Bliss Study Guide

Bliss by Katherine Mansfield

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

By the time of her death, Katherine Mansfield had established herself as an important and influential contemporary short story writer. Her appeal can be traced to her focus on psychological conflicts, her oblique narration, and her complex characters that seem to be on the brink of a major epiphany.

One of her finest short stories, "Bliss," serves as prime examples of these defining qualities. The protagonist of the story, Bertha, experiences a sense of rapture as she reflects on her life, which later turns to disappointment and resignation as she discovers that her husband is having a love affair with her friend.

Mansfield's *Bliss, and Other Stories*, published in 1920, secured the author's literary reputation. While readers and critics at the time generally lauded the short fiction collection, a few reviewers objected to its controversial subject matter - infidelities, discussions of sexuality, cruel and superficial characters. Today "Bliss" is one of Mansfield's most frequently anthologized stories and still resonates with modern readers.

Author Biography

Katherine Mansfield Beauchamp was born to a wealthy family in Wellington, New Zealand, on October 14, 1888. She was educated in London and decided early on that she wanted to be a writer. She studied music, wrote for the school newspaper, and read the works of Oscar Wilde and other English writers of the early twentieth century.

After three years in London she returned to New Zealand, where her parents expected her to find a suitable husband and lead the life of a well-bred woman. However, Mansfield was rebellious, adventurous, and more enamored of the artistic community than of polite society.

She began publishing stories in Australian magazines in 1907, and shortly thereafter returned to London. A brief affair left her pregnant and she consented to marry a man, George Bowden, whom she had known a mere three weeks and who was not the father of her child. She dressed in black for the wedding and left him right after the ceremony.

Upon receiving word of the scandal and spurred on by rumors that her daughter had also been involved with several women, Mansfield's mother immediately sailed to London and placed her daughter in a spa in Germany. During her time in Germany, Mansfield suffered a miscarriage and was disinherited. After returning to London, Mansfield continued to write and was involved in various love affairs.

In 1911, Mansfield published her first volume of stories, *In a German Pension*, most of which had been written during her stay at the German spa. That same year she fell in love with John Middleton Murry, the editor of a literary magazine. Although they lived together on and off for many years, her other affairs continued.

Together Mansfield and Murry published a small journal, the *Blue Review*, which folded after only three issues. However, the experience led to friendships with members of the literary community of the day, including D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf. In 1918, Mansfield was granted a divorce from Bowden, and she and Murry married.

Stricken with tuberculosis in 1917, Mansfield became very ill. She continued to write, publishing her collections *Bliss, and Other Stories* and *The Garden Party, and Other Stories* in 1920 and 1922 respectively. The title story of the former collection, "Bliss" garnered much critical success, both in England and the United States. Its success established Mansfield as a major talent.

Her short fiction received favorable critical attention, and she continued to write even after her health forced her to move to Fontainebleau in France. Though she was separated from Murry for long periods towards the end of her life, it was he who saw that her literary reputation was established by publishing her last stories and her collections of letters after she died of a massive pulmonary hemorrhage in January, 1923, at the age of thirty-four.

Plot Summary

"Bliss" opens with Bertha Young reflecting on how wonderful her life is. As she walks home, she is overwhelmed by a feeling of bliss; she feels tremendously content with her home, her husband, her baby, and her friends.

At home, she begins to prepare for a dinner party she is having that evening. She reflects on the guests that will be arriving soon: Mr. and Mrs. Knight, an artistic couple; Eddie Warren, a playwright; and Pearl Fulton, Bertha's newest friend. Bertha wishes that her husband, Harry, would like Pearl; he has expressed some misgivings over the women's burgeoning friendship and Bertha hopes they will eventually become friends too.

As Bertha waits for her guests, she looks out on her garden. Her enjoyment of a pear tree with wide open blossoms, which she sees as representing herself, is ruined by two cats creeping across the lawn. Bertha meditates on how happy she is and how perfect her life is. She goes upstairs to dress, and soon thereafter her guests and husband arrive for dinner.

The group moves into the dining room, where they eat with relish and discuss the contemporary theater and literary scene. Bertha thinks about the pear tree again. She also senses that Pearl shares her feelings of bliss, and she is simply waiting for a sign from the other woman to show her recognition of the empathy between them.

After dinner, as Bertha is about to make the coffee, Pearl gives her the sign by asking if Bertha has a garden. Bertha pulls apart the curtains to display the garden and the pear tree. Bertha imagines that Pearl responds positively to the tree, but she is not sure if it really happened.

Over coffee, the group talks about a variety of topics. Bertha perceives Harry's dislike for Pearl and wants to tell him how much she has shared with her friend. She is suddenly overcome by a feeling of sexual desire for her husband. This is the first time she has felt this way, and she is eager for the guests to leave so she can be alone with Harry.

After the Knights leave, Pearl and Eddie are set to share a taxi. As Pearl goes to the hall to get her coat, Harry accompanies her. Eddie asks Bertha if she has a certain book of poems. Bertha goes to retrieve the book from a nearby table. As she looks out into the hallway, she sees her husband and Pearl embrace and make arrangements to meet the next day. Pearl reenters the room to thank Bertha for the party. The two guests leave and Harry, still cool and collected, says he will shut up the house. Bertha runs to the window to look at the pear tree. She cries "'Oh, what is going to happen now?"' but outside the pear tree is just the same as ever.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Bertha Young is a very youthful thirty. She feels like running instead of walking, like dancing, and like laughing at nothing. She has feelings of bliss, and they fill her with satisfaction. Why, she reasons, should one keep such feelings bottled up?

She returns to her home and finds that she has forgotten her key, a common occurrence for her, and must be let in by the housekeeper, Mary. She asks about the baby's nurse and inquires as to whether the fruit has come. She asks Mary to bring the fruit to the dining room so she can arrange it before she goes upstairs.

She takes off her coat in the chilly dining room so she will not feel at all restrained, and looks at herself in a mirror and sees a radiant woman full of excitement, waiting for something wonderful to happen.

Mary brings in the fruit and bowls for the arrangement, and Bertha admires their beauty. The beautiful fruit, some of which she has chosen to match the dining room carpet, fills her with joy. She arranges it and stands back to admire the effect. She feels that it seems to float in the air. She cautions herself that she is becoming hysterical and grabs her bag and coat and runs upstairs.

The nurse is feeding the baby when she gets upstairs. The baby, in a white flannel gown and blue woolen jacket, begins to jump when she sees her mother, but the nurse does not approve. Although the nanny objects to it, Bertha finishes feeding the baby. Bertha feels that she must beg permission to mother the child. The nurse gives directions for how she should restrain herself lest she excite the child. Nevertheless, she leaves the child with its mother, who is delighted. She loves her baby so much and again she has the feeling of bliss that she does not know how to express.

Nurse returns triumphantly, taking the baby from her mother and announcing that she is wanted on the telephone. It is her husband, Harry, telling her that he will be late and asking her to delay dinner for about ten minutes. She tries to express to him her feelings of happiness yet is unable to do so and abandons the effort.

Guests are coming to dinner—the Norman Knights—he is owner of a theater, she an interior decorator. There is Eddie Warren, a recently published poet, now a very popular dinner guest. In addition, there is Pearl Fulton, whom Bertha has met at the club, likes, and has invited to dinner. Bertha likes Pearl although she does not entirely understand her frank yet distant manner.

Harry does not like Pearl, saying that she is cold and anemic in the brain. However, Bertha feels that there is more to her than that and is determined to understand her better. Harry tends to put Bertha's ideas and feelings down, but she seems to enjoy it. It is one of his traits that she most admires.

She goes into the drawing room and lights the fire, rearranging the cushions that had been so carefully placed by the housekeeper. She grabs a cushion and holds it to her chest, again feeling the glow of total happiness that has stayed with her during the day.

She looks out the window at the garden, and a perfect pear tree reinforces her feelings of perfection and satisfaction until she sees a cat crouching on the lawn being followed by a black one, and she feels a shiver of apprehension.

The smell of the jonquils in the room is so strong that she is almost overcome. "I'm too happy—too happy!" she murmurs. She feels that the pear tree with its wide-open blossoms is a symbol of her life. She has everything, she feels. She is young; she and her husband are in love and compatible. They have plenty of money, a wonderful home and interesting and exciting friends. They have books and music, and she has a wonderful dressmaker. They will be going abroad in the summer, and they have an extraordinary cook.

She goes upstairs to put on a white dress, jade beads, green shoes and stockings. The Knights arrive with an amusing story about Mrs. Knight's unusual coat. Then Eddie Warren blows in and tells an over-dramatized tale about his taxi ride. Then Harry gets home, dashing upstairs to change. Bertha relishes his doing things at high pressure. She also ruminates on his competitiveness and his tendency to see everything as a test of his power and courage. Pearl Fulton's taxi finally arrives. Bertha has a feeling of proprietorship about her since she is one of her "finds."

Harry rings the bell for dinner; Bertha takes Pearl's arm and suddenly feels that the other woman has the same feelings that she, herself, is experiencing. Dinner is accompanied by gossip and small talk, and Bertha is sure that they do not share her mood, her feelings. Harry praises the food and compliments Bertha on the soufflé, which fills her with delight. She marvels that Pearl's mood is such a match for her own, thinking that it happens rarely between women and never between men.

Dinner is over, and Bertha invites everyone to come and see her new coffee machine. Pearl asks to see the garden. An understanding seems to flow between them as they look at the pear tree.

When asked about their baby, Harry declares that he never sees her and does not intend to take an interest in her until she has a lover. The two men react with displeasure at this statement, but Mrs. Norman, the interior decorator, simply declares that she is going to decorate a room for the Jacob Nathans.

A moment passes between Harry and Pearl that indicates that they do not like each other, which distresses Bertha, and she intends to confront Harry later about his attitude toward her friends. She has a moment of terror when she realizes that soon everyone will be gone and she will be alone with Harry.

She realizes that for the first time, she is feeling amorous about Harry. We find that she has been cold and unresponsive up to now, but she has felt that it was not a problem

since they were such good friends. Nevertheless, this sudden feeling of ardor leads her to feel that this is what her feeling of bliss has been about.

The Knights take their leave. Pearl and Eddie are planning to share a taxi. While Bertha and Eddie are talking in the drawing room about a writer, Harry quickly goes into the hall to help Pearl with her coat. Bertha moves quietly toward the door and sees Pearl and Harry embracing and planning a meeting on the following day. Pearl says goodbye to Bertha, murmuring, "Your lovely pear tree!"

Eddie follows Pearl, and Bertha is reminded of the two cats she has seen in the garden. She goes over to the window wondering what is going to happen now. The pear tree is as lovely and as still and full of flowers as ever.

Analysis

Point of view is important to the success of this story. Although it is told in the third person, we are limited to what Bertha, the protagonist, is thinking. Her state of mind is established at the beginning of the story. Her heightened sense of the advantages she enjoys not only foreshadows the ultimate outcome of the story, but it also sets the stage for the action and the characters. We know, as she does, that this state of excitement, this excessive mood of bliss, is not normal and does not bode well. She overreacts to the pleasures of preparing for the dinner party. She overreacts to her feelings about her baby. Her subservience to the nanny tells us that she is not in control of her life.

Her feelings of excessive pride and pleasure in what we know are not very attractive characteristics in her husband suggest even further that all is not well. He is pompous, unfeeling, uncaring and inordinately competitive in his dealings with others. His statement about the baby reveals him unacceptably callous in his role in this family.

The relationship between Bertha and Harry slowly reveals itself less than blissful, and it becomes apparent that her coldness in their lovemaking has set the tone. We would like to blame Harry since he has been painted as an unsympathetic character; however, the revelation that she has never before had strongly amorous feelings for him sheds new light not only on his behavior, but on her reasons for the feelings of anxiety that she has interpreted as bliss.

Therefore, the conflicts in the story are certainly internal, since we are seeing the action only through Bertha's response to what is going on. Moreover, Bertha's feelings are conflicted. The focus of the conflict is revealed when we find that the relationship between her and Harry has been less than satisfactory due to her own coldness, possibly frigidity. The struggle within her is appropriately focused on the privileges of their lives together and the potential that this life and the good things that go with it are in jeopardy. Her overreaction to the good life—the home, the baby, the garden, the trip abroad—is symptoms of her insecurity about the future prospects for that life. Her suddenly amorous feelings about Harry are an indication that the focus of the problems is her own incapacity to participate fully in the marriage. The action—the struggle

between her feelings about the long-term viability of her privileged life and the potential that it is threatened—comes to a climax when she witnesses the exchange between Harry and Pearl. The threat is real now. "Bliss" is over. Reality sets in.

The denouément of this story is interesting, and it is directly related to two symbols that this author has set up earlier in the story. The two cats, one being pursued by the other, obviously in mating behavior, disturb Bertha. She finds it "creepy." The second one is the pear tree, which comes into play three times. The first time is when she looks out at the garden before the dinner guests arrive and observe the tree and thinks how tall and slender it is and in "fullest, richest bloom." She sees it as perfect and calm, an obvious reference to her marriage. Later, she and Pearl look at it after dinner, and it is at that time that she feels that she and Pearl are perfect soul mates, an indication of how out of touch with reality Bertha is with regard to her relationship to her husband. Then, after the revelation that Harry and Pearl are having an affair, she again returns to the window and looks at the pear tree, which is "as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still." The denouément, the finishing out, the winding down of the story is contained in that brief moment and in that symbol. The marriage is unchanged; it is what it has always been: cold and passionless on her part, made up entirely of its material possessions. Outwardly, it seems perfect, but the truth revealed is that it is no marriage at all, and that truth must now be confronted.

