

## Interpreting Symbolism In Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss"

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### Abstract:

In her short story about a young newlywed woman's seemingly happy life, Katherine Mansfield employs a multitude of symbols, at once poignant and sublime, yet obscure and abstract, to delve into the complex interweavings of human relationships and of the human experience. In this specific case, Mansfield, through her main character, explores the idea that emotions such as bliss, joy, and happiness are, at a most fundamental level, derived and created from a sort of naivety, or self-delusion, and are extrinsic in origin. In other words, "ignorance is bliss" and knowing is pain. Pain then leads to self-awakening and thus, personal growth and maturity.

**Key Words:** feminine, symbolism, imagery, Mansfield,

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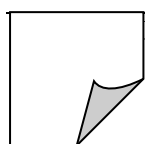
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Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss" is rich in symbolism and imagery. These are symbols that we may use to interpret the story. Symbols that appear in the story include: the pear tree, the garden, and the piano and fiddle. To go a step further, these symbols are used as literary devices, and these devices may be seen in some of the work her contemporaries; namely in the symbolism of the moon found in D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*. The sensual, feminine nature of the symbolism of the moon in *The Rainbow* can also be found in "Bliss." Mansfield's "Bliss" often switches back and forth from the first-person narrative point-of view, into an omniscient point-of view, to a semi, or fully, stream-of-consciousness one. This is a literary technique found in other modernist works and is attributed mainly to Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. The major symbols found in "Bliss" may be compared with the moon symbolism found in Lawrence's *The Rainbow*. This paper shall attempt to explain Bliss' literary significance by examining Mansfield's employment of symbols and her usage of certain literary techniques. Criticism on Mansfield, both general and specific to this paper's focus, shall be covered. While approaches and subject matter differ between critics, there are general tendencies shared among them and, can be incorporated into this paper. Expressly, most discourse on "Bliss" seems to revolve around the central motifs of symbolism and imagery. These critics are concerned with the sexual, social, and psychological meanings of recurrent and key symbols.

Edward Wagenknecht's essay "Katherine Mansfield" is illuminating as to the reasons why symbols are



such an integral part of Mansfield's works. He attempts to characterize her work as such:

Very characteristic of Katherine Mansfield's psychological interest is her penchant for transferring sense impressions or even for attributing physical properties to the immaterial. (Wagenknecht , p. 277)

C.A. Hankin's essay, "Katherine Mansfield and her Confessional Stories" asserts that Mansfield deliberately masked and made "Bliss" ambiguous, leading to uncertainty on the part of literary critics as to the "story's overall significance." Hankin finds a correlation between the ambiguous nature of "Bliss" and its symbols:

With perhaps more conscious artistry than in any other work, she encoded her meanings, using aspects of the ordinary, external world to suggest emotional attitudes and moods not easily expressible. (Hankin, p. 143)

Hankin is suggesting that Mansfield "encoded" her meanings. The symbols in the story act as these encodings from the "ordinary, external world." These "ordinary" yet symbolic objects we may define as the pear tree, the garden, fiddle, and piano.

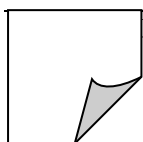
The pear tree is most notable in any discussion of symbols in "Bliss." The pear tree is located in the garden and both may be seen as primary symbols in the story. The first description Mansfield gives us immediately associates the tree with Bertha. The tree is described poetically and Bertha's identification with the tree is clear:

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. (Mansfield, p. 34)

Even from afar, Bertha clearly sees that the tree is perfect, and somehow a reflection of her own self, of her own state of mind. Judith S. Neaman's essay "Allusion, Image, and Associative Pattern" has suggested that the pear tree, "Of all the plants and trees in a garden,..." was the "most important" to Mansfield while she was writing "Bliss" because of what the tree symbolized to her personally. Her brother had recently died in the war and she reminisced about the many times they had sat under a pear tree back in New Zealand (Neaman, p. 249). Neaman's central claim was that "Bliss" contains within it several overt allusions to Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and to *The Bible*. Neaman claims that Bertha's garden symbolized the Garden of Eden, the pear tree with the tree of knowledge, and Pearl Fulton "fulfills her roll of the serpent in garden" because she is the catalyst of Bertha's awakening or biblical fall and exile from the Garden of Eden. Not only is Pearl a symbol of another symbol, the biblical serpent, she is also identified with the moon. Neaman indicates Pearl Fulton's "lunar qualities" in the text. Miss Fulton is dressed "all in silver with a silver fillet binding her head." Pearl's fingers are "like moonbeams...so slender that a pale light seemed to come from them" (Neaman, p. 244). Neaman writes, "If like a modern Eve, Bertha has lived in a fool's paradise which is destroyed by knowledge." In "The Fiction of Katherine Mansfield", Marvin Magalaner also recognizes Pearl's lunar symbolism along with Bertha's identification with the pear tree:

In an apparent attempt to universalize the meaning of her story, Mansfield attires her heroine in the garb of a pear tree and allows "her petals" to rustle "softly into the hall". At the same time, Pearl Fulton is elaborately presented as no less a figure than the moon itself. (Magalaner, p. 78)

In "The Hidden Love Triangle in Mansfield's 'Bliss'", Walter E. Andersen also delineates between the



two ladies regarding their symbolism. Following a direct quote of the scene in which Bertha and Pearl seem share a quiet epiphany while looking at the pear tree, Andersen writes,

The thoughts and feelings here belong to Bertha's dream, so different from what Pearl—the silver moon, the silver flower to Bertha's yearning desire—must be thinking as she stands next to her lover's wife. (Andersen, p. 399)

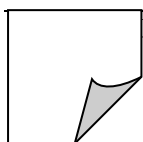
Magalaner is more cautious with this identification. He agrees with Bertha as pear tree but is not so convinced that the tree be identifiable only with Bertha alone. Looking at the same scene in which the two women stand side-by-side, staring at the pear tree, Magalaner seems to lean toward the idea of pear tree as phallic symbol or of Harry. He writes, "...that the tree...is a very phallic symbol that attracts, almost mesmerizes, the two women in the garden" (Magalaner, p. 79). The pear tree being identified with Harry would thus have him "divides his attention between the two." Magalaner feels that such an interpretation would "have the pear tree act as symbolic representation of both Harry and his wife, in two very different ways—an unusual and confusing use of symbol" (Magalaner, p. 79). Magalaner gives evidence that this duality in symbolic representation is what Mansfield intended.

Others have stated that the pear tree is a phallic symbol therefore connecting it with Harry or his sexuality. Andersen disagrees, preferring to find a correlation between the tree and Bertha's sexuality. He claims that the "flowering pear tree is a composite symbol..." This "composite" is one that represents Bertha's latent homosexuality and her "desire to be sexually used" (Andersen, p. 400). Andersen's interpretation is interesting and it builds on the interpretations of many critics before him. His reading is based on the assumption that most of what Bertha says, does, or thinks is a result of sexually frustration or sexual repression. The pear tree's flowers are described by Andersen as "sexually symbolic silver flowers." It is an obvious link here between flower and feminine sexuality. The silver color of the flowers probably links to Pearl's silvery blond and thus, the symbolic reference is more revealing. Andersen summarizes his point and writes, "Her pent-up desires are still in full flower, as are the tree and its flowers that symbolize them" (Andersen 403).

Thomas Dilworth's essay, "Darwin, Displacement, and Literary Theory Form in Katherine Mansfield's 'Bliss'" is also concerned with Bertha's sexuality in the context of the symbols found in "Bliss." He claims that the story's literary form "becomes symbolic." Here, he means that the major symbols include: "central imagery—the pear tree, garden, and moon—continually changes..." (Dilworth, p. 141). Dilworth is interested in how the imagery adapts and "rhymes" with "biological evolution"—within the larger context of Darwinism, and this he claims is the "thematic strand in the story." For the purposes of this paper, we shall focus in on how the imagery is related Bertha's sexuality. Following is an excerpt from Dilworth's essay:

Her erotic feeling then acquires objects, which are, in sequence, symbolically narcissistic, female other, and male spousal....she looks at a beautiful pear tree in her garden, with which she identifies... (Dilworth, p. 142)

