronation” by which the mother is “symbolically transferring to Laura the Sheridan heritage of snobbery, restricted social views, narrowness of vision” (116 – 117). For Walker, the hat represents the “spell of society,” and Laura “does not escape its influence throughout the ritual of the party” (256). The term crown of course provides a metonymic substitution for royal governance, and therefore connotes not only upper-class privilege and snobbishness but also power and authority. Note also that Laura’s name is derived from “laurel,” the classic Greek victory crown. Therefore, her very name furthers conflation of her identity with the object, even as it reinforces its symbolic resonance.

Standing before Scott’s body however, Laura rejects all of that. In sharp contrast to her earlier encounter with the workmen, the simplicity and directness of her statement here is unmistakable. The experimentation in linguistic form that she began with her mother after the party reaches fruition. She does not even preface her request with “please.” She merely pleads, “Forgive my hat” (296). The request marks a reversal of power dynamics as Laura makes a direct request to the lower classes without the use of a tag question. Moreover, this is the first time that she uses a possessive pronoun to describe the object. It is no longer “the” hat. It is now “my” hat. She embraces the object and accepts it, specifically to renounce it. She apologizes for both her own actions and all that the hat symbolizes: snobbishness, elitism, privilege, power and authority. Although the narrator’s description of the scene is ironized and exploits the decidedly ridiculous nature of the spectacle, Robert Murray Davis notes that Laura’s plea marks her as “more mature than her mother... ever can be” (65).

From that definitive statement, the text moves to the truncated, final exchange between Laura and Laurie. From the perspective of linguistic form, the scene emerges as a perverse reenactment of Laura’s first meeting with the workmen. Here, Laura adopts the role of the lower class figures and confounds Laurie’s expectations at every turn. After
subtly establishing that Laura's suddenly strange behavior has become a source of concern - “Mother was getting anxious” – Laurie attempts to gain control of their exchange in typical Sheridan fashion with the use of a tag question posed in the negative, “you’re not crying, are you?” (296, 297). But his sister is crying, and since a simple order of “Don’t cry” would be unlikely to have any effect, Laurie attempts again to re-establish normalcy by suggesting to Laura the one option that will allow for such a spectacle. He asks “Was it awful?” (297). Clearly, he seeks an affirmative answer, for if the scene at the Scotts’ really was “awful,” then Laura’s emotional outburst would be justified. Rather than offer a neutral, open-ended question such as “How was it?”, his query implicitly pushes Laura toward the response he wants.

But, having learned from the workmen that morning and newly arrived from the lower-class world of Scott’s family, Laura now stands immune to such insinuation and manipulation. She refuses to take the bait and declares “It was simply marvellous” (297). Both the content and the form of the statement run counter to the linguistic model under which Laurie operates. Laura then attempts to contextualize her assertion further with her existential statement regarding the nature of life. But in doing so, she begins to revert to her old habits. Instead of saying simply “Life is…”, she forms her pronouncement as a negative rhetorical question: “Isn’t life” (Ibid.). If completed, the question would have been constructed to presuppose agreement and would have embraced the fundamental rhetorical strategy of the Sheridan family. To avoid that, Laura does not finish her assertion. Instead, the narrator comments “what life was she couldn’t explain” (297).

To date, critics have read “couldn’t” as meaning that Laura, for whatever reason, does not know what to say. Ben Satterfield claims that her silence stems from her inability to understand the experience she has just undergone (70), while Nownes suggests that it reflects the incomprehensibility of the situation itself (56 – 57). Both of these readings cast Laura’s crisis as a crisis of content. If in fact she cannot grasp the situation that she has just faced, or if the situation itself defies understanding, then the leap to the conclusion that the text as a whole is “unresolved” becomes quite short.

There is, however, another plausible interpretation of “couldn’t” available to the reader that demands consideration. “Couldn’t” can also signify Laura’s refusal to present her experiences in the form that she starts to employ. In other words, “what life was she couldn’t say in that manner.” Read this way, her silence joins her apology before Scott’s body as a rejection of her upper-class background.