It is tempting to speculate whether Katherine Mansfield is dealing with the nature of Bertha's sexuality. Are her feelings toward Pearl romantic? Is her inability to develop a heterosexual relationship with Harry an indication that she is, in fact, lesbian? Is the story truly about how a woman with an ambivalent sexual identity deals with making a life in a heterosexually dominated world? Is it actually about the desire to have a "good life," as described in this story, for a woman whose sexual identity is equivocal, one who lacks the ability to develop a satisfying relationship with a man?

Irony is a statement that means the opposite of what is expected such as when expressions of praise are used where blame is implied. This literary device is important in making this story interesting and memorable. It is ironic that Bertha is so suffused with happiness when all the elements that are set up to destroy her happiness are in place and known to her—her own ambivalent relationship with her husband and the dominance of the nanny in the care of her baby. It is also ironic that she is convinced that she and her rival are soul-mates when all the behaviors of Pearl suggest that not only are her feelings not in sync with Bertha's, she is carrying on an affair with her husband and concealing it. There is irony in Bertha's pride in the interesting guests who are revealed by their dialogue and behavior to be boring stuffed shirts.

"Bliss" is an effective short story because each word works to draw us into the struggle that is going on in the mind of the protagonist. We see in exquisitely condensed detail the characteristics of the nanny and the guests at the dinner party. We know these characters as well as or better than we come to know those in a long novel because of the distillation of descriptive detail, their actions, and their dialogue. A successful short story often has more impact than a novel simply because of the concentration of all the

aspects that make a story effective—plot, characters, conflicts, dialogue, etc. "Bliss" by Katherine Mansfield is a masterpiece in that it powerfully achieves a singular effect.

Characters

Pearl Fulton

Pearl Fulton is Bertha's enigmatic new friend in the story. With her indirect way of looking at people and her half-smile, she appears distant and mysterious. Although Bertha acknowledges that she and Pearl have not had a really intimate conversation, on the night of the dinner party Bertha senses an intimate attachment between them. This feeling of attachment is confirmed when Bertha discovers that Pearl is having an affair with her husband, Harry.

Mrs. Knight

Mrs. Knight and her husband are guests at Bertha's dinner party. Though she is "awfully keen on interior decoration," Mrs. Knight dresses herself in wild clothing and resembles a giant banana peel.

Norman Knight

Norman Knight is about to open a theater that will show thoroughly modern plays.

Mug

See Norman Knight

Eddie Warren

Eddie Warren is an effeminate playwright. He is described as always being "in a state of acute distress" and over the course of the evening complains about his taxi ride to the party.

Bertha Young

Bertha, a young housewife, is the main character in the story. Despite the fact that the story is told from her perspective, readers learn few concrete details about her. She appears to enjoy a fairly leisurely life, as she and her husband are financially comfortable. However, though she claims she and her husband are "pals," her home life would seem not as ideal as she views it; her marriage lacks passion, and the nanny clearly keeps her at a distance from her young daughter.

Bertha's most notable characteristic is her inexplicable state of happiness. As the story opens, she is pleased with all life offers her. During her dinner party, she seems to find

joy in almost everything she sees: the lovely pear tree in the garden, which seems to represent both herself and Pearl Fulton; her smart and cosmopolitan friends; the bond she is forging with Pearl. She even sexually desires her husband for the first time in her life and looks forward to spending the rest of the evening alone with him. By the end of the story, however, this world in which Bertha finds such pleasure is shattered when she discovers that her husband is having an affair with Pearl.

Harry Young

Harry is Bertha's husband. He provides a good income for his family, enjoys good food, and has a zest for life. However, his most notable characteristic is his duplicitous nature: while he declares to Bertha that he finds Pearl Fulton dull, he is secretly engaged in a love affair with her. In fact, during the dinner party, he pretends to dislike Pearl. Yet he risks exposure of the affair when he embraces Pearl in the hallway while his wife is in the next room.

Themes

Marriage and Adultery

The themes of marriage and adultery are central to "Bliss." Bertha believes (or makes herself believe) she has a fulfilling, complete marriage. Although she characterizes her husband as a good pal, she still contends they are as much in love as they ever were.

The climactic event of the story - Bertha's realization of Harry's affair with Pearl - proves that her husband does not share his wife's contentment. As Harry's affair demonstrates, he is not happy with the lack of passion in their marriage. Harry's actions reveal his duplicitous nature: not only has Harry been hiding the affair from his wife, he also pretends to dislike Pearl in order to cover it up. The risk that Harry takes in kissing Pearl in his own home, as well as his method of hiding his true feelings, indicate the likelihood that he and Pearl share a very strong connection.

Change and Transformation

Change and transformation are subtle themes in the story. Bertha's extreme sense of bliss, along with her new feelings of desire for her husband, show that she is undergoing a profound change in her life. She wonders if the feeling of bliss that she had all day was actually leading up to her increased attraction to her husband. At the end of the story, she wants nothing more than for the guests to leave so she can be alone with Harry.

Bertha's transformation into a sexual being is abruptly halted when she sees her husband kissing Pearl Fulton. She realizes that she can no longer look at her world as perfect, nor can she move forward to a new relationship with Harry. When she runs to the window to look at the pear tree she finds that it is "as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still." This is a clear sign that the change Bertha has undergone will be brought to an abrupt halt, for the pear tree - which is seen to represent Bertha - remains exactly the same.

Modernity

The concept of modernity is an important aspect of the story. Bertha constantly characterizes the elements of her life - her relationship with her husband and her friends, for instance - as being thoroughly modern. However, Bertha's view of modernity would seem to be a liking for things that are shallow, superficial, and duplicitous. She has rationalized her poor sexual relationship with her husband as "being modern" because they are such good pals. Thus, in Bertha's mind, a modern marriage needn't be based on love or attraction but simply on the bonds that would make two people friends.

Her view of the modern marriage hurts her relationship with Harry as he experiences dissatisfaction at the state of their relationship. Even Bertha and Harry's philosophy of raising children is perceived as modern. Bertha seems to spend little time with her daughter, instead entrusting her to a jealous nanny; moreover, Harry claims to have no interest in his daughter.

Bertha's friends are also considered thoroughly modern - but they appear utterly ridiculous. Mrs. Knight is described as a cross between a giant monkey and a banana peel. Her modern ideas for decorating - including french fries embroidered on the curtains and chairbacks shaped like frying pans - seem distasteful and ugly. Plays and poems mentioned by the guests seem dismal and pseudo-intellectual, and the satire reaches a high point in Eddie Warren's lauding of a poem that begins, "Why Must it Always be Tomato Soup?" The guests and their interests, rather than seeming "modern" and "thrilling," seem merely excessive and absurd.

Style

Point of View and Narration

The story is told from a third person, limited point of view. This means that readers are privy to only Bertha's perspective. In "Bliss," all events are filtered through Bertha, and her overexcited way of viewing the world forms the story's narrative technique. That the narration is studded with questions, interjections, and exclamations only emphasizes Bertha's perspective.

Bertha's emphatic and constant reassurances of how happy she is also serves to emphasize the fact that she may be hiding something from herself. Clearly, she is not truly as content with her life as she claims to be. The facts presented by the narrative reinforce this idea. For instance, Bertha spends very little time with her child. Her lack of meaningful activity also demonstrates the hollowness of her life. When she draws up a list of all the things she has - money, a nice house, modern friends - she ends with the pathetic inclusion of a "wonderful little dressmaker" and "their new cook [who] made the superb omelettes." Bertha's narration demonstrates the incompleteness of her life, though she cannot acknowledge it.

Satire

Satire is the use of humor, wit, or ridicule to criticize human nature and societal institutions. Indirect satire, as found in "Bliss," relies upon the ridiculous behavior of characters to make its point. Bertha describes her friends as "modern" and "thrilling" people, yet they are presented as ridiculous figures. Mrs. Knight resembles some kind of monkey, wearing a dress reminiscent of banana peels. The most notable characteristic of Eddie Warren, who appears to be a writer, is his white socks and his affected way of speaking.

Although these people aspire to be sophisticated and artistic, their conversation reveals how little regard they truly have for an aesthetic sense of beauty. Mrs. Knight, an interior decorator, wants to design the room of a client's home around a fish-and-chip motif. The poems and pieces of literature enjoyed by Eddie Warren border on the grotesque. Truly, Bertha's friends seem to have no idea of true artistry; instead, they wrap themselves up in what they believe to be fashionable talk about artistic ideas.

It is also clear that the group is more about talk and less about creating art. She thinks "what a decorative group they made, how they seemed to set one another off." In Bertha's mind, as in the group itself, the image of oneself as an artistic person is more important than actually being one.

Symbolism

The most important and complicated symbol in "Bliss" is the pear tree: it represents different people at different times throughout the story. First and foremost, it represents Bertha because she believes that "its wide open blossoms [are] as symbol of her own life." When Bertha first notices the tree, she is intent on pursuing the belief that her life is full and rich, open to wondrous possibilities.

Later on in the story the pear represents Pearl Fulton. Like the pear tree, Pearl, dressed in silver, emits a shimmery, ethereal glow. Thus both Pearl and Bertha - who are actually rivals - are connected to each other by association with the pear tree.

However, the pear tree also takes on a masculine identity in its phallic description: "it seemed, like the flame of a candle, to stretch up, to point, to quiver in the bright air, to grow taller and taller" under the gaze of the women. In this manifestation, the pear tree can be seen as representing Harry, who further unites the two women.

In addition, the pear tree seems to be reaching toward the moon, which previously had been identified with Pearl. Thus Harry's sexual desire, which Bertha now wants for herself, is clarified as reaching toward Pearl, not Bertha.

Historical Context

Post-World War I Art

In the aftermath of the devastation of World War I, artists expressed their shock at the horrors of war and their disillusionment with modern society. Art that emerged in the post-war period showed a marked departure from past forms as artists rejected traditional ways of expressing their ideas. For instance, James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* (1922) experimented with a stream-of-consciousness narrative. Poets often abandoned traditional rhyme and meter. Playwrights such as Bertolt Brecht saw the theater more as a classroom than as a place of performance. In his plays, characters would step out of their roles and directly address the audience.

The Bloomsbury Group

In the 1910s, and 1920s, London was a hubbub of literary and artistic activity. At the center of this activity was the Bloomsbury group, one of London's foremost intellectual and artistic circles. Members of this group rejected conventional ideas on religious, artistic, social, and sexual matters. Bloomsbury members included writer Virginia Woolf, painter Vanessa Bell, novelist and essayist E. M. Forster, art critic Roger Fry, and economist John Maynard Keynes. Attendees at the regular Thursday night meetings included such British literary luminaries as George Bernard Shaw and William Yeats.

In 1917, Leonard Woolf established the Hogarth Press, which went on to publish Sigmund Freud's works in English, T. S. Eliot's poetry, and Mansfield's short stories, among other pieces. The Bloomsbury group also set up the Omega Workshop, which lasted from 1913 to 1919. At the workshop, painters applied their ideas of abstraction and decorated ordinary objects, such as screens and chairs, in what today would be called modern design. Through their artistic work and ideas, the members of the Bloomsbury group were influential practitioners of twentieth-century modernism.

The British Economy

In 1920, Britain headed into a cycle of economic depressions, which were to last until World War II. Unemployment quickly reached 1.5 million, where it remained for most of the decade. A government committee was appointed to find remedies for this depressed economic situation; unfortunately, some of the remedies the committee recommended were ignored in light of pressure from other economic interests. As a result, the situation did not significantly improve throughout the decade.

The Modern British Woman

World War I had forced many women to join the ranks of male workers. At the outset of the war, the British government actively set out to recruit women as men went to war. Millions of British women entered government departments, factories, and private offices. They worked in many capacities, from clerical jobs to manufacturing.

Such increased employment and economic opportunities were important factors in women's emancipation. By 1918 the Franchise Act gave all women over the age of twenty-eight the right to vote (all men over the age of twenty-one were given this right by the same law). Soon the first British female sat in the House of Commons. However, women did not have equal voting rights as men until 1928, when the Representation of the People Act, known as the "flapper act," was passed.

As in the United States, young British women used fashion to reflect their changing status in society: shorter skirts and bobbed hair became the rage amongst young women in both countries. Despite these advances, most married women remained dependent on their husbands, and working women were paid less than men for equal labor. Women were not promoted to positions of power, such as judges, corporate CEOs, or managers.

Some women publicly decried this inequality. Beatrice Hastings wrote feminist articles published in the *New Age* in which she frankly discussed such topics as the sexual subjection of women to their husbands or the refusal of British universities to grant degrees to women. Laws passed in 1919 and 1923 also gave women rights equal to those of men in cases of divorce.

Modern British Society

British society underwent significant changes in the 1910s and 1920s. By 1914 the discrepancies between the lifestyles of the rich and poor were far less evident. Fewer people had servants, poorer people had access to the same goods as the wealthy, and middle-class society came to hold greater political power. More people owned homes that had the comforts of electricity and modern plumbing. The workweek was reduced in 1918 from 56 hours to 48 hours. Working-class people also saw improvements as new forms of recreation—particularly dance halls and talking films—enhanced their leisure hours.

Critical Overview

The story "Bliss" was first published in *The English Review* in 1920. Later that year, it became the title story for Mansfield's second collection, *Bliss, and Other Stories*. The story (and the volume) helped solidify Mansfield's reputation as an important contemporary writer.

