

Symbols in *Bliss*

The Pear Tree

The pear tree in “Bliss” symbolizes Bertha’s attraction to Pearl Fulton, a friend she has invited to her dinner party. The tree also represents hidden desire more generally throughout the story. Bertha associates the pear tree with the sensation of “bliss” that she feels as she is preparing for the party that Pearl will attend. Looking at the tree through a window, Bertha feels that it is a “symbol of her own life” and that its “wide open blossoms” represent the possibility of change, which is available to her if she is able to break away from social convention and admit her attraction to, or form a romantic connection with, Pearl. The tree further represents Bertha’s internal state as its colors in the moonlight are the same colors that Bertha has chosen to wear that evening. Because the tree is outside and separated from Bertha by the window, however, it comes to reflect a desire outside the realm of domesticity and upper middle-class conventionality.

Botanically, a pear tree can be regarded as bisexual by nature because it is self-fertilizing. It has both female and male organs. During the dinner party, Bertha and Pearl stand and look through the window at the pear tree together. When Bertha shows her garden to Pearl Fulton, this is a crucial moment of the story. Bertha is highly emotional in this scene because she forgets the world and the time around her and her thoughts are described emotively. To Bertha, this moment represents their unspoken connection and suggests to her that Pearl is feeling the same way that she is feeling. In this moment, to Bertha, the pear tree looks like a huge flaming candle in the light from the moon and this symbolizes the strength of Bertha’s desire. The pear tree occurs in this scene in a remarkable way for it seems “to touch the rim of the round, silver moon.” The pear tree symbolizes Bertha for she explicitly says that and her dress resembles to the pear tree.

Moonlight

Moonlight represents transformation and illusion in the story. Bertha sees the moon rising when she is looking out at the pear tree before the dinner party and associates this with the

transformative potential of the evening, which she believes will bring about some change in her life and lead to the fulfillment of her hidden desire for Pearl Fulton. The moon continues to have a transformative effect over the evening: when Eddie Warren arrives, he complains that the moonlight has made his socks whiter and transformed his taxi driver into a “sinister” and “timeless” figure whom Eddie was afraid would kidnap him in an “eternal taxi.” Pearl is also associated with the moon: dressed all in silver, she has a pearl-like appearance reflective of her name and similar to the white glow of the moon. This represents the idea that Pearl herself has had a transformative effect upon Bertha’s life, just as the moon has transformed the night outside and made ordinary things seem mysterious and extraordinary. It is Pearl’s presence which is responsible for Bertha’s feeling of “bliss,” which has transformed the world around her and made her feel “tender” towards everything and everyone.

The moon in “Bliss” has been represented in a very classical way. The moon is an ancient symbol for the feminine principle in the world (as the sun stands for the masculine). The cycle of the female sex hormone (i.e. menstruation) and the cycle of the moon are similar. So there is a simple connection between the moon and female sexuality. The moon so important in this story because Pearl is associated with the moon. She is dressed all in silver, she has “moonbeam fingers” and Bertha compares her to the moonlight, thinking: “(...) the light of (...) [the] moon, silver as Miss Fulton.” So when Bertha gets the impression or imagination that the pear tree (herself) touches the moon (Pearl), it comes clear that Bertha adores her. She longs for physical fusion with Pearl. The pear tree touching the moon is a sexual picture.

Cats

The appearance of cats in the story imbue Bertha’s joy with a sense of foreboding and symbolize the harmful nature of dishonesty—both to others, and to oneself. While looking out over her garden at the pear tree, Bertha sees two cats crossing the lawn: first a grey one and then a black one who is like “his shadow.” Although Bertha has been contemplating the pear tree as a symbol of the possibility of joy in her own life, the sudden appearance of the two cats beneath the tree makes her “shiver” and she thinks: “what creepy things cats are.” The idea of the black “shadow,” underneath the image of Bertha’s “bliss” foreshadows the idea that things are not

quite as they appear in the story and that Bertha's desire for joy will not come to fruition. The two cats creeping across the lawn also reflects Harry and Pearl's behavior; sneaking about in order to have an affair. The fact that the cats give Bertha a shiver, although she does not know why, suggests that Bertha does not fully understand her own motives. This is corroborated by the fact that Bertha feels that her attraction to Pearl is platonic and otherworldly, rather than sexual, reflecting Bertha's sexual naivety and lack of self-knowledge more generally.