The development of Laura’s character over the course of “The Garden Party” privileges this second, unifying reading because her self-censorship mirrors her spatial movement within the text and reinforces the undefined social sphere into which she has moved at the conclusion. Laura’s final exchange with Laurie takes place on the corner of the “great road” that divides the Sheridan’s compound from the community of “little cottages” where Scott’s family lives (290). The text maps class identity directly onto topography, for the neighborhood is “the greatest possible eyesore” and despite being at the bottom of a “steep rise,” it is still “far too near” (Ibid.) Thus, the two siblings meet on the demarcation line between the opposing worlds, a neither-here-nor-there no-man’s-land. This is not, however, the first time that they have found themselves at that place:

When the Sheridans were little, they were forbidden to set foot there because of the revolting language and of what they might catch. But since they were grown up, Laura and Laurie on their prowls sometimes walked through. It was disgusting and
it was sordid. They came out with a shudder. But still one must go everywhere; one must see everything. So through they went. (290)

Given the substantial physical and social barriers which stand in her way, Laura's repeated forays down the road reflect a deeply ingrained attraction for the poor community that brings her back on her “prowls.” The verb evokes images of stealth and criminal activity. Her visits are not mere walks, journeys or saunterings. Despite the fact that Laura uses the forays as a means of defining her adult status, she would rather not be seen undertaking them and is ashamed of the experience. She recognizes that she has stepped outside of the established cultural norms of the Sheridan family by going down the lane. And yet, she is compelled to go.

When she returns to the previously forbidden lane to face Scott’s body, she finds herself freed from the social forces that normally impinge upon her in the Sheridan household and mandate the use of the pre-determined responses that the family’s language dictates. She is also enlightened by her earlier experiences with the workmen and the marquee. Those factors combine to transform Laura. At the moment of her apology, she finally undertakes the simple act of dictating her own physical movement for the first time. Prior to that point, her coming and going is always controlled by others. Mrs. Sheridan sends her to meet the workmen for the marquee, to the kitchen with flags for the sandwiches and to visit the Scott family with the basket. During her conference with the workmen, she is called away by the ringing of the phone. Upon her arrival at the Scotts’, the widow’s sister leads her into the house and then to see the body, despite Laura’s reservations. Even her approach to the corpse is presented as a matter of compulsion: “she couldn’t go out of the room without saying something to him” (296). In all of these cases, Laura is purely reactive and subject to the direction of others. After her apology however, she leaves Scott’s house on her own terms: “And this time she didn’t wait for Em’s sister. She found her way out of the door” (296). Having symbolically rejected her own past and the ornate world of the Sheridans, she assumes control over her actions and forges a new identity.

In doing so however, she pushes herself into a liminal space. It is clear where she is not, but it is not clear where she is. Despite her obvious attraction to and identity with her family’s poor neighbors, she cannot remain on Scott’s lane permanently, for she remains what Adam J. Sorkin calls “the privileged daughter of her monied class” (441 – 442). But at the same time, it is clear that she has grown beyond the limitations of the Sheridans’ world, and the text underscores this by denying her access to it. Standing between spatial and social boundaries, she also finds herself caught between linguistic forms. Even though Laura has a clear affinity for the directness and affirmation that characterizes lower-class speech, she also has reservations about its vulgarity. For instance at one point, she wonders about the propriety of a worker speaking of “bang slap in the eye” (283). Thus, when she attempts to give voice to her experience, she recognizes clearly the form not to use, but she cannot grasp the form to use: What life was, she could not say.

Because previous studies of “The Garden Party” have not taken into account the key role that language plays in shaping class identity within the text, their judgments of Laura have focused primarily upon her role in and reaction to the events of the day. Read in such a light, both the sincerity of her pronouncements and the text’s commitment to their rhetorical stance quickly come into question. It is, after all, quite easy for a wealthy woman of leisure to rail against “absurd class distinctions” when she must suffer absolutely no economic or social hardships because of them. Given her ventures down to
Scott’s neighborhood as a child and her impending return to the Sheridan estate, she is also subject to charges of what might be termed “cultural tourism.” Satterfield notes that she will “in all likelihood remain in the refuge of their bright house on the hill” (70). Certainly if Mansfield had wanted to leave no doubt about the story’s position, Laura would be seen turning her back on her family and wandering off in a different direction to establish an entirely new identity for herself. This does not happen of course, and therefore, Nownes argues that “Neither Laura nor the narrator ever establish an ordered series of events that might conclusively support reading “The Garden Party” as an account of Laura’s ever increasing wariness of class distinctions” (53). Such a plot-focused critical approach would be appropriate if applied to a realist novel where, as Irving Howe suggests, “Plot... comes to seem inseparable from meaning, and meaning to inhere in plot” (160). It is out of step, however, with Mansfield’s fundamentally Modernist aesthetic where form speaks as loudly as, if not louder than, both actions and words.