Many early reviewers lauded the collection and Mansfield's unique narrative voice. Conrad Aiken, in a review for *Freeman*, called Mansfield "brilliant" and remarked upon her "infinitely inquisitive sensibility." Several reviewers drew a parallel between Mansfield's work and that of the Russian writer Anton Chekhov. Aiken noted this similarity but also countered any claims that Mansfield "borrowed" from Chekhov: "One has not read a page of Miss Mansfield's book before one has said 'Chekhov'; but one has not read two pages before Chekhov is forgotten."

Malcolm Cowley also commented on the resemblance to Chekhov. He deemed the collection to be a "voyage of adventure" filled with Mansfield's "own experiments and successful experiments."

Many reviewers paid particular attention to "Bliss." The anonymous reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* maintained, "it is all beauty till the end; beauty so deeply known and so discerningly expressed that that special condition of springtime exaltation seems here finally and fully held." The review ended with this positive judgment: "Miss Mansfield, with the air of dispassionately reporting, is making all the while her own world. In other words, she is an artist in fiction."

A reviewer for *The Athenaeum* contended that despite the "shock and disillusionment, . . . [and] seemingly wanton destruction of faith, vision, or happiness," in stories such as "Bliss," readers "are left believing . . . in human virtue and integrity."

Yet some critics focused on the story's cruel or disagreeable aspects. A reviewer for the *Spectator* countered these accusations early on: "That is not to say that they ["Bliss" and "Je ne parle pas francais"] are cheerful stories; they are anything but that; they have not, however, that element of trivial discomfort so dominant in modern fiction." This reviewer also acknowledged, however, that both stories would likely "shock some people by their outspokenness on some subjects usually left alone." The reviewer continued, "but surely the only real test for 'book ethics' is whether they will . . . be likely to do good or harm. Judged by this standard, we cannot imagine anyone objecting to Miss Mansfield's book."

Succeeding generations of critics and readers also singled out "Bliss" as one of Mansfield's finer stories. In 1934, the poet T. S. Eliot, in his *After Strange Gods*, put forth the story as an example of the modern mood. While early reviewers and critics tended to focus on literary and stylistic aspects of the story—as well as how it reflected contemporary society—as the years have passed, critics have broadened their scope of inquiry.

For instance, recent criticism of the story has explored Bertha's sexual desire (both for Harry and Pearl Fulton), which earlier critics disregarded. In addition to Bertha's sexuality, commentators hold differing views of many key facets of the story, such as their analysis of Bertha's personality, why Bertha experiences feelings of bliss, and what these feelings actually mean to her.

It is also interesting to note the way specific criticism has changed since the publication of "Bliss." The review in *Athaeneum* referred to one of Mansfield's "finest pieces of characterization" of "'ordinary' people" such as "the vigorous Ha Harry." Most contemporary critics, however, find Harry to be crass, aggressive, and crude.

When a number of Mansfield's books, journals, and letters were reprinted in the 1980s, reviewers again discussed the story. Katherine Dieckmann, in the *Village Voice Literary Supplement*, responded to Murry's assertion that Mansfield's stories were "read and loved by innumerable simple people," and not the academics or critics. She contended: "Bosh. Read Mansfield's story "Bliss" and it's immediately apparent how deeply connected she was to this cultured world—both critical of it and quite willingly a part of it. . . . The upshot of "Bliss" is that these social animals eat away at your soul."

Recent critics, however, contend there is much more to the story than simply Mansfield's effective use of satire. In fact, commentators laud the effective and unusual use of symbolism and imagery on multiple levels, the deft psychological portrait of Bertha, and Mansfield's evocation of mood in the story.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5
- Critical Essay #6

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she focuses on Bertha's feelings of bliss as a way of understanding the story.

In 1919, Katherine Mansfield wrote in a letter to a friend:

O this Spring—It makes me long for happiness. That is so vague. Each year I think—this year I shall not feel it so keenly—but I feel it more. Why are human beings the only ones who do not put forth fresh buds—exquisite flowers and leaves? . . . Really, on some of these days one is tired with *bliss*. I long to tell someone—to feel it immediately shared—felt without my asking 'do you feel it?'—Do you know what I mean?

Within the year, Mansfield had channeled her own feelings of exultation into "Bliss"—a story that helped solidify her literary reputation. The story demonstrates Mansfield's skill as writer while evoking a milieu of social superficiality and stagnation. At the same time, the story operates on a more emotional level, one to which countless readers have responded positively without precisely knowing why

"Bliss" relates a fateful day in the life of Bertha Young. Bertha, a thirty-year-old housewife, tenaciously clings to the belief that she has all that is good in the world: a fine, dependable husband; "an adorable baby"; "modern, thrilling friends"; and the material comforts that money can buy.

Yet as day merges into evening, it becomes clear that Bertha's declarations of happiness serve as a mere cover-up for all that her life lacks. This feeling reaches its culmination when she finds out that her husband Harry is having an affair with her friend, Pearl Fulton—the very friend she had believed was the only person to share her overflowing emotions.

The richness of "Bliss" allows for much discussion; critics have focused on different aspects of the story—those they deem most essential to its understanding—such as character analysis, sexual desire, and Mansfield's use of symbolism, imagery, and satire. Just as critics do not always agree on what is the most important facet of "Bliss"—what makes the story "work" and indeed survive the decades—neither do they always agree in their analysis of what remains at the core of the story: Bertha's feelings of bliss.

Critics remain divided over the genesis of these feelings that grip Bertha so strongly. J. F. Kobler, author of *Katherine Mansfield, A Study of the Short Fiction*, maintains that her feelings derive from a natural source; much as, it would seem, did Mansfield's own feelings as described in the letter of 1919. "Bertha definitely feels what is happening to her," he writes, "but she cannot discover [its] source."

In contrast, Saralyn R. Daly has asserted in *Katherine Mansfield* that Bertha's overwhelming protestations of happiness stem from her denied awareness of Harry's affair.

Most critics, however, attribute Bertha's neurotic behavior to her growing dissatisfaction with her life. Her feelings of bliss are thus artificially manufactured as a means to hold on to her facade of happiness. Indeed, Bertha, laughing at how beautiful she finds the fruit she has arranged, even declares, "'I'm getting hysterical.'"

In addition to the hints inherent in Bertha's words, the story's narrative style indicates all that she is trying to keep from herself. The opening paragraphs demonstrate her inability to perceive her life through her own eyes. Instead, she speaks as if she is in the process of observing herself. Though she speaks glowingly of moments when she wants to "laugh at—nothing, at nothing, simply" and of the feeling of "absolute bliss!" that comes over her as she walks home, it is subtly revealed that her words are not her own. She questions, "Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?" but then immediately edits her own thoughts: "No, that about the fiddle is not quite what I mean."

Later, while visiting her daughter in the nursery, Bertha returns to this turn of phrase: "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's repetition of the phrase shows her experimentation with finding a way to express her feelings, but she is only able to rework an expression she was not happy with in the first place.

Mansfield wrote of the former scene to her husband John Middleton Murry. "What I *meant*. . . was Bertha, not being an artist, was yet artist manqué enough to realise that these words and expressions were not and couldn't be hers. They were, as it were, *quoted* by her, borrowed with . . . an eyebrow . . . yet she'd none of her own." Thus, early in the narrative, Bertha reveals her engagement in an act of self-deception and self-creation.

As Bertha continues to congratulate herself on her privileged life, her very words indicate the rationalization taking place in her mind. "Really— really—she had everything," she thinks, as if trying to convince herself. The list that she manufactures moves swiftly from family and home to praises for her dressmaker and her cook. Harry and she "were as much in love as ever," but then she qualifies this statement with the revelation that they were "really good pals." Indeed, Bertha later reveals that she has never felt any sexual passion for her husband.

Her friends are "keen on social issues" but as their conversation at the dinner party shows, her friends are more concerned with inflating their own egos. Their lack of social conscious is revealed through Eddie Warren's description of "'A *dreadful* poem about a *girl* who was *violated* by a beggar *without* a nose in a little wood. . .'"

Bertha's claims of a good life ring hollow. She cannot even find solace in her daughter—though the moment in the nursery seems to be when Bertha really lets down her

defenses. She readily acknowledges that she "did not dare to" question the nanny's authority; later, the baby is snatched back by the nanny "in triumph" when Bertha takes a phone call. Bertha's lack of a close relationship with her daughter is not surprising given that the child, Little B, serves more as a reflection of her mother than her own person.

Part of Bertha's problems stem from her inherent immaturity, as underscored by her last name, "Young." Bertha's immaturity (as well as that of her friends) prevents her from achieving any meaningful connections with those who surround her. She is not able to adequately mother her child despite the fact that while feeding Little B "all of her feelings of bliss came back again." She does not experience sexual satisfaction with her husband nor is she able to truly communicate with him, as evidenced by her inability to keep him on the telephone when she "only wanted to get in touch with him for a moment."

Of Bertha's circle, only Pearl Fulton seems to possess a modicum of maturity (and it is significant that she is not really a member of Bertha's crowd but rather Bertha's latest "find"). Yet Bertha finds it difficult to truly connect with her new friend. Though she and Bertha had "met a number of times and really talked" her true essence eludes Bertha, who cannot break past Pearl's wall of reserve. Of course, as the story demonstrates, Pearl's maturity can be crudely construed as a sexual one—and her reserve could come from the knowledge that she is betraying Bertha.

It is not surprising that before discovering Pearl's and Harry's affair, Bertha reaches out to Pearl. The narrative states that "Bertha had fallen in love with her, as she always did fall in love with beautiful women who had something strange about them." Bertha's affection for Pearl seems to stem from her search for something or someone meaningful and different—which, compared to those she surrounds herself with, implies a person of some substance. Pearl Fulton, as the newest comer, still has that potential, while her friends and family have failed to inspire Bertha to experience *true* feelings of bliss.

Harry's coarseness is revealed in his "talk about food and glory in his 'shameless passions for the white flesh of the lobster'"; his inclinations show his predatory and aggressive nature. Eddie Warren's inherent foolishness and pretentiousness is revealed when he talks about a poem that begins with an "*incredibly* beautiful line: 'Why Must it Always be Tomato Soup?'"; he finds the poem so '"*deeply* true . . . Tomato soup is so *dreadfully* eternal.'"

Clearly, such people are no match for Bertha, who finds artistic pleasure in something as simple as the arrangement of fruit. Pearl, on the other hand, is the only person who seems to relate to Bertha's emotion. While the other guests are "dabbing their lips with napkins, crumbling bread, fiddling with forks and glasses and talking," Bertha remains silent. After dinner, when Pearl asks Bertha whether she has a garden, Bertha takes this as a sign.

Unfortunately, Bertha is simply reading into Pearl's actions. This is subtly acknowledged when, as the two women are regarding the pear tree, the narration reads, "And did Miss

Fulton murmur: 'Yes. Just *that*.' Or did Bertha dream it?" For Bertha, this feeling of shared communication opens her own life up to numerous possibilities, foremost that of feeling passion for her husband.

Instead of fulfilling her desires, however, Bertha discovers Harry and Pearl in a silent embrace. Thus does Bertha's burgeoning transformation come to an end. While she had hopes of evoking a change in her life, based on a feeling of shared emotion—which her life so sorely lacks—she resigns herself to a profound loneliness. The pear tree, which symbolizes Bertha (note that the pear tree is bathed in the white of the moon and rises against a jadegreen sky, and Bertha dresses in a white dress, jade beads, and green shoes and stockings), remains unchanged, "as lovely as ever," as Bertha's life seems destined to go forward, unchanged.

Because "Bliss" is so full of multiple meanings and symbolism, a thorough understanding of it on a textual level is difficult to achieve. Yet the story also succeeds on a more undefinable level. As Kobler maintains: "A first-time reader of a Mansfield story may have similar feelings of bliss while experiencing the story and may well not understand their source. Why does this story on this reading create such pleasure for this particular reader?"

Kobler's question may prove impossible to answer, but countless readers over the generations would agree with his assessment.

Source: Rena Korb, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Kotin Mortimer argues that a second story exists within "Bliss," one that is critical to the understanding of the story as a whole.

When the heroine of Mansfield's well-known, extraordinary short story discovers her husband's infidelity less than a page before the end, a *second story* untold in the first but necessary to its meaning erupts into the narrative, to devastating effect. The devious second story construction leads, and often misleads, the reader, who interprets clues and applies general cultural competence to "retell" the once-submerged second story. Appealing to the reader's cooperation in its complex processes, the story subverts the reading subject, placing her in the position of the unknowing heroine.

"The truth is," Katherine Mansfield wrote in her journal, "one can get only *so much* into a story; there is always a sacrifice. One has to leave out what one knows and longs to use. Why? I haven't any idea, but there it is. It's always a kind of race to get in as much as one can before it *disappears*." Suggesting Hemingway's principle of the iceberg, this double-edged observation, both naive and devious, insinuates an interpretive strategy: it challenges the reader to find the disappeared text. If we assume that the sacrificed material of the second story in "Bliss" contained what Mansfield knew and longed to use, still we may not agree on what she knew. Some readers soft-pedal the homosexualities of Mansfield's relations, or eliminate them altogether, while others make them a necessary ingredient in any interpretation of her fictions. I favor neither extreme. Let us recognize, as many have, that Bertha Young and her text are lacking knowledge; they are in the position of the analysand. As the analyst, however, I prefer not to claim to discover a particular referential knowledge behind the text (taken to be the "language" spoken by the analysand), but rather to be *knowledgeable about the functioning of language*. This wording borrowed from Shoshana Felman aptly describes the stance I take in reading "Bliss." I am interested in showing how the text reveals its own strategies for manipulating the reader, while it convinces us to apprehend a character as if she were a real person. In other words, I wish to be attentive not just to what Susan Stanford Friedman calls the horizontal axis, the "movement of characters within their fictional world," but especially the vertical space-time, referring to the "writer and reader in relation to each other," in particular the "interplay of the semiotic and the symbolic." "Bliss" is a good example of how the represented events of the story mirror the way language drives the narrative. Furthermore, although the story has an undoubted lesbian meaning that compels us to read out homosexual desire, it is rich enough to enjoy wider interpretations. The second-story construction, whose effects "work" only once, throws up a fortification protecting what Mansfield knew, and this is what guides our interpretive strategy. In question is not so much what hidden knowledge we may reveal about Bertha as what we may know about how the story moves us.

