

E-CONTENT

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Topic of the E-Content

Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss"

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“Bliss”

Katherine Mansfield

Introducing the Author:

Katherine Mansfield (born October 14, 1888, Wellington, New Zealand—died January 9, 1923, Gurdjieff Institute, near Fontainebleau, France) was a New Zealand-born English master of the short story, who evolved a distinctive prose style with many overtones of poetry. Mansfield went on to become an internationally acclaimed writer best known for her Modernist short stories. She published three collections of short stories during her lifetime: *In a German Pension* (1911), *Bliss and Other Stories* (1920) and *The Garden Party and Other Stories* (1922).

Short Story: A short story is a piece of prose fiction. It can typically be read in a single sitting and focuses on a self-contained incident or series of linked incidents, with the intent of evoking a single effect or mood.

“Bliss” as a modernist short story:

Katherine Mansfield’s “Bliss” is a modernist short story. It was first published in 1918. It was published in the *English Review* in August 1918 and later reprinted in *Bliss and Other Stories* (1920).

The story starts with Bertha in a blissful mood as her party approaches, as she considers the specialness and unconventionality of her mood. The maid has prepared a colourful fruit tray for the party, which Bertha will arrange. The nanny is feeding the baby, who reluctantly lets Bertha hold her. The moment of connection with her daughter brings her more bliss.

After a phone call from her husband, who is running late, Bertha thinks ahead to who will attend the party that evening. A couple, Mr. and Mrs. Norman Knight (close friends to Bertha and Harry), Eddie Warren, a neurotic and sought-after writer, and Pearl, a strange, mysterious young woman that Bertha has taken a liking to after meeting at a club. As she prepares the drawing room cushions, Bertha recalls how Harry has declared that he finds Pearl dull. She is sure there is much more to her. Her feeling of bliss continues as she hugs the cushions and

looks over the balcony to a most perfect blossoming pear tree in the garden, which she imagines "as a symbol of her own life." She lists to herself some of the many aspects of her life she is grateful for, and finds that her outfit is even reminiscent of the tree.

As the guests start to arrive, with Mr and Mrs Norman Knight calling each other nicknames and Eddie complaining about his taxi, she notes their outfits and appreciates how attractive the company is. As Harry arrives late, she considers the charm of her husband's eccentricities. Pearl is the last to arrive and, as Bertha takes her arm to lead her to the dining room, she feels an intense yet unspoken intimacy with her guest.

With everyone present, the meal begins. Compliments are paid regarding the food as theatre is discussed, and Bertha is overcome again by a sense of bliss, delighting in the company she has chosen. She thinks of the perfect pear tree in the moonlight in the garden, as she wonders how she can feel so connected to Pearl. She is somehow sure that Pearl must be feeling the same.

After dinner, when Pearl asks if Bertha has a garden, she takes it as a sign of their connection and leads her to the garden window. Here, she opens the curtains to reveal the pear tree. The two women stand side-by-side admiring its beauty and in a seemingly perfect moment of mutual understanding and bliss, when the lights are snapped on and the moment ends.

They rejoin the group for coffee, cigarettes, and more lively conversation. Bertha thinks about how her husband is being quite rude to Pearl, which upsets Bertha. She decides that she will try to find a way to explain to him what she and Pearl have shared, but also realises that soon the party will end. She fears she will be alone with just her husband but then, "for the first time in her life", finds that she is also filled with desire for him. She wonders if this ardent feeling is what all her bliss has been leading up to.

As the guests begin to leave to catch their trains and taxis, Harry goes to help Pearl with her coat in the hallway, which Bertha appreciates considering his earlier brusqueness. In the drawing room still, Bertha fetches a book for Eddie to borrow. As she turns her head to peer down the hallway she sees Pearl and Harry in a romantic embrace, secretly arranging to see each other the next day.

Not knowing they have been spotted, Pearl returns to the drawing room to say goodbye to Bertha and mentions the pear tree. As the final guests leave, Harry nonchalantly locks up behind them. Uncertain about the future, Bertha runs to her garden window and gazes upon her perfect tree, "as lovely as ever."

Katherine Mansfield's title "Bliss" is paradoxical because the protagonist Bertha feels bliss on a very ordinary day when nothing out of the ordinary has happened to change her situation.

Characters in "Bliss"

- Bertha Young - the main character, age 30.
- Harry - Bertha's husband.
- Little Bertha/Little B - Bertha's baby daughter.
- Mary - servant.
- Nanny - Little B's nurse.
- Mr and Mrs Norman Knight - dinner guests.
- Eddie Warren - a poet.
- Pearl Fulton - a young, beguiling blonde woman.

Setting: The time setting of the story is only a few hours- a moment in Bertha's life, but it is one prefigured in her past, and it presages her future.

Symbolisms Used in "Bliss" : A Discussion

The Pear-Tree

'Bliss', like much modernist fiction, is marked by its use of ambiguous symbolism: symbols whose meanings appear multifaceted and hard to pin down. And central to the story is the symbol of the pear-tree, which recurs at numerous points throughout 'Bliss'. When it is first described, Bertha is admiring it from the window:

The windows of the drawing-room opened on to a balcony overlooking the garden. At the far end, against the wall, there was a tall, slender pear tree in fullest, richest bloom; it stood perfect, as though becalmed against the jade-green sky. Bertha

couldn't help feeling, even from this distance, that it had not a single bud or a faded petal.

If the 'tall, slender' shape of the pear tree suggests the physique of a woman, the fruit itself denotes the female genitals (especially the uterus) while also carrying connotations of the fruitful, fertile, juicy, and voluptuous.

Of course, apple trees usually take us to the Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis (according to a [long-standing tradition](#); the Bible doesn't mention apples in relation to the tree), and pear-trees carry something of this association, without being as blatant or direct as if Mansfield had used an apple-tree to suggest temptation, a loss of innocence, or carnal knowledge.

Bertha is quick to associate the pear-tree with herself: she sees 'the lovely pear tree with its wide open blossoms as a symbol of her own life.' But why she detects such symbolism is not explained; it's possible that there is some linguistic association at work ('pear' is so near to 'Pearl', the name of the woman she is attracted to, in ways which surprise her), although the symbolism and associations already mentioned doubtless play a part.

At the end of the story, Mansfield strengthens this 'pear = Pearl' association when she tells us that 'the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still.' It remains unchanged, and untouched: Bertha's evening with Pearl has not altered that. If the pear-tree is a symbol of her own life, it is full of flowering potential and yet remains 'still': its beauty has not been fully awakened, and it has not been (to coin a phrase) *deflowered*.

Food

The centrepiece of 'Bliss' is, of course, the dinner party at which Bertha and Harry entertain their friends, including the Norman Knights, Pearl Fulton, and Eddie Warren, the poet. And so food plays an important role in the story. But it is not there merely to set the scene, for it symbolises things beyond the dinner-table:

Harry was enjoying his dinner. It was part of his – well, not his nature, exactly, and certainly not his pose – his – something or other – to talk about food and to glory in his ‘shameless passion for the white flesh of the lobster’ and ‘the green of pistachio ices – green and cold like the eyelids of Egyptian dancers.’

Food is here figured as almost sensual (sexual?), with the pistachio ice cream summoning exotic dancers and the ‘white flesh’ of the lobster standing in for the white flesh of a woman (Bertha? Pearl?).

Cats

A key theme of ‘Bliss’ is marriage, and Bertha’s unhappy marriage to Harry raises questions about the role of female desire in a largely loveless or at least sexless marriage. At a couple of points in the story, Mansfield draws our attention to a pair of cats seen in the garden:

A grey cat, dragging its belly, crept across the lawn, and a black one, its shadow, trailed after. The sight of them, so intent and so quick, gave Bertha a curious shiver.

‘What creepy things cats are!’ she stammered, and she turned away from the window and began walking up and down ...

Bertha’s distaste for this scene, as one cat follows behind the other, stalking it but also walking in its shadow, suggests that on some level she also sees in the cats a reflection of her own life. Is she the black cat (black cats, lest we forget, often associated with witches in European folklore: those faithful companions of unmarried women who stepped outside the bounds of acceptable society), following in the ‘shadow’ of her husband?

At the end of the story, when Pearl leaves the dinner party, the cats are mentioned again, with their movements mirroring the two human figures, Eddie Warren and Pearl: ‘And then she was gone, with Eddie following, like the black cat following the grey cat.’ Now, Pearl has become the grey cat and Eddie the black cat, but once again, one character is following in the shadow of another.

It isn't easy to say what we are to make of this cat-symbolism. In the first mention of the cats, they are described as 'intent' and 'quick', with the grey cat 'dragging its belly' as it moves, suggesting the stalking of prey. Is the black cat, in turn, stalking it? Is the grey cat sexual prey, much as Eddie Warren appears to stalk the beautiful Pearl at the end of the story?

It's worth bearing in mind that both mentions of the grey cat and the black cat come just after the pear-tree has been mentioned: the first time, it is just after the 'slender pear tree in fullest, richest bloom' is introduced; the second time, it is immediately after Pearl's parting comment to Bertha: 'Your lovely pear-tree!'

The pear-tree, in standing in the garden and being 'lovely', suggests paradise, a kind of Edenic world. But the two cats are a blot on this paradisaical landscape. Of course, it was a serpent or snake that sowed trouble in the Garden of Eden, not a cat; but the grey cat's action of 'dragging its belly' curiously recalls the punishment God meted out to the serpent following its successful temptation of Adam and Eve. Genesis 3:14 reads:

And the LORD God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life.

Just as the pear-tree stands in for the apple-tree associated with the Fall of Man and the Garden of Eden, so the cat dragging its belly stands in for the serpent, and performs a similar function: symbolically, it suggests the threat to paradise that lurks within the garden.