Continuing on with the sexual motif and with the symbols that attach themselves to it, we may proceed to a discussion about other key symbols in "Bliss." The piano and the fiddle are more subtle in terms of what they symbolize about Bertha's sexuality. As Bertha wishes to express her bliss, she asks herself if that kind of expression would be considered appropriate. She asks herself "Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut



up like a rare, rare fiddle?" (Mansfield, p. 338) Later in the story, the nanny reluctantly lets Bertha feed the baby, saying how any change in who feeds the baby might "unsettle her." Bertha uses the analogy of the fiddle in this case as well. "How absurd it was. 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?" (Mansfield, p. 339) The "rare, rare, fiddle" is a symbol of Bertha's pent-up sexuality because it has not been played. Agreeing with Judith Neaman's original observation about the symbolism found in the fiddle, Thomas Dilworth writes, "It is poignant that Bertha's sexual awakening should be followed by her discovery of her husband's infidelity" (Mansfield, p. 150) Dilworth asserts that Bertha is an instrument and Harry the musician, thus, Bertha's need to be played "will not find fulfillment." He paraphrases Neaman in the following line: "Metaphorically, Bertha has been a musical instrument that is about to be played for the first time." Neaman argues that the fiddle is shaped like a female body and the analogy here also applies to the shape of pears. She writes, "...the fiddle—shaped like a pear and analogue, like the pear, to a woman's body—grows into a piano" (Neaman, p. 247). We have now moved on to piano as symbol. As Bertha is anxious about the upcoming night in which she must "share the bed" with her husband, she runs over to the piano and says "What a pity someone does not play!" twice. We can intuit here that Bertha is ready to be played and that she herself recognizes the piano as mirror of herself. He desires her husband and because of this desire, she has felt blissful all day.

Any conscientious reading of "Bliss" can lead to an observation about the sometimes erratic adjustments in point-of-view. There are frequent switches between points of views. There is an omniscient voice, often giving the reader more information about Bertha's thoughts than even Bertha herself. This omniscient voice seems to tap into Bertha's unconscious mind and provides key information. Edward Wagenknecht supports this stance and builds upon it, asserting that Mansfield makes use of the switches in point of view in many of her other works.

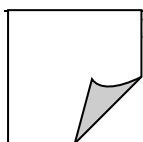
An interesting device in the writing of Katherine Mansfield is her tendency to shift, frequently and without warning, from the conscious to the subconscious. (Wagenknecht, p. 279)

Mansfield's modernist contemporaries often employed this frequent "shift" in point of view. "Bliss" incorporated a type of stream of consciousness technique and again we can point to Mansfield's contemporaries such as Woolf and Joyce.

Another work we may now look at is D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*. Both *The Rainbow* and "Bliss" contain key passages that have references to the moon. The moon is symbol of femininity, of feminine sexuality, power and magic. Pearl Fulton and Ursula Brangwen are the two characters identified with the moon in the two works. To illustrate the similarities in the usage of the moon as symbol, I have included the following two excerpts from each work:

She turned and saw a great white moon looking at her over the hill. And her breast opened to it, she was cleaved like a transparent jewel to its light. She stood with the full moon, offering herself... like a quivering anemone, a moon to fill in to her, she wanted more, more communion with the moon, consummation... (Lawrence , p. 319)

This is a key moment in the life of Ursula Brangwen and it corresponds to the key moment as seen in Bliss. Bertha and Pearl stand together, staring at the pear tree, under the moon light. Pearl is already garbed in



silver colors and looking mysterious and feminine; somehow magical.

And the two women stood side by side looking at the slender, flowering tree. Although it was so still it seemed, like the flame of a candle, to stretch up, to point, to quiver in the bright air, to grow taller as they gazed—almost to touch the rim of the round, silver moon. (Mansfield, p. 347)

The symbolism in "Bliss" is plentiful and a few have been looked at as keys in interpreting the story. The pear tree and the fiddle have been found to symbolize not only Bertha, but also her sexuality and desire. There are biblical connotations in the garden and the pear tree has been argued to symbolize Bertha, Pearl, or even Harry. Mansfield's usage of sudden and frequent "shifts" in narrative point of view, allow us to draw similarities between her and other modernist writers.

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