The dazzling feeling of bliss that Bertha Young shares with her "find," Miss Pearl Fulton, lies mysteriously hidden. At dinner, she thinks she has seen the enigma behind Miss Fulton's smile: "But Bertha knew, suddenly, as if the longest, most intimate look had passed between them - as if they had said to each other: 'You, too?' - that Pearl Fulton,

stirring the beautiful red soup in the grey plate, was feeling just what she was feeling"; Miss Fulton too has swallowed a bit of the sun. The reader will find out, with Bertha, that she is not wrong, but that this should not be cause for joy. Bertha ponders what could make her so certain of this knowledge: "What she simply couldn't make out - what was miraculous - was how she should have guessed Miss Fulton's mood so exactly and so instantly. For she never doubted for a moment that she was right, and yet what had she to go on? Less than nothing." Together, they look at the beautiful pear tree in the garden, "understanding each other perfectly." Setting this "perfect" understanding against a backdrop of grotesques taints the shared feeling with both comic and tragic irony. Bertha can hardly wait for her idiotic guests to leave so she can tell her husband in bed about her wonderful feeling. And it is then that she realizes with a shock that the name she must give to her feeling, instead of the euphemistic "bliss," is desire: "For the first time in her life Bertha Young desired her husband."

Husband Harry, however, professes to dislike striking blonds like Miss Fulton, and the reader has little choice but to interpret his rude behavior as Bertha does. In the last page and a half the narrative takes pains to describe the characters' movements: Pearl Fulton goes toward the hall to get her coat; Bertha is following her to help, but her husband brushes past, repenting his coldness; as a good hostess, she must then remain in the drawing room to listen to Eddie Warren's italicized praise of Bilks's *new* poem, "Why Must it Always be Tomato Soup?" and to fetch the anthology containing it from a table near the hall door - "And she moved noiselessly to a table opposite the drawing-room door and Eddie glided noiselessly after her. She picked up the little book and gave it to him; they had not made a sound." This elaborate staging, insisting implausibly on the silence of both characters, announces to the reader at the very least *that* something is going to happen, if not exactly *what*. As Bertha looks up to see Harry helping Miss Fulton with her coat, the second story bursts upon her like a tornado:

And she saw. . .Harry with Miss Fulton's coat in his arms and Miss Fulton with her back turned to him and her head bent. He tossed the coat away, put his hands on her shoulders and turned her violently to him. His lips said "I adore you," and Miss Fulton laid her moonbeam fingers on his cheeks and smiled her sleepy smile. Harry's nostrils quivered; his lips curled back in a hideous grin while he whispered: "Tomorrow," and with her eyelids Miss Fulton said "Yes."

With Bertha, we embrace the entire second story in an instant. We feel certain that Harry Young and Pearl Fulton have already become lovers, for he is a proficient reader of her eyelids, and it seems likely that "To-morrow" follows a "To-day." At the same moment, we realize that Bertha, through whose eyes the entire story is told, has been a particularly bad guide for us (leading us down the garden path?). Her understanding of Miss Fulton is far from "perfect," and her reading of her husband's behavior is always wrong. For the first-time reader, who does not know the second story until it surfaces, the second story sweeps away mistaken interpretations and irreparably changes the first. As Mansfield wrote, "[w]ithout [the sense of crisis] how are we to appreciate the importance of one 'spiritual event' rather than another? What is to prevent each being unrelated - complete in itself - if the gradual unfolding in growing, gaining light is not to be followed by one blazing moment?" The blazing moment, the eruption of the second

story into the first, links the spiritual events of Bertha's bliss in a sudden new light, which casts into shadows the "gradual unfolding in growing, gaining light." Until these moments, our reading is necessarily naive; it becomes devious when the second story bursts into the first.

The exclusive focus on Bertha and the scintillating expressiveness of her discovery of desire also take our attention away from any clues to the threatening tornado. Our second reading finds them. The first story is highly indexical (rather than functional), particularly in its treatment of the sublime bliss. Preeminent among symbols indexing the mysterious and enchanting feeling is the pear tree in perfect full bloom at the end of the garden, which Bertha takes as an icon of her own life. She dresses for dinner in a flowing white dress with a jade necklace, and green shoes and stockings, thus uncannily presaging the white-blossomed pear tree against the jade-green sky at dusk. Yet this index also serves as an early clue to the reader, if not to Bertha, that the bloom is not her own, for later in the moonlight the tree turns silver, "silver as Miss Fulton" in her elegant dress. When Miss Fulton asks to see the garden, Bertha takes this request as an enigmatic "sign," and when she sees the pear tree, Bertha fancies she says "Yes. Just *that*." As Miss Fulton and Bertha together gaze at the slender tree, it indexes their "perfect" understanding: "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 and taller as they gazed - almost to touch the rim of the round, silver moon." Symbolic of the fullness of desire, no doubt suggestively phallic, the fantastical tree finally stands as an index not of Bertha's bliss but of Miss Fulton's, which remains undisturbed at the end of the story. With Miss Fulton's farewell words echoing in Bertha's mind ("Your lovely pear tree - pear tree - pear tree!"), she runs to the window and cries, "Oh, what is going to happen now?" The story thus closes on a question that calls explicitly for a further narrative, and the only answer, in the final one-sentence paragraph, is again indexical and not functional: "But the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still." Bliss remains - not Bertha's but Miss Fulton's.

A second index, which the reader probably ignores on a first reading, is also found in the garden when Bertha first looks out, before the guests arrive: "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." The cat is the vulgar counterpart to the sublime pear tree, the defect that dooms the "perfect" symbol. Yet if it passes unnoticed in the first story, it reappears after the second story has erupted. When Miss Fulton leaves after murmuring "Your lovely pear tree!," Eddie follows her "like the black cat following the grey cat." For Bertha now that the tornado has burst upon her, the silvery, blond Miss Fulton, with her moonbeam fingers, has become the creepy gray cat that slithered snake-like below the beauty of the miraculous tree. Against a pervasive array of vibrant and compelling colors, in this narrative, black and gray are merely two intensities of non-color. Not only has Miss Fulton become a sinister, treacherous cat, the devious introduction of evil into paradise, but she has lost her shining silver mystery and taken on a dullish gray - no enigma but a trite, brutal platitude. The gray cat is a distant clue to the second story, but the reader is not allowed to give it a precise interpretation

until the second story has shattered the first. Everything was not perfect, after all, in the garden.

There are many other clues, but the most intriguing lie in the very feeling of bliss and the muted mystery of its origin in Miss Fulton. After the shared fantasy of the phallic pear tree, the following paragraph offers, on second reading, an insertion point for a clue addressed to the reader: "How long did they stand there? Both, as it were, caught in that circle of unearthly light, understanding each other perfectly, creatures of another world, and wondering what they were to do in this one with all this blissful treasure that burned in their bosoms and dropped, in silver flowers, from their hair and hands?" The third person plural, the stressed word "both," the plural noun "creatures" all tell us that Miss Fulton's case is exactly like Bertha's. As Judith Neaman believes, "Bertha's 'crushes' on women are nothing new in her life, but her desire for her husband is both new and startling to her." Yet this crush on Pearl Fulton also remains in the second-story mode, leaving us to supply the details: without knowing it, Bertha "found" Miss Fulton because Harry had already become her lover.

This untold story lies buried in such a well-fortified location that the reader's access to its ramifications leads through many deviations. Let us first see how the story misleads the reader by proposing meanings that turn into red herrings. Given the ironic context, the reader may, during a first reading, assume that the developing point of the story lies in the contrast between the sublime sensation of bliss and the grotesque social mores the story satirizes - between the sensually poetic internal feeling and the ridiculously ugly external portrayal. Mr. Norman Knight, putative producer of plays, who evolves in a milieu in which writers named Oat write plays called "Love in False Teeth," screws and re-screws a large tortoise-shell-rimmed monocle into an eye and is called "Mug." Mrs. Norman Knight, whose orange coat sports processions of black monkeys and who seems to be wearing a dress made of scraped banana skins, is nicknamed "Face" and is going to decorate a room with a "fried-fish scheme, with the backs of chairs shaped like frying pans and lovely chip potatoes embroidered all over the curtains." Effete Eddie Warren, poet and admirer of poems with "*incredibly* beautiful" first lines about food ("It's so *deeply* true, don't you feel? Tomato soup is so *dreadfully eternal*l"), is terrorized by taxi-drivers and always speaks in italics. A very large portion of the story is devoted to the pretentious and inane conversation among these remarkable specimens of the superficial, self-satisfied bourgeoisie, providing a comic backdrop to the seemingly sublime drama within Bertha. The narrative induces the reader to pursue this contrast even into the relation between husband and wife; although Bertha's tenderness toward Harry does not readily allow us to see him as an utter grotesque, like his guests, we doubt that this blunt, superficial, "extravagantly cool and collected" pasteboard confection will rise to Bertha's sublime heights. His first manifestation in the story already reveals that he is not on Bertha's poetic level. So brusque is he on the phone that she cannot tell him about her new feeling, and she concludes that civilization is idiotic. Everything that goes on around Bertha is external and ridiculous except Miss Fulton; when the Norman Knights leave, Bertha feels that "this self of hers" has taken leave of them forever; she has moved to a different plane, in the sole present company of Miss Fulton, and in the naively anticipated company of her husband. We predict an

outcome that would include a rude awakening, an abrupt fall from the heights of bliss to the new discovery of her husband's mundane reality, and, possibly, Pearl Fulton's.

In this way, or in another, the reader formulates erroneous hypotheses on a first reading which must be rejected or at least significantly revised on a second reading. If, like John Middleton Murry, we see mainly that caricature contradicts pathos, then we will only describe the story as a "sophisticated failure." Any failure on our part would consist in not seeing how the story masks and thus reveals its messages by forcing mistaken interpretations. Although it appears that authorial irony is directed only toward the grotesques, and not toward Bertha, it is the story's intentions that are ironic. Little prepares us for the supremely ironic discovery that what Miss Fulton shares with Bertha is also her husband, not just the wonderful feeling of bliss, and that the day when sexual desire finally flares up in her, after several years of marriage, is the very day she will see it destroyed. The knowledge Bertha acquires only shows her that her vision was defective. Thus our reading neurosis takes the form of an interpretive construction or delirium that is simply wrong. While erroneous hypotheses protect the reader from the second story, the second reading forces one back to read and recognize the ironic treatment of the heroine. It is then that the reader becomes as devious as the second story.

Bertha founders in a "snare" in the narrative, and the reader with her, when she thinks her husband is "simple" and really dislikes Miss Fulton, and when she interprets the way Miss Fulton refuses a cigarette as an expression of her hurt ("she felt it, too, and was hurt"). For much of the story, Bertha's desire to explain the mysterious attraction of Miss Fulton, the elusive feeling of bliss, the miraculous unspoken knowledge, only leads to blockage of the enigma. No detective she, the solution explodes upon her unbidden and unwanted. What I now want to show is that shared sexual desire, the essence of the enigma, is the very thing that makes it difficult for Bertha to understand the mystery.

What Bertha catches sight of in the hallway is the tip of the iceberg - the only part of the second story that is visible, momentarily and by accident. Readers' competence, including Bertha's, leaves no doubt whatsoever that the rest of the second story has happened just as surely as we know an iceberg lies, as Hemingway said, seven-eighths under water. Bertha is forced to let the entire second story into her consciousness. In this structure there is a kind of internal intertextuality: the text refers not to an intertext outside the story, but to one that lies within - under water, as it were - the familiar story of the unfaithful husband. When Bertha sees her husband embrace Miss Fulton, she learns not only the nature of the secret Miss Fulton contains, but also that there is a *real* secret about mundane events, what one might call a degraded version of the mysterious enigma she had perceived. Until that point the wall surrounding the second story construction can fairly be called a fortification, a product of her own nascent sexual desire.

Chicane and redan, both describing deviations in fortified walls, are Lacanian terms for the fortifications characteristic of obsessive neurosis. In "L'agresivité en psychanalyse" Lacan describes the obsessive neurosis as "une décomposition défensive, si comparable en ses principes à celles qu'illustrent le redan et la chicane, que nous

avons entendu plusieurs de nos patients user à leur propre sujet d'une référence métaphorique à des 'fortifications à la Vauban'" ["a defensive decomposition, so comparable in its principles to those that illustrate the *redan* and the *chicane*, that we have heard several of our patients employ with regard to their own selves a metaphorical reference to 'Vaubanlike fortifications.'"] The structure of these bastions is "particulièrement destinée à camoufler, à déplacer, à nier, à diviser et à amortir l'intention agressive" ["particularly aimed at camouflaging, displacing, denying, dividing and deadening the aggressive intention"]. When Bertha interprets Harry's behavior toward Miss Fulton as rude, unkind, or sarcastic, when she concludes that Harry really dislikes Miss Fulton, Bertha is producing a neurotic interpretation that functions, unconsciously, to defend her from a fact that her conscious mind has no purchase on, namely that if the feeling she shares with Miss Fulton is sexual desire, then Miss Fulton too must be feeling desir

Instead, the entire narrative about Bertha's shared feelings with Pearl Fulton presents a neurotic, unconscious camouflage, displacement, disavowal, division, and deadening of Miss Fulton's aggressive intentions, to use Lacan's terms. Like another bit of the iceberg, the text supplies openings to its own devious structures. At the revelation of Bertha's indescribable feeling, the text stops just short of realizing the source of Miss Fulton's feeling too. She has been mentally telling Harry: "I shall try to tell you when we are in bed to-night what has been happening. What she and I have shared." A break in the page follows, after which the narrative continues: "At those last words something strange and almost terrifying darted into Bertha's mind. And this something blind and smiling whispered to her: '. . .you and he will be alone together in the dark room - the warm bed . . . .'" She and her husband had been "such good pals" and she had not loved him "in that way," but now she desires him "ardently! ardently! . . . Was this what that feeling of bliss had been leading up to? But then - " and here the text of her thoughts is interrupted by the pedestrian needs of the grotesque Mug and Face. The attentive reader will come to see that the dash stands for and eliminates (camouflages, displaces, etc.) the repressed thought: *Miss Fulton* desires Harry Young "ardently! ardently!" and loves him "in that way." The story might have erupted at that dash, had there not been the defensive decomposition of Bertha's "perfect" understanding of Miss Fulton. The rhetorical indices of her perfect understanding - for instance, the terms "miraculous," "exactly," "instantly," "never doubted for a moment" - bolster the fortification. Instead, the break in her thoughts is only a clue to the alert reader, who must, I believe, wait for a second reading to fill in the dash with the story of Miss Fulton's bliss - the internal intertext. Although this dash does not represent an ellipsis during which the entire second story takes place (like a famous dash in Kleist's "Die Marquise von O . . ."), by the second reading one probably wonders if Bertha is as naive as she seems. The bulk of the first story, then, can be read as an example of Lacan's , the zigzag structures in the wall designed to prevent the passage of enemy forces, or the devious, circuitous, surreptitious formulations of the narrative which lead the reader astray - the erroneous hypotheses about the first story, the false clues or snares, the inadequate, defective, or devious vision of our reader's guide - in all, the failure of narrative reliability hidden behind the walls thrown up by Bertha's apparent self-knowledge, her "growing, gaining light."

We might profitably compare this second story structure to the repetition of a primal scene. In Freud's original formulation, the primal scene portrays the child witnessing the mother and father in sexual embrace. As is well known, however, Freud revised this bald account by claiming the scene could just as well be only a fantasy. Carrying the metaphor into the textual domain, Ned Lukacher writes that primal scenes are *interpretive constructions*. Thus it suffices to see the mute scene in the hall; from it Bertha and the reader construct the entire second story. The love affair Harry Young is having with Pearl Fulton could well be described as the forgotten primal scene of Bertha Young's new bliss. Miss Fulton has already had the experience that Bertha's story refers to, and Bertha's sublime feeling is only an ironic repetition, a degraded version of the original, a mere copy. The second story here is thus a kind of primal scene which the first story conveniently "forgot" to tell the reader (or Bertha), thus protecting her new-found bliss, until the fortification is breached.

That moment we may well call a Lacanian instant, the event by which Bertha learns that her desire is the desire of the other. Lacan's well-known statement that desire is the desire of the other occurs in "La subversion du sujet et la dialectique du désir." Until this moment, Bertha thinks - and the reader with her - that she has reached a new knowledge of her feeling, when she identifies it as sexual desire. Here the narrative is unflinchingly direct: "For the first time in her life Bertha Young desired her husband." But it is also deceptive in its directness; to say that Bertha desired her husband is to mask, by exploiting the simplicity of this phrase, the complexity of the relations of desire that lead to the final moment. Discovering Miss Fulton's desire for Harry, Bertha learns that her new desire for her husband is not simple but complex, for the second story soon demonstrates that her knowledge is rather what Lacan calls "nescience," misrecognition or misprision, found in the structure of the fantasy: "Car là se voit que la nescience où reste l'homme de son désir est moins nescience de ce qu'il demande, qui peut après tout se cerner, que nescience d'où il désire" ["For there is it seen that the misprision in which man remains of his desire is less misprision of what he is asking for, which can after all be discerned, than misprision of where he desires from."] That is, misrecognition of desire does not come from not knowing its object, which can be and is discovered, but from the fact that the self does not know where desire comes from. "Unknowing" is a misrecognition of the fact that desire is the desire of the other.

In psychoanalysis, unknowing occurs in the family trinity; the girl's desire for the father is the mother's desire. Among others, a reading in this vein emerges from the symbolic structures of the story. Throughout, while Bertha is called by her first name, like a child, and her last name, Young, only underscores her youth, Miss Fulton is never called simply Pearl. The opening segment of the story explicitly opposes maturity ("thirty" and "sensible") to youth as Bertha Young arrives home ("she wanted to run instead of walk, to take dancing steps on and off the pavement, to bowl a hoop"). The next narrative segment concerns an episode I have not mentioned so far, because it seems to have very little to do with the events in the dining room, drawing room, and hall after the guests arrive, events that seem to constitute the entire story. After arranging the many-colored fruit in the blue bowl and the glass dish, Bertha runs upstairs to the nursery where Nanny has just finished bathing and feeding her daughter. Here Nanny is the authority, disapproving of this unwanted interruption, and Bertha is just the "poor little

girl in front of the rich little girl with the doll." Even her desire for her daughter is breached in this way. In this scene too Bertha completes a reflection she had begun as she waited on the stoop to be let in, having childishly forgotten her key, a reflection interrupted (as many of Bertha's thoughts are) when the maid opened the door. There she had thought: "Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?," but had then corrected herself: "No, that about the fiddle is not quite what I mean. . . . It's not what I mean, because - Thank you, Mary," she stops, as the door is opened. The dash is later filled in when Bertha begs Nanny to let her finish feeding her daughter: "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?" - a woman who, in this scene, stands in for a mother, and has a visibly but paradoxically greater authority and power. "In another woman's arms" is precisely where Bertha will at last see the reality of her husband. In the triangle relating Harry, Bertha, and Miss Fulton, Bertha stands in the position of the child who discovers her desire for her father, and immediately thereupon discovers that she is merely repeating her mother's desire.

This rather simplified triangle stands for all possible permutations of the relations of desire, which never become fixed. The second story sub verts the first story just as the unconscious subverts the subject, splitting it; the story subverts the discourses of the self that produce knowledge and understanding. With its second-story structure, "Bliss" says that a discourse of desire is not sayable; it is among the things that the narrative has to sacrifice (as Katherine Mansfield wrote in her journal), the better to command understanding. For the "*so much*" one can get into a story reveals the traces of what disappears. We demand to know quite little of the second story, and most of what we do know is based on our general competence; the story is "in" the first story in the form of a perverse secret that ceases to be secret for the first story. Rather, it is the very process and structure of hiding (the forgetting of the primal scene, the fortification, the sighting of the tip of the iceberg) that give the story its chilling efficacy; it exists for these structures of hiding, structures that mostly censure saying but allow it to erupt in minimal form ("Tomorrow," says Harry Young) to confirm what they have shown by hiding. The narrative with its second- story structure forces us to produce in our reading, as Shoshana Felman writes, an "analysis of the unconscious (the repressed) not as hidden but on the contrary as *exposed* - in language - through a significant (rhetorical) displacement." Connoting both dissertation form and voyeuristic pleasures, the word "exposed" well expresses the ambiguous effectiveness of the second-story structure. In these rhetorical and unavowed (camouflaged, etc.) structures, what Katherine Mansfield knew, and suppressed, lies revealed. She knew how fragile desire is; she did not let on that she knew the misadventure awaiting her heroine. She knew why Bertha was blissful, but kept it in the second-story mode. She knew desire throws up fortifications, and she lent her reader an ample supply of obstacles.

The dynamic of this narrative process is an instance of what Lacan calls *fading*. Originally meaning the weakening of the signal in radio transmissions, allowing intermittent reception of other wavelengths, the term is used in typically metaphoric fashion to describe the situation in psychoanalysis in which the unconscious speaks intermittently of things the subject has no knowledge of, because of its subordination to the signifier. The subject is thus subverted and split, and the fading is the point at which

the speaker's desire can never be recognized. Rather than force a purely psychoanalytic reading in which the text would be compared to a patient undergoing analysis, I would prefer to take "fading" as a metaphor for a literary structure of significant complexity. That is what Barthes does when he borrows Lacan's concept to explain the plurality of a text, in a section called "Le fading des voix" the fading of voices. Most utterances, in a classical text, speak from a known voice. It happens, writes Barthes, that

the voice is lost, as if it were disappearing into a hole of the discourse. The best way to imagine the classical plural is then to listen to the text as a shimmering exchange of multiple voices, posed on different wavelengths and seized at times by an abrupt fading, whose gaps permit the enunciation to migrate from one point of view to the other, without warning.

Fading subsumes all the double, devious, and ironic mechanisms of the narrative; "Bliss" is plural in intermittently and partially allowing the second story to be heard. In the breaches Bertha's thoughts make in the story of the grotesques, the second story throbs behind the wall of her fortification, until, with the fading of these inane and ironic voices, one hears the point at which Bertha's desire can never be recognized. In the lapses of the "shimmering exchange of multiple voices" the ones in Bertha's head, another voice is heard, intermittently, as if from a different wavelength - a voice posing questions for the reader. When the story stops, the reader continues, telling herself the story of the adulterous love affair, from its still obscured beginning in female desire to its vulgar exposure among the grotesques. It is a measure of the power of "Bliss" that readers want to go well beyond its ending to say "what happens" next; but does the reader have an answer to Bertha's question? Harry's love affair will obviously bring changes to Bertha's desire for her husband, but how much can the reader say about Bertha's comprehension of Pearl Fulton? How vast and deep is Bertha's forced insight?

It is my contention that each reader will answer differently, and the gist of my answer ties in the dynamic of fading. Bertha can never recognize her relation to her self, no more than anyone can. Fortifications remain necessarily in place. Her homosexual desire is revealed only in the structures that hide it and keep it hidden even beyond the end of the story. Bertha is not allowed to recognize the censor that guards the door of insight; that role is strictly the reader's. We think we have at last understood the mystery, found out the secret, solved the enigma, but we do so only if we think of Bertha as a real person. Are we not deceived when the narrative explains: "Bertha had fallen in love with [Pearl Fulton], as she always did fall in love with beautiful women who had something strange about them"? Is this an excessive, rhetorical expression of Bertha's enthusiasms, or is the text forcing us to argue that the direct, overt meaning is the disguised one? As long as we affirm that we are knowledgeable about how language - the language of narrative - functions, then reading turns our knowledge to misprision about where our desire to know comes from. No more than Bertha do we know what is going to happen now.

Source: Armine Kotin Mortimer, "Fortifications of Desire: Reading the Second Story in Katherine Mansfield's 'Bliss'" In *Narrative*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1994, pp. 41-52.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Neaman argues that allusions to the Bible and Shakespeare's Twelfth Night *offer answers to questions that have troubled critics*.

"Bliss" Katherine Mansfield's most ambiguous story of initiation, poses many problems, some of which have plagued critics for years. What is Bertha's "bliss"? What does Pearl Fulton represent and to what does her name allude? Why a pear tree instead of an apple? Was Bertha really cold? Is she hysterical? Would *would* "happen now"? Why, at the end of such a crisis of disillusionment, is the pear tree "as lovely as ever"? Yet, Mansfield has answered these questions in the story by interweaving allusions to two sources - the Bible and Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* - whose major role in "Bliss" has been largely ignored. These allusions not only answer the crucial questions but they also illuminate the meaning of the tale, while simultaneously charting the anatomy of its creation.

Perhaps because critics have seen all too clearly the obvious tree of knowledge blooming in Bertha's garden, none seems to have detected the first overt clue to the thematic importance of the Bible. It appears as a familiar echo in the words, "for the first time in her life, she desired her husband." In Genesis 3.16, among the punishments God metes out to the disobedient Eve is: "thy desire *shall* be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee." In visiting this affliction on Bertha at the very moment that she first experiences marital lust, Mansfield appears to indicate an easy familiarity with the long tradition of biblical commentary. According to both Augustinian and Talmudic interpretation, lust entered the world as a result of the Fall. "Bliss" pursues the theme by chapter and verse.

In the same chapter of Genesis, directly before and after Eve is first sentenced to a life of connubial desire, there are numerous phrases so similar in image and content to those Mansfield uses in "Bliss" that the story seems to be almost a gloss upon the Bible. The evidence that the words of Genesis were deeply embedded in her mind appears in a diary entry of February 1916 in which she remarks that, since she came to Bandol where she wrote "Bliss" in 1918, she has "read the Bible for hours on end." She wrote here of wanting to know "if Lot followed close on Noah or something like that. But I feel so bitterly that they ought to be part of my breathing." Furthermore, during the same brief period of feverish work in which she produced "Bliss," Mansfield wrote the story "Psychology" in which a character playfully remarks, "And God said; 'Let there be cake. And there was cake. And God saw that it was Good.'"

In both stories, words or phrases from Genesis appear in brief but they set up reverberations which guide the reader's responses to all subsequent events. In "Bliss," Mansfield's more indirect use of the words of Genesis is overbalanced by a closer attention to the intent and material of it. In fact, the parallels between the biblical work and Mansfield's story are so close that the words of Genesis may inform the reader not only of what Bertha's life was before the day of her maturation but also of what her future will be. In this way, Genesis answers Bertha's last question: "What is going to

happen now?" If, like a modern Eve, Bertha has lived in a fool's paradise which is destroyed by knowledge, then she and Harry are destined to repeat, in a modern form, the fate of their first models. This is so much the case that God himself answers Bertha's question about her future. What "will happen now" is that Bertha will desire only her husband and he will dominate her life. "In sorrow [she] will bring forth children" while Harry, who has tasted another form of the forbidden fruit of knowledge, will now eat "the herb of the field" "in sorrow . . . all the days of [his] life" (Gen. 3.17). Bertha's future children will be begotten in sorrow and bitterness born of the knowledge she has gained. She will know that Harry sees her as Adam saw Eve after the Fall - as the "mother of all living" (Gen. 3.20), which, in Mansfield's punning paraphrase, is Berth A' Young.

Because Mansfield's metamorphosis of this chapter of Genesis remains so close to its source, readers will not be surprised to find still further relations between the words and events of "Bliss" and those of Genesis 3. The garden in which this young pair learns the consequences of sin is populated not only by a wondrous tree about which all knowledge revolves but also by animals. Following her own associative thought patterns, Mansfield has linked the denizens of the first garden and the Youngs' garden with the behavior of Adam and Eve and also with Darwinian evolutionary theory. The Norman Knights are also compared to first forebears by their name but they are now the forebears of English society. Mansfield compares them to monkeys, for "Face" Knight, so perfectly matched with her mate, "Mug," is wearing a funny little coat with monkeys all over it and looks "like a very intelligent monkey."

Here the reader must wonder if Mansfield is using her Bible to deliver a post-Darwinian stab at English society. The rest of Face's outfit echoes Adam's and Eve's first attempt at clothing, which they made in Genesis 3 to hide their shame at their newly discovered nakedness. As God created for Adam and his helpmeet "coats of skins" (3.21) to help them "hide their shame," so Face wears a yellow silk dress that looks like "scraped banana skins" and she is later described as "crouched before the fire in her banana skin." No sooner has Bertha noticed the simian clothing and physiognomy of her guest than Mr. Norman Knight remarks on parenthood and paradise, "This is a sad, sad fall!. . . When the perambulator comes into the hall - . . . . "The final link of this particular chain which seems to stretch through Mansfield's mind from Bible to "Bliss" is forged when Norman Knight remarks in parting, "You know our shame."

Gradually, it becomes apparent that the innocent Bertha and her hairy mate, an emotional primate if there ever was one, have opened their house and garden to beasts from a number of literary fields. Eddie Warren, his last name removing all doubt of his nature and habitat, is a stuttering rabbit. Terrified by his taxi ride, dressed in white socks and an enchanting white scarf to match, Eddie speaks in conversational tones and patterns that often echo those of Alice in Wonderland's white rabbit.

Pearl has been called a moon to Bertha's sun and a parallel to the pear tree, which has also been identified with Bertha and Harry. However, Mansfield's descriptions of Pearl emphasize not only Pearl's lunar qualities (she is dressed "all in silver with a silver fillet binding her head" and her fingers, "like moonbeams, are so slender that a pale light

seemed to come from them") but also focus the reader's attention on her "cool arm," "heavy eyelids," and "[mysterious] half smile." Pearl is such an adept at enigma that everyone who encounters her assigns her another identity. Her conversation merely amplifies the mystery, for it is barely audible; she whispers and intimates. Bertha is not even certain what Pearl murmured about the pear tree or if she had guessed that Pearl said, "just that" when she looked out at the tree in the garden. Yet, it is Pearl who ask if there is a garden, Pearl whose "cool arm could fan - fan - start blazing - blazing the fire of bliss that Bertha did not know what to do with."

Enigmatic, dressed in scaly silver, full of whispers and murmurs, Pearl is infinitely tempting. Her lidded eyes conceal her passion for Harry. But she is secretive, intimating, cool-skinned and cool-souled, in other words, "the subtlest beast of the field" (Gen. 3.3). Thus, Bertha cannot see the truth until she glimpses the kiss. With that kiss, Bertha's innocence falls and her blissful illusions are destroyed. Only then does Bertha begin to see her mysterious friend in a new light. No longer the distant and enchanting moon of Bertha's hopes, Pearl now appears to her hostess to resemble the seductive gray cat who had provoked a shiver of sexual revulsion in Bertha earlier in the evening. One critic believes that Bertha's new vision of Pearl is evoked by a horror of the bestiality she perceives in her former love, since she considers that Pearl's purity has been sullied by the heterosexual behavior Bertha abhors. But, if we see Pearl as a serpent, the common Talmudic and patristic interpretation of the serpent's role in tempting Eve seems far more appropriate a view.

According to this traditional understanding of the Bible, it was the serpent's seduction of Eve that first induced her to lust for Adam. Pearl's seduction of Bertha awakens Bertha's lust for her own husband. In fact, Bertha's image of Pearl followed by Eddie, as the seductive gray cat followed the black cat, is so distorted a view of Eddie that it makes little sense if Pearl is not seen as the serpent. Mansfield has, after all, painted Eddie as effeminate at least and homosexual at most, hence hardly a likely candidate for seduction by a woman. Clearly the "grey cat, dragging its belly . . . [as it] crept across the lawn, and a black one, its shadow trail[ing] after," reminds Bertha, and is intended to remind readers of "Bliss," of the serpent of Genesis which God punished by decreeing that it should crawl on its belly.

In every possible way, Pearl fulfills the role of the serpent in the garden. She is one of those beautiful women with "something strange about them" with whom Bertha is always falling in love. Like the rest of these temptresses, she is strangely secretive while seeming to be so open and Bertha is certain that they "share" something. Until Bertha gains the carnal knowledge which will be revealed to her, she is incapable of understanding that what they share is a lust for Harry. By the time Bertha realizes that the "bliss" with which she has burned is sexual desire and then sees that desire mocked (all within moments), she has tasted the fruit of the tree and found it a bitter dessert to the banquet of sight and taste she has laid for herself and her guests. That the discoveries which cause her so much pain should take place at a dinner party celebrated in a house with a flowering fruit tree is no coincidence.

Critics who have noted the importance of the imagery of food and eating in this tale have ignored standard biblical associations among lust, fruit, and knowledge so clearly introduced in Mansfield's references to the food and eating which led to the Fall and lead to this fall. Bertha's first important act in the story is associated with these elements. The reader can see this link in her conflict between the enjoyment of temptation and her fear of succumbing to it. First she luxuriates in the beauty of the fruits she has bought for the party. Then, as she begins to fear the intensity she tries to repress it, crying, "No, no. I'm getting hysterical." As the tale and Bertha's growth simultaneously progress, the images of fruit and eating become less abstract and aesthetic and more active and hostile, for their connection with sex, flesh, and desire is clarified. Pearl rolls a tangerine between her luminous fingers. Harry loves the "white flesh" of lobster and "pistachio ices - green and cold like the eyelids of Egyptian dancers." The most emotionally evocative dish is made of eggs, reminding us of the embryonic Youngs and their new infant. In the forms of the new cook's omelets and the "admirable souffle," eggs become the crucial bonds in the marriage, inspiring Harry's praise which makes Bertha almost weep "with childlike pleasure."

After Bertha sees Harry and Pearl embracing, the nature of the imagery shifts from its focus on the food to be eaten to a new emphasis on the act of eating it. With this shift, the cannibalism which has been vaguely implied now becomes glaring. When Harry kisses Pearl "with his lips curled back in a hideous grin," the reader, like Bertha, sees him devouring this delectable woman whose serenity he had earlier attributed to a "good stomach." Hence, fruit becomes the visible apple of temptation (at one point in the story it is a tangerine turning in Pearl's fingers), and eating becomes the act of lust born of knowledge.

If fruits and flesh and the devouring of these represent desire and consummation as well as knowledge, then instruments and the music *not* played on them represent human bodies and sexual frustration and/or repression. Marilyn Zorn quotes Mansfield's letter of May 24, 1918, to Ottoline Morrell in which Mansfield cries, "What might be so divine is out of Tune - or the instruments are all silent and nobody is going to play again." For her purposes, Mansfield's succeeding words are irrelevant, for ours, they are central. "There *is* no concert for us. Isn't there? Is it all over? Is our desire and longing and eagerness, quite all that's left? Shall we sit here forever in this immense wretched hall - waiting for the lights to go up - which will never go up." That is precisely what Bertha does at the end of course, and it is Harry who "shut[s] up shop" or turns out the lights. The musical refrains, though they occur only three times in the story, are central and the association between the fruits, the passion, and the music becomes increasingly specific. Music is "the food of love." Like the eating of the fruit, the playing of music, in this tale at least, is forbidden.

At the very outset of the tale, Bertha longs to dance, bowl a hoop, or "simply laugh at nothing" in the streets to express her bliss. "Oh, is there no way you can express it without being 'drunk and disorderly'? How idiotic civilization is! Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare rare fiddle?" Bertha's protest against the social requirement that she quash her ebullience becomes a louder aria when Nanny

removes the baby from her embrace: "How absurd it was. Why have a baby if it has to be kept - not in a case like a rare string fiddle - but in another woman's arms?"

Finally, the fiddle - shaped like a pear and analogue, like the pear, to a woman's body - grows into a piano. Now fully aware and unsuccessfully trying to repress her thoughts and fears about that moment at which she will share the bed with a husband she suddenly desires, Bertha runs to the piano. "What a pity someone does not play! What a pity someone does not play!" Indeed, Bertha's body has not been played, nor has she played. But now the fruit of carnal knowledge is about to be transmuted into the music of desire and the passion arising from both is about to suffer "a dying fall," a hidden pun on both the original fall from grace and the musical form of a "dying fall."

Associating the tree of knowledge with the food of love, Mansfield has subtly alluded to Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, a play she knew almost by heart, which celebrates the Feast of Twelfth Night or Epiphany. This reference creates a musical tie which binds all the images and references of "Bliss." Like the primary biblical allusion, this secondary Shakespearean allusion from the opening lines of the play not only recapitulates the theme of the Fall but, in so doing, explains in part why Bertha's beloved tree is a pear tree. The lines alone explain the musical references in "Bliss" and show the relations between love, food, and the shattering of Bertha's innocence:

If music be the food of love, play on; Give me excess of it that surfeiting, The appetite may sicken and so die. - That strain again! - it had a dying fall! (*Twelfth Night* I.1.4)

To observe Mansfield's whole train of thought, the reader must consider the entire play. *Twelfth Night* is a play of pairing and couples, of confused and confusing sexuality, of female love which leads to male-female unions. The pear tree of "Bliss" may be Mansfield's conscious or unconscious pun on pair, as Magalaner suggests, for the story is itself full of pairs and even possibly alter egos. More important, Mansfield was interested throughout her life in "shadow selves," as she called them in a letter to Murry of 1920. But the connections among the pairing and the pear tree and the structure and imagery of *Twelfth Night* run deeper still.

Large portions of the play take place in a garden which belongs to Olivia; there, to oblige Orsino, Viola courts Olivia. Viola is dressed as a man and Olivia does, indeed, conceive a passion for her, only to discover that she is not eligible. It is only after meeting Viola's twin, Sebastian, whom Viola had feared was dead, that Olivia transfers her affection to him and gives him a pearl as a love token. Viola, one cannot help noting, is closely related to the viol or fiddle to which Bertha compares her caged body, and Bertha is, at first, Pearl's wooer, sadly winning her for Harry. Thus, the theme of sexual confusion, of pairing of opposites, of "shadow selves" which Mansfield had cherished so long and embodied in her story "Sun and Moon," is everywhere in "Bliss" Bertha and Harry, Bertha and Pearl (Bertha's gift to Harry), the black and gray cats, Pearl and Eddie, and the spiritual twins, Mug and Face, recapitulate this favorite theme, one which Magalaner has noted. In *Twelfth Night*, as in "Bliss," heterosexual love is the goal toward which the play strives and pairing is, after all, just another name for copulation, suggesting the lust which the fruit of the tree evoked.

But Mansfield's personal and aesthetic interests might have been far more effective than her reading in directing her choice of associations which formed "Bliss." Since girlhood, Mansfield had been both a cellist and a passionate lover of gardens and pear trees. Magalaner notes that, a year before she wrote "Bliss" Mansfield mentioned, in a letter to Ottoline Morrell, the importance of writing about a flower garden with people in it:

walking in the garden - several pairs of people - their conversation - their slow pacing their glances as they pass one another.

A kind of, musically speaking, conversation set to flowers. In Murry's volume the letter immediately succeeding the letter to Ottoline Morrell was a note to Virginia Woolf about the sketch "Kew Gardens":

Yes, your Flower Bed is very good. There's a still, quivering changing light over it all and a sense of those couples dissolving in the bright air which fascinates me -

Of all the plants and trees in a garden, a pear tree was one of the most important to Mansfield and, at the time of the writing of "Bliss," she must have been thinking of it. Convinced that she was dying after the major hemorrhage which preceded the writing of this story by a few days, she thought constantly of her beloved brother, Chummie, who had recently been killed in the war. How often the two of them had sat on the bench beneath the pear tree in Tinakori Road in New Zealand and ex changed confidences. The new home which she and Murry first rented in England had a garden with a pear tree.

