

Themes to Discuss in *Bliss*

Sexuality and Desire

Katherine Mansfield's short story "Bliss" chronicles a day in the life of thirty-year-old Bertha Young. Bertha's feeling of "bliss" in the story comes from her attraction to Pearl Fulton, a woman she has recently become friends with. Although Bertha is married, she comes across as sexually naïve and has never "desired" her husband. Not coincidentally, she feels sexually attracted to him "for the first time in her life" on the night of the dinner party when Pearl is present and when Bertha is in the throes of "bliss." Due to the conventions of the early twentieth century, in which homosexuality was neither legal nor socially acceptable and was rarely discussed in polite society, Bertha's sexual desire towards Pearl is depicted ambiguously and in terms of forbidden desire. This reflects the repressive nature of propriety in this period and Mansfield's criticism of a society in which people are forced to conceal feelings of love and desire for the sake of social convention.

Bertha's attraction to Pearl is not explicitly referenced in sexual terms. However, Bertha's homosexuality is implied by the fact that she does not feel sexual attraction towards her husband, Harry, and the fact that her attraction to Pearl induces such a physical response. Bertha feels a "little air of proprietorship" toward Pearl "that she always assumed with her women finds," suggesting that she is possessive of Pearl in the way one might be over a lover. Bertha's excitement about the dinner party is also explicitly linked to Pearl's attendance: she feels that she has "fallen in love with" Pearl, "as she always did" with "beautiful women," and the "fire of bliss" that Bertha feels all day leading up to the party is increased by physical contact with Pearl. When Pearl takes Bertha's arm, Bertha wonders, "what there was in the touch of that cool arm that could fan—fan—start blazing—blazing—the fire of bliss that Bertha did not know what to do with?" This physical sensation is contrasted with Bertha's coldness towards Harry, which is evidently something they have already accepted as part of their marriage. Bertha even becomes panicked by the idea of being left alone with her husband with the thought of "the dark room"

and “the warm bed.” This suggests that Bertha avoids having a sexual relationship with Harry—a sharp contrast from the glut of warm feelings and excitement she feels in Pearl’s presence, underscoring Bertha’s carefully concealed homosexuality. Indeed, she notably feels the first pangs of desire towards her husband only while she is immersed in the “bliss” brought on by Pearl’s presence, suggesting this sudden desire for Harry is really just displaced longing for Pearl.

The story, in turn, is implicitly critical of a society that represses these relationships and desires. Mansfield herself had relationships with women throughout her life and wrote about her female lovers. It is likely that Bertha reflects Mansfield’s own struggles as a homosexual woman in Edwardian society, who would have been forced to hide her relationships with women. Mansfield’s belief that homosexuality is natural and beautiful is reflected by Bertha’s feelings of “bliss” and by Pearl’s association with natural, beautiful things like the moon. The moon is associated with femininity in mythology, and silvery moonlight infuses the night outside the dinner party—making Eddie Warren’s socks appear whiter and seeming to transform his taxi driver into something otherworldly, just as Pearl’s presence transforms the world for Bertha by intensifying her emotional response to ordinary things and suffusing everything with a sense of “bliss.”

Pearl is also associated with the “silver” pear tree in Bertha’s garden, which the two women gaze at in the moonlight and which Bertha views as a “symbol of her own life” with its “wide open blossoms.” This suggests that Bertha is open to new possibilities—that is, homosexuality—in a way that “idiotic civilization” is not. The fact that she and Pearl seem to share a moment of mutual understanding, “caught in the circle of unearthly light” of the moon shining on the pear tree, suggests the potential reciprocation of Bertha’s feelings and supports the idea that the two women belong to a different world, separate from that of the heterosexual domesticity that so limits their sexual desires.

Of course, given that homosexuality was not openly acknowledged in society in the Edwardian period and homosexual relationships often existed on the fringes of mainstream culture, Bertha

has no frame of reference in which to think about her desire for Pearl, other than as something which must be concealed or expressed in an ambiguous way. The image of the pear tree is thus further symbolic of forbidden desire as it relates to the biblical story of the Garden of Eden, in which Adam and Eve were forbidden from eating fruit from the Tree of Life (but sinfully did so anyway). Although Bertha's life is very free in some ways because of her upper-middle class status and material wealth, the pear tree symbolizes the limitations in her life; the tree itself remains out of reach beyond the window, reflecting the social difficulty that Bertha would face being openly gay in this period and society.