24 The unmistakable shift in Laura’s speech away from her original upper-class structures, to lower-class patterns and then finally to a non-space between the two signals that she has undergone an essential transformation. Walker’s claim that the social crisis in “The Garden Party” is unresolved stems in large part from his inability to imagine Laura redefining her relationship to the rest of the Sheridans: “Will she not now have to reorient her feelings toward her family?” (357). In fact, her silence indicates that she has already done exactly that. Although Laura will return to the Sheridans’ home in body, she will be far away in spirit and, like T.S. Eliot’s Magi, “no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation / with an alien people clutching their gods” (lines 41 – 42).

25 The ridiculous nature of Laurie’s response to Laura’s truncated question foregrounds the alien space she will now occupy in the Sheridan family. In the final speech act of the text, Laurie employs the standard Sheridan strategy of question as statement – the same linguistic structure that his sister has just rejected with her self censorship:

“Isn’t life,” she stammered, “isn’t life –” But what life was she couldn’t explain. No matter. He quite understood.

“Isn’t it?, darling” said Laurie (297)

26 Acting as the voice of the upper classes, the narrator claims that Laurie has a full grasp of what has happened. The reader, however, knows differently. Laura’s understanding of events is based upon her life experiences. Of all the members of the Sheridan family, Laurie is seemingly the most able to intuit her thoughts, given that he has accompanied her on her “prowls,” and there is no indication that any of their other siblings have ventured outside the confines of their upper-class existence. Even so, her perception at that moment is dominated by her visit to the corpse, and Laurie has no access to this. Indeed, his attempt to have Laura describe the event as awful indicates that his expectations are far removed from her experience down the lane. But, the Sheridan linguistic paradigm in which he is clearly immersed renders both his lack of understanding and Laura’s truncated assertion finally irrelevant. He does not need to hear Laura’s statement in order to reply to it. In the upper-class world, the listener’s role is only to provide assent, and he readily does this. Moreover, by suggesting agreement without asserting anything, he employs a form which epitomizes the linguistic strategy of the Sheridans, and in doing so, he exposes its utter inadequacy as a means for understanding the world.

27 In all of her fiction, Mansfield rarely, if ever, offers simple, direct answers or ties things up neatly with obvious conclusions. Even by Mansfield’s standards however, “The Garden
Party” stands out as a particularly understated text, and she worried about the openness of its ending (Magalaner 118). Resolution is necessarily a relative term, but at least some degree of it can be established here. The attacks that Laura levels at the attitudes and practices of her family are genuine and the text is committed to them. In a world where class conflict is played out on the battlefield of speech, her silence should be read as an act of resistance, a refusal to continue with those forms which have shaped her life and consciousness to that point. The text does not – indeed it cannot – prescribe where she should go, but it clearly decries where she has been.

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ABSTRACTS

Cet essai explore jusqu’à quel point les structures linguistiques contenues dans “The Garden Party” de Katherine Mansfield constituent des marqueurs de l’identité de classe. Tant le narrateur que les personnages de la classe supérieure utilisent des modèles de discours reposant sur le démenti et la négativité. À travers l’usage répété de questions polies, les personnages établissent une hiérarchie d’attentes limitant le choix et empêchant le défi. L’affirmation et
l'assertion sont rares; le démenti et la répression sont la règle. Inversement, les membres des classes inférieures embrassent l'affirmation et agissent. Ces résultats suggèrent que le silence de Laura à la conclusion du texte doit être lu comme un acte de résistance, un refus de continuer à suivre ces formalités qui ont modelé sa vie et sa conscience jusqu'à ce moment. Le texte ne prescrit pas la route qu'elle devra suivre dans l'avenir, mais il décrit clairement où elle s’est trouvée. Cette interprétation contredit la croyance largement répandue que “The Garden Party” ne forme pas une position rhétorique claire à l’égard des enjeux d’interaction entre classes qui y sont soulevés.

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