If these two types of sources, the biographical and the literary, consistently clarify Mansfield's use of images and symbols in the story, it would be illogical to ignore their potential influence upon the meaning of the story. Might they not also, central as they seem to be to Mansfield's consciousness at the time she wrote "Bliss," shed light on the relationship between Bertha and Pearl, for example? Upon this love, some critics of the story have dwelled far too emphatically. Mansfield's friend Virginia Woolf, for example, hated "Bliss," which she considered a shallow, maudlin tale of lesbianism. Later critics, like Nebeker, have argued that Bertha's real goal is Pearl and that the sorrow she experiences is a result of Pearl's rejection of her for Harry. But nothing in the story suggests this. In fact, Bertha considers a bedtime discussion with Harry about what she and Pearl share. She imagines that this conversation will promote the spiritual understanding that will culminate in their first passionate physical union. In both *Twelfth Night* and "Bliss" youthful and innocent love is homosexual, as if both authors were chronicling the normal English schoolgirl stage of maturation. Heterosexual love is the source of the excitement, the growth, the real passion. Bertha's "crushes" on women are nothing new in her life, but her desire for her husband is both new and startling to her. Ultimately, Bertha's disillusionment over the impossibility of fulfilling her terrifying but exciting new desire matures her, for, through this loss of hope, she learns the sorrow of knowledge. Finally, it is Harry's "cool" voice which sets the seal on Bertha's fear and suffering.

Critics have cited Bertha's frigidity as the most incontrovertible proof of her lesbianism. After all, Bertha seems to have admitted to frigidity when she reflected that "it had worried her dreadfully at first to find that she was so cold." Despite the fact that readers conventionally accept a narrator's statements about him or herself, Bertha's self-evaluation, in this instance, cannot be taken at face value, no matter how afraid she is of her first real sexual encounter. Too much of her behavior argues against frigidity. She experiences bliss, she resents the restrictions of a society that demands she "cage" her body, she enjoys her child's flesh and resents the woman who withdraws it from her, she aches to communicate her bliss to Harry though it is hopeless to do so. Bertha is highly sensual, glorying in the colors of fruit, in smells and sights, in feelings she can hardly contain. Surely these are not the responses of a frigid woman. The source of her conviction that she is frigid lies elsewhere - at the site of her "discovery" that she is so cold. It is the same source from which she learns that her desire to dance and sing, to hold her child are symptoms of "hysteria." That source is the society she identifies as the one which will call her "drunk and disorderly" if she gives vent to her passions; it is the "idiotic civilization" which demands that she imprison her feelings and her body. Harry, and she have "discussed" her problem and he has explained that he is "different."

That Bertha's testimony about her own proclivities is not necessarily reliable is attested to by the sardonic tone, the desperate contradiction of her "Really, really - she had everything. . . ." She is missing something - something that throws a pall over her marriage, and surely part of what she is missing is the understanding husband who would not hasten her off the phone, truncate her expression of feeling. Is the rest the passion she lacks or is it, as Mansfield's portrayal of Harry's callousness suggests, the passion he tells her she lacks? Throughout the story, Bertha acts the good wife and mother, observing the conventions of social respectability which pinion her whims and moods. The purveyors of these conventions appear in the forms of Nanny and Harry, yet she still emerges as a passionate woman. When she finally experiences the marital lust so "improper" in a good English matron, Bertha learns that the fruit of desire is death, for there is always a snake in the garden and the music of passion always suffers a "dying fall."

In marrying these sources to produce so carefully unified a story, Mansfield has disclosed the cast of her mind. Critics who have often pointed out how autobiographical the tale is, have neglected one major aspect of Mansfield's autobiography to which both her letters as well as her journals draw attention. Mansfield was devoted to Shakespeare and the Bible and was especially absorbed in Genesis at the time she wrote "Bliss." She spoke of her desire to know the Bible as well as she knew Shakespeare, whose words she recited constantly. In a letter to Murry, dated March 4, 1918 written only a week after completing "Bliss," Mansfield remarked to Murry: "My Shakespeare is full of notes for my children to light on." Magalaner noted a letter to Murry written just days before the completion of "Bliss" in which Mansfield speaks of her love for Murry in terms of food and eating. She concludes, "'Hang there like fruit, my soul, till the tree die!' The tree *would* die."

Twelfth Night is much on her mind. She notes often at this time that she is thinking of death (because of her own severe hemorrhage and Chummie's death), and these

morbid thoughts intermingle with visions of gardens and food. She is filled with what she calls either "a rage of bliss" or bliss she longs to "share unexplained." Coincidentally perhaps, both the story and the title of "Sun and Moon" are conceived at this same time. The intellectual and emotional recipe for "Bliss" is revealed in these threads of thought recorded in Mansfield's journals and letters. How she regarded the conclusion of the story is not. Yet, the mystery of the concluding lines is solved by finishing the speech from *Twelfth Night* which both opens the play and sets the musical key of the story.

The work ends on an elegiac note: innocence dies quickly, but those who see their paradise fade survive. They live out long lives in a twilight sorrow, illuminated only by a memory of an irretrievable bliss.

O, spirit of love, how quick and fresh art thou! That, notwithstanding thy capacity Receiveth as the sea, naught enters there, Of what validity or pitch soe'er, But falls into abatement and low price Even in a minute! (*Twelfth Night* I.1.9-15)

Twelfth Night tells us what has happened; Genesis tells us that what happened once will happen - again and again. The pear tree remains "as lovely as ever and as still" because, like the tree of knowledge, it remains firmly rooted in perfect Eden. Only Bertha is expelled. The lasting beauty and seductiveness of the tree sound an ironic note of contrast with the imperfection of the love they provoke and disclose. In the mythic world in which the pear tree, now forever out of Bertha's reach, blooms eternally without blemish, Eddie Warren's last words about the eternal quality of the lines: "Why must it always be tomato soup?" bear the wisdom of the Shakespearean clowns; they are set against an archetypal quest for knowledge which will always end in the "too dreadfully eternal" discovery that sweet fruit turns bitter when bliss fades. Accompanied by the unplayed music of *Twelfth Night* Bertha Young relives the epiphany of Genesis in a London garden.

Source: Judith S. Neaman, "Allusion, Image, and Associative Pattern: The Answers in Mansfield's 'Bliss,'" in *Twentieth Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 32, No. 2, Summer, 1986 pp. 242-54.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Anderson explores the psychological aspects of mood and feeling within the conventional love-triangle plot of "Bliss."

In her study of Katherine Mansfield's art, Anne Friis draws special attention to the style, which "hints and suggests rather than asserts. It is indirect, it is elliptic." Mansfield abbreviates crucial thoughts or statements with dots and dashes, and "by the use of those punctuation marks she waives a mass of description and psychology." In her short story "Bliss" this technique is most apparent, perhaps, in a significant passage occurring just after Bertha Young has her first experience of sexual desire for her husband: "But now - ardently! ardently! The word ached in her ardent body! Was this what that feeling of bliss had been leading up to? But then then - ." Only a proper understanding of the psychological meaning of the story's action enables us to complete correctly that final sentence. Previous critics generally seem to agree that "Bliss" embodies a provocative study in mood and feeling within a conventional love-triangle plot. The climax has been seen as Bertha's discovery that her husband Harry and her friend Pearl Fulton are lovers, a revelation which shatters her growing sense of marital bliss. In accordance with this interpretation, Robert Heilman identifies two main ironies: "Bertha's realization that her admired Miss Fulton shares her own unique bliss, and then her discovery that the shared mood has the same origin for each - love for Harry." Edward Shanks faults Mansfield for making this central subject so obvious. All her art, he argues, goes into establishing the precarious external dependency of Bertha's bliss, "and it is a disastrous descent to a lower plane when, at the end, she appears to say, 'Disillusionment, you see, might have come in some such way as this. . . .'" Actually the story is more subtle than Shanks imagines and more complexly ironic than Heilman has proposed, because the point of Bertha's disillusionment is not that both she and her friend love Harry and Harry loves Pearl instead of his wife, but that Bertha also loves Miss Fulton.

It is safe to say that Pearl Fulton does not, contra Heilman, share Bertha's "unique bliss," as Bertha, in the course of the party, imagines she must. In guessing Miss Fulton's mood, Bertha admits that she actually has "less than nothing" to justify her suspicion that their inclinations coincide. The entire bearing of the action suggests that Bertha's and Pearl's desires have neither the same origin nor the same object, yet Bertha, in her dreamy self-delusion, gives free rein to her coursing desire. Almost completely unaware of the homosexual nature of her attraction to Pearl, Bertha quite logically supposes that her passion - though fanned throughout the evening by imaginary communications with Miss Fulton - is for her husband Harry. If she desires Harry, "then then - " (the sentence Bertha is unable to complete) what has Miss Fulton had to do with it all? Being together in a "warm bed" with Harry, she asks in apparent disbelief, "was this what that feeling of bliss had been leading up to?" The answer is no. But she cannot fill in the sexual gaps - hence the all-significant dash and her wondering perplexity, both in this scene and at the close, when she recalls the "lovely pear tree - pear tree - pear tree." Earlier in the evening she had ecstatically contemplated this tree in company with Miss Fulton, the touch of whose arm kindled Bertha's passion into a blaze. After dinner, over coffee and cigarettes, Bertha imagines that Miss Fulton at last

"'gave the sign"' for which she had long been waiting. The indefiniteness of the sign forces the reader to mark the disparity between Miss Fulton's words and what Bertha makes of them: "'Have you a garden?' said the cool sleepy voice." In answer, all Bertha can do is "obey," ecstatically:

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

How long did they stand there? Both, as it were, caught in that circle of unearthly light, understanding each other perfectly, creatures of another world, and wondering what they were to do in this one with all this blissful treasure that burned in their bosoms and dropped, in silver flowers, from their hair and hands? For ever - for a moment? And did Miss Fulton murmur: "Yes. Just that." Or did Bertha dream it?

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. Both the "as it were" and the final question undercut Bertha's hopes for a silent communion with her "new find." Before understanding the significance of this moment for Bertha, we must consider those earlier passages of thought and feeling which resonate both with it and with the startling scene of disillusionment immediately following.

Early in the story we receive an insight into Bertha's stifled sexual feelings. "How idiotic civilization is," she thinks: "Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?" The thought of her body's not being used bears implications causing her to resist her analogy: "'No, that about the fiddle is not quite what I mean,' she thought, running up the steps and feeling in her bag for the key . . . 'It's not what I mean, because - '" (*ibid*.). Beyond a certain point, Bertha would not go, and she nervously allows herself to be distracted from pursuing her thoughts. The idea would bring Harry to mind, simultaneously forcing her to acknowledge that Harry cannot be blamed for her sexual indifference. The real issue that Bertha will not pursue is the origin of this indifference. Just before the close of the story, Mansfield reveals the crucial fact that Bertha and her husband are simply good pals:

Oh, she'd loved him - she'd been in love with him, of course, in every other way, but just not in that way. And, equally, of course, she'd understood that he was different. They'd discussed it so often. It had worried her dreadfully at first to find that she was so cold, but after a time it had not seemed to matter. They were so frank with each other - such good pals. That was the best of being modern.

Although modernity had its advantages, civilization was idiotic if one's body was shut up in a case. When Bertha compares her lack of desire with Harry's sexual appetite (his difference), she thinks of herself as "cold." Yet she obviously is, as we have seen, a woman of ardent, though repressed, passions. Although she tries to pretend that she is

happy ("She had everything": baby, money, house, cook, friends, and a husband) she still feels unsatisfied. This evening gives her a sense of other possibilities, vague perhaps, yet overwhelmingly powerful.

Hours before the dinner party, Bertha's excited anticipation of Pearl's imminent visit causes her bosom to glow unbearably as if a "shower of little sparks" were exploding, though the reader only learns later that Pearl has caused this excitement. Bertha "hardly dared to breathe for fear of fanning it higher." She observes in the mirror her "trembling lips" and feels that she is "waiting for something . . . divine to happen . . . that she knew must happen . . . infallibly" (Mansfield's ellipses). To appease her excitement, she rushes up to the nursery to hold her baby girl. But when the nanny deprives her of this outlet, "all the feeling of bliss came back again, and again she didn't know how to express it - what to do with it." She flies to the phone to answer Harry's call and "to get in touch for a moment" with him, but finds "nothing to say." Her thoughts return to her expected guests and the arrangement of the living room: "As she was about to throw the last [sofa cushion] she surprised herself by suddenly hugging it to her, passionately, passionately. But it did not put out the fire in her bosom. Oh, on the contrary!" Releasing the cushion, Bertha beholds the "tall, slender pear tree in fullest, richest bloom" standing "as though becalmed" at the end of the garden. Anne Friis and Chester Eisinger interpret the tree as a symbol of nature's indifference to human suffering. A few other critics, however, perceive a phallic symbolism in the tree, and connect it with Harry. The tree does not stand either for Harry's sexuality or for a pure, spiritual relationship with a woman, which Helen Nebeck claims is what Bertha seeks. The flowering pear tree is a composite symbol representing in its tallness Bertha's homosexual aspirations and in its full, rich blossoms, her desire to be sexually used. As Bertha flings herself down on the couch in ecstasy, "she seemed to see on her eyelids the lovely pear tree with its wide open blossoms as a symbol of her own life": the open flowers image her female sexual self, but the meaning and object of the tree's tall assertiveness, the "masculine" part of her sexual feelings, eludes her conscious recognition. To the end of the story it remains a strongly felt urge only vaguely defined.

Mansfield initially presents Bertha in a state of unfocused, semi-hysterical bliss heightened by thoughts of Miss Fulton, her most recent "find," whom she had met at the club: "And Bertha had fallen in love with her, as she always did fall in love with beautiful women who had something strange about them." Mention of her falling in love elicits at first only casual attention, since the phrase characterizes Bertha's hyper-sensibility and exaggerated manner of expression. We note, however, that Bertha habitually finds and picks up beautiful women, afterward trying to draw them out. Toward what end, she does not specify: "Up to a certain point Miss Fulton was rarely, wonderfully frank, but the certain point was there, and beyond that she would not go." Bertha does not consciously know herself the tendency of her own solicitations.