Even if Bertha did openly recognize her desire for Pearl as sexual, this is not something that would be accepted in Edwardian society. The fact that Bertha's desires remain mysterious and unexplained, even to herself, suggest the total repression and denial of homosexual desire by British society. Bertha's frustration with her situation is suggested by the story's ending. While Bertha is desperate for some progression in her relationship with Pearl, the story's ending is anticlimactic, and Bertha's desire remains unfulfilled. The still, untouched quality of the pear tree outside and Bertha's unanswered question of "what is going to happen now?" underscore Bertha's lingering lack of fulfillment. Rather than reaching a climax, Bertha's bliss remains unreciprocated and unexpressed, and the story suggests that this will continue as long as society represses certain sexual desires and emotional states.

Women's Roles and Social Constraint

A large part of the narrative tension in "Bliss" derives from the fact that Bertha Young, the thirty-year-old protagonist, feels a great sense of joy that she wishes to express. However, the constraints of the society in which she lives, and the rigid constraints placed on women in this society in particular, prevent Bertha from expressing her titular "bliss." Mansfield extends her argument against the repression of homosexuality to show how Bertha's entire life is strictly organized according to the rules of propriety, which defined social convention during Britain's Edwardian period. Despite Bertha's best efforts to surround herself with unconventional people

and a spirit of individualism, social convention is too large and powerful to topple, and her life is rigidly structured around the conventions of middle-class womanhood.

Bertha's antagonism towards the constraints of polite society is evident early in the story, as these constraints prevent her from expressing the strong emotion that she feels. Bertha feels that "although" she is thirty, she still has moments when she wants to "run instead of walk, to take dancing steps on and off the pavement [...] or to stand still and laugh at—nothing—at nothing, simply." The use of the word "although" suggests that these expressions of joy are inappropriate for an adult woman and go against the grain of expected behavior. Bertha thus feels a sense of constraint because she cannot freely express herself and her own sense of joy. She is disdainful of social convention and thinks "how idiotic civilization is" as it places restrictions on emotional freedom. Bertha feels this constraint so strongly that it manifests physically: she cannot "bear the tight clasp of" her coat and wonders "what is the point of having a body" if it is to be kept like a "rare, rare fiddle [...] locked in a case." This suggests that social constraints infringe on Bertha's freedom and prevent her from doing what she wants with her own body.

Although Bertha's life is very privileged in some ways, she is barred from fully experiencing certain parts of life because of social attitudes toward women in this period. Women of Bertha's class were viewed as physically and mentally fragile and discouraged from partaking in strenuous activities or from engaging with serious social or emotional questions. Bertha's comparison of herself with a rare instrument in a case reflects the idea that she needs to be physically protected from the world.

This notion is further developed when Bertha goes to see her child, Little B, who is taken care of by Nurse. Although this arrangement was common in this period—most wealthy households employed a nurse or nanny so that rich ladies would not have to undergo the physical aspects of childcare—Bertha feels cut off from the experience of raising her child and questions societal conventions when she wonders, "why have a baby if it has to be kept—not in a case like a rare, rare fiddle, but in another woman's arms?" Bertha loves the physical sensation of caring for her

daughter, and it fills her with “bliss” to see the baby’s “exquisite toes as they shone transparent in the firelight.”

Despite this, Bertha is too timid to challenge the nurse. She hardly dares to ask if she can feed Little B and fails to criticize the nurse for introducing Little B to a strange dog. This demonstrates that Bertha has little sense of her own authority or responsibility for her child, and by extension has little authority in or control over her own life. Instead she feels like a “poor little girl,” particularly when she sees the nurse caring for Little B and is envious of her because of the nurse’s connection with the baby. She is only given access to a superficial side of motherhood and this makes her feel like a child playing with toys, or like a toy herself, “kept in a case.” This emphasizes how women of Bertha’s class were viewed as childlike and fragile, and that physical processes like nursing and childcare were viewed as jobs for lower-class women.

The fact that women in the story are frequently compared with inanimate objects further underscores the objectification of women’s bodies in the period and the tendency to view upper class women as beautiful or decorative rather than as full human beings. Although Bertha wants to rebel against this objectification, she is not quite brave enough to openly break with the constraints placed on women in the period. Bertha and Pearl are in a similar position in that both are objectified throughout the story. The use of the name “Pearl” itself suggests that women are like precious jewels—decorative and rare, to be guarded or “kept in a case.” Yet Bertha seeks a tangible connection with Pearl because she is desperate to see beyond Pearl’s decorative surface, which she believes “has something behind it.” This reflects Bertha’s desire to understand Pearl in more than just a superficial or idealized way.

Bertha also demonstrates her desire to rebel against gender roles in society through her choice of unconventional friends, like Mrs. Knight. Mrs. Knight demonstrates her unconventionality through her fashion sense—drawing attention to herself by wearing a bright orange coat decorated with monkeys, which makes people stare on the train. Bertha, however, is not depicted as a bold character and, instead, only internally wishes to disrupt conventions. This is evident in her timidity in front of the nurse and the fact that, even though she “wishes to run instead of

walk,” she refrains from doing so. However strong her moments of bliss, at the end of the story she remains prisoner to the expectations placed on all women at the time.

Aesthetics, Appearance, and Performance

“Bliss” is written in a Modernist style, reflected in the focus on aesthetics throughout the story. Bertha herself is preoccupied with external appearances. Although this may come across as shallow, Bertha’s desire to make things beautiful is an attempt to express her feeling of “bliss.” Bertha is also interested in interpreting the appearance of others; as she watches guests interact at her dinner party, Bertha makes assumptions about their internal states based on their outward appearances. She assumes that, because she tries to communicate her feelings through her appearance, others are doing the same. However, events in the story contradict this assumption and Bertha is proved wrong about the motives of Pearl and Harry, whom she has assumed are loyal and innocent but who are really having an affair. Instead of trying to communicate their internal states, Pearl and Harry are in fact trying to disguise them through their outward performance. Combined with the discussion of aesthetics, theatre, and performance at the party, “Bliss” gives the reader the feeling that nothing is quite as it appears.

Bertha tries to use both her external appearance and the presentation of her home to communicate her feelings and personality to the people around her. For example, she has paid special attention to the appearance of her living room in preparation for the dinner party and has even ordered certain types of fruit to match the room’s décor. Although Bertha herself acknowledges that this does “sound rather far-fetched and absurd,” her attention to detail is in keeping with her interest in modernity and current artistic movements, which someone like Bertha, who has “modern, thrilling friends,” would likely be aware of. She is “in her present mood” of almost delirious bliss when she buys the fruit, and this suggests that Bertha is trying to communicate her internal state through her surroundings; indeed, since she has no other way to communicate her feelings of joy and beauty to others because of social constraints placed on her ability to openly express her emotions.

When Bertha sees the pear tree, which is white under the moon, “becalmed against the jade-green sky,” she thinks that this matches her outfit—“a white dress” and “a string of jade beads.” She notes that this “wasn’t intentional” but feels it is fitting because she views the pear tree “as a symbol of her own life.” This further suggests a correspondence between Bertha’s internal emotional state and her external appearance and presentation.

Although appearances initially seem to reflect reality, Mansfield complicates the concept of appearances at Bertha’s dinner party. There, Bertha misinterprets her guests’ behavior, emphasizing that not everything is what it seems. Throughout the evening, Bertha makes several assumptions about what Pearl is feeling based on the way Pearl presents herself. Interpreting the “strange smile” that Pearl gives Bertha across the table, Bertha decides that “the longest, most intimate look had passed between them,” and that Pearl “was feeling just what she was feeling.” Bertha also feels that she can read Harry’s moods based on his actions. When he offers Pearl a cigar, Bertha interprets from his manner that he is “bored” by Pearl and that he “really disliked her.” Similarly, when Harry goes to help Pearl with her coat, Bertha believes that Harry is “repenting his rudeness” towards Pearl and Bertha thinks affectionately how “simple” Harry is in some ways, like “a boy.”

Bertha’s assumptions about Harry and Pearl are wrong, however, and they are presenting themselves in this way—Harry as innocent and Pearl as friendly—with an ulterior motive. Pearl’s friendship with Bertha is possibly an attempt to get close to Harry, with whom she is having an affair, rather than a “sign” that she is in love with Bertha. This revelation highlights the idea that appearances can be deceptive and as well as Bertha’s naivety in assuming that everyone around her is attempting to be as honest and transparent as she wishes that she herself could be.

Ultimately, all the characters in the story—even Bertha—are merely putting on performances, as their appearances don’t reflect their inner states. Although Bertha describes her guests as “modern, thrilling” people, who are interested in “social questions,” they give little indication of this during the dinner, suggesting that this is merely a performance in keeping with fashion rather

than a true reflection of their interests. During the party, Bertha describes her guests as a “decorative group” suggesting their superficiality and their lack of substance.

Much of the conversation at the party also notably revolves around theatre and performance—reflecting both Pearl and Harry’s performance (as a loyal friend and a loyal husband) to mask their infidelity. The idea of performance also corresponds with Bertha’s performance as a woman who is happy in her life. Although Bertha does feel a genuine sense of bliss, there are indications throughout the story that her happiness verges on desperation and hysteria. Indeed, her frequent repetition of how happy she is gives the impression that she is trying to convince herself that there is nothing wrong with her life, despite the repression of her desires and the problems in her marriage, which become obvious as the story progresses. The revelation of Harry’s infidelity with Pearl throws into doubt all of Bertha’s, and the reader’s, certainty about how the other characters feel and draws attention to the fact that, while Bertha wishes to be a frank, honest person, her own true desires are hidden beneath a veneer of respectability and her performance as a conventionally happy woman.