When her guests begin to arrive, she forgets until Harry enters the house that "Pearl Fulton had not turned up." Her thoughts shuttle back and forth from Harry to Miss Fulton in a pattern of association which gains significance as the crisis builds. When Pearl does arrive, Bertha smiles, "with that little air of proprietorship that she always assumed while her women finds were new and mysterious." Upon seizing Pearl's arm, Bertha

feels much as she did earlier in the afternoon when sparks seemed to light up in her bosom: "What was there 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?" Although Pearl does not look directly at her hostess, Bertha is sure, "as if the longest, most intimate look had passed between them - as if they had said to each other: 'You, too?' - that Miss Fulton . . . was feeling just what she was feeling." Mansfield repeats the "as if" to heighten the contrast between the apparent facts and what Bertha would most like to believe. For her part, Pearl is simply casual, blase; she may be thinking about Harry, but Bertha clearly does not. In believing that she and Pearl are intimately in touch, Bertha is doomed to disappointment at the close of the evening.

For the moment everything that happens seems to fill her brimming cup of bliss: "Everything was good - was right." And always, "in the back of her mind, there was the pear tree. It would be silver now, in the light of poor dear Eddie's moon, silver as Miss Fulton." After connecting the silver moon and the silvery blond Pearl, Mansfield expands her primary symbolism in an event which climaxes Bertha's mood. Bertha feels that she has read Miss Fulton's mind exactly, yet she is not absolutely certain: "she never doubted for a moment that she was right, and yet what had she to go on? Less than nothing." Consequently she hopes that her friend will "'give a sign'," though "what she meant by that she did not know, and what would happen after that she could not imagine." While she waits for the sign to come, as she feels it infallibly must, she simply has to "laugh or die." She diverts herself by observing Mrs. Norman ["Face"] Knight, who, "like a very intelligent monkey," is habitually "tucking something down the front of her bodice - as if she kept a tiny, secret hoard of nuts there." The thought causes Bertha to dig her nails into her hands. Then comes the sign, so Bertha imagines, and the visit to the garden to contemplate the pear tree, as described above.

The adjectives - "tall," "slender," and "still" - for the tree specifically recall Bertha's earlier perception of it while squeezing the sofa cushion with passion. The phrase "wondering what they were to do . . . with all this blissful treasure" parallels Bertha's previous feelings, which she "didn't know how to express" or "what to do with." The latter phrase also occurred in the description of Bertha's thoughts upon taking hold of Pearl's arm after her arrival. "Treasure that burned in their bosoms" echoes the earlier phrase, "in her bosom there was still that bright glowing place - that shower of little sparks coming from it." Some urge inside Bertha grows taller and taller as she stretches, quiveringly, toward the silvery blond Miss Fulton, much as the pear tree seems to her to stretch up and touch the "rim" of the round, silver, feminine moon. The color silver now draws to itself, along with previous associations, the sexually symbolic silver flowers. Bertha has no more knowledge of what her own feelings mean than she would know what to do were Miss Fulton actually to go beyond a certain point, in frankness, and give the sign she secretly longs for. She is left wondering what she is to do with her unknown and unfulfilled desires.

When the lights in her house are turned on, Bertha returns to the world in which her marriage to Harry is a simple fact. Ironies multiply as Bertha imagines that she can share with him the feelings Pearl Fulton has inspired. The conflicting tendencies within her psyche emerge in thoughts at cross purposes: "Oh, Harry, don't dislike her. You are

quite wrong about her. She's wonderful, wonderful. And, besides, how can you feel so differently about someone who means so much to me. I shall try to tell you when we are in bed tonight what has been happening. What she and I have shared." Here Bertha attempts to transfer her unconscious feelings for the woman onto her relationship with the man, according to what she knows her feeling for him conventionally ought to be. For the *first* time in her life, we are told, she feels sexual desire for her husband, and it is a "strange and almost terrifying" thought. Somehow she feels perplexed that her bliss has been leading up to Harry; it was Pearl, after all, who seemed to fan the flames of her ardor. "But then then - " why Harry? or, if Harry, what has Miss Fulton had to do with her excitement? Bertha breaks off, not pursuing the implications even this far.

As the guests take their leave, a stunned Bertha beholds Harry embrace and kiss Pearl. Her eyes focus on Miss Fulton, who laid her "moonbeam fingers" on his cheeks and smiled "her sleepy smile." The sign she had so much desired has been reserved for Harry, and her pearl slips from her grasp like quicksilver. Bertha touches those slender fingers only in parting, as Miss Fulton holds her "hand a moment longer" to praise her "lovely pear tree." The unwitting irony of her praise is devastating. In another moment she is gone, leaving Bertha feeling empty and hopeless. Bertha, confused and in pain, rushes to the window to view the pear tree: "Oh, what is going to happen now?" she wonders. Her pent-up desires are still in full flower, as are the tree and its flowers that symbolize them.

Throughout "Bliss" Mansfield ironically plays off a conventional love triangle against an unconventional one, forcing the reader to make the necessary adjustment. She subtly controls her symbolism and other modes of suggestion and indirection to convey both the tendency of Bertha's peculiar feelings and her lack of self-knowledge, the degree of ignorance in her bliss. In her essay examining Katherine Mansfield's theory of fiction, Eileen Baldeshwiler reveals the degree to which this author cared about her craft, how much she delighted in achieving the perfect detail and the sufficient balance between form and subject. "Bliss" adequately illustrates both the care and the craft. But even more perfectly, it exemplifies, perhaps, the kind of joy which every practitioner of the art of fiction must feel when he successfully detaches the object from himself. Mansfield carefully articulates this feeling in her letters, parts of which Baldeshwiler summarizes: "'But when I am writing of "another" I want so to lose myself in the soul of the other that I am not.' The act of faith, of surrender, requires 'pure risk,' the absolute belief in 'one's own essential freedom.' It is hard to let go, 'yet one's creative life depends on it and one desires to do nothing else.'" Certainly we may suppose that Mansfield felt her own essential freedom when lost in the soul of Bertha Young and her short-lived bliss.

Source: Walter E. Anderson, "The Hidden Love Triangle in Mansfield's 'Bliss'" in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Volume 28, No. 4, winter, 1982, pp. 397-403.

Critical Essay #5

In the following essay, Zorn argues that cultural bias is responsible for the misunderstanding and misrepresentation of "Bliss" by critics.

It is perhaps inevitable, given our cultural bias, that Bertha Young, who yearned to share her feelings of "bliss" with her husband and friends and failed to find the language that would communicate it, has been misunderstood and misrepresented by the critics of this most popular of Katherine Mansfield's stories. Even a largely sympathetic critic like Sylvia Berkman has had difficulty with Bertha, seeing her as representative of the brittle set among which she moves, an example of a "modern metropolitan woman" who is "callous, temperamental, selfish and unreasonable," demanding "servile, undeviating attention" from her men. Miss Berkman is uneasy with this mold for Bertha, for she goes on to admit: "Bertha Young in 'Bliss' to my mind exemplifies a misapplication of this tone, she seems not so much detestable as immature and stupid, an impression I do not believe Miss Mansfield meant to convey." Marvin Melanger also identifies Bertha with her social set and stresses the satirical element of the story. Bertha's "hysteria," her frigidity, her mind's apparent "confused internal chaos" make her "a highly unreliable grade for the reader." Eisinger goes so far as to say that the pear tree and Bertha's identification with it is "nothing short of myopic sentimentalization."

Poor Bertha! According to these critics, she is quintessentially a female stereotype: timid, sentimental, childish, frigid, naive, self-deluding. Such a figure (no matter how self-contradictory some of those qualities might be) of course deserves the disillusionment which comes to her at the end of the story when she discovers her husband's and friend's affair. Perhaps her worst fault, as Melanger insists, is that she has thought herself happy. Even her bliss is suspect: ". . . in the very words which the author frames her insistence, she demonstrates the emptiness of the claims." Katherine Mansfield is thus brought forward as a witness against her character. And what seems to be primarily a critic's reaction against the character is attributed to the author.

But to strip Bertha of her human dignity and to make the story into an unpleasant little expose of a social group and of a child-woman is to fail to recognize the author's state of mind during the writing of the story and her hopes and intentions for her art. For Katherine Mansfield was not thinking small or smart at the time "Bliss" was composed. The story was written a week after the hemorrhage which signaled the seriousness of her lung condition. Like Keats in a similar situation she was henceforward convinced that she did not have enough time left to seal the accomplishment her work had promised. She turned her back on her earlier, for her less satisfactory, work on the *New Age* and her stories in the collection. *In a German Pension*. Indeed, she forbade republication of that work at a time when she needed money, and it would have been undoubtedly profitable for her to republish it because she no longer wanted to be identified as a clever, satirical voice.

And she no longer needed to be. With signs of her mortality before her eyes, "Bliss" nevertheless occurs during a strongly productive time in her career. Highly excited by

"Je ne parle pas francais" and by J. Middleton Murry's reaction in praise of the story, she writes, "But what I felt so seriously as I wrote it was - oh! I am in a way *grown up* as a Writer - a sort of an authority." In another letter of this time she borrows an image from "Bliss": "Oh dear, oh dear! you have lighted such a candle! Great beams will come out of my eyes at lunch and play like search-lights over the pommes de terre." Clearly, for all the playfulness of her language, she is exhilarated by the sense her art has matured. Clearly also there is in her letter to Murry at the conclusion of the first draft of "Bliss" the conviction that the stories are crowding up on her, that the writing is a matter of necessity and that her powers are sufficient to her inspiration: "One extraordinary thing has happened to me since I came out here. Once I start them they haunt me and plague me until they are finished and as good as I can do." In accord with that sense of power comes also a heightened sensitivity to nature which Katherine Mansfield ascribes to her illness. On February 20, 1918, the day after she hemorrhaged, she wrote to Murry: "Since this little attack I've had, a queer thing has happened. I feel that my love and longing for the external world - I mean the world of *nature* - has suddenly increased a million times." It is this awareness of the signatory aspect of nature which links Katherine Mansfield to the Romantic poets. Like Keats and Shelley, she sees nature as a veil for the ideal world, offering intimations of a beauty and state of being which are transcendent, never possible except in hints and brief glimpses offered in the natural beauty of the world. It is the poet's task to testify to the visionary world's possibility, but he or she is continually aware that such insight also includes its transcendence. Hence to be a messenger of such a world also means that one must speak of its corruption in the real world. When Katherine Mansfield tells Murry that she has two starting points for writing - the sense of joy and the "cry against corruption," - she is being as true to Shelley's vision that life "Stains the white radiance of Eternity" as any twentieth-century writer can be. Moreover, "Bliss's" theme encompasses exactly the visionary joy and the cry against corruption which we associate with the Romantics. One of the unacknowledged sources for the story is Shelley's poem "The Question," which she cared enough about to memorize and which she mentions both to Murry and to Lady Ottoline Morrell in letters at this time.

The poem is a sensuous description of a flowering countryside on a spring morning. There are animistic images which show the earth and the stream embracing, followed in the next stanza by the birth of flowers. The moon's presence on this morning scene is also invoked through the flower imagery, increasing the sense of the strange in the poem and suggesting both the poet's vision and the unifying presence of love. Pearl Fulton perhaps acquired her coolness and her connection with the moon from stanzas two and three:

Daisies, those pearled arcturi of the earth / The constellated flower that never sets . . . / And in the warm hedge grew lush eglantine / Green cowbine and the moonlight-colored may

The silver blossoms offered by Pearl and Bertha in the moment with the pear tree are an echo of the poem's speaker offering "visionary flowers" to his lover in the fifth stanza. Finally, the poem's last line asks the question which troubles Bertha throughout the story: "Oh, to Whom" can the vision be communicated? A year later, the season, the

emotion, and Shelley's poem are still linked together in the author's mind. In another letter to Ottoline Morrell she speaks of her sensitivity to the spring and her desire to share her feelings with someone: "Why are human beings the only ones who do not put forth fresh buds - exquisite flowers and leaves? . . . We have all been wintry far too long - Really, on some of these days one is tired with *bliss*. I long to tell someone - to feel it immediately shared - ."

A major assumption about the story must be, then, that Bertha's state of mind and her need to share it with her friends and husband are seen as perfectly valid by the author. The lack of awareness on the part of those close to her is seen as their incapacity, not Bertha's. Her intuition of the new life which might grow out of her awareness, her brief glimpse of ideal womanhood, and her awakened sexual desire are genuine in the story - not fraudulent and not sentimental. The failure of the vision is the result of those elements in the society and in the individual which Katherine Mansfield identified as corrupting.

Since it would be difficult to speak of Bertha, the most childlike of the story's characters, as corrupt, it is better to ask what has caused Bertha's vision to falter. There is no denying the irony with which the author views her character. She chips away at the illusory nature of Bertha's happiness until at the end nothing seems to be left of it. Still, there she is throughout the story with her "bliss," the only character who is so graced. Moreover, Katherine Mansfield gives her the two central metaphors of the story: the vision of the pear tree and the analogy for art, "playing." In speaking of Bertha to Murry, Katherine Mansfield calls her an "artist manquée" and indicates that Bertha has the discrimination to separate language which is her own from language she has borrowed from someone else. She is able therefore to know what is genuine in herself, if not yet in others. Bertha shows the same aesthetic sense in her remark about the piano: "What a pity someone does not play; what a pity someone does not play." The remark must be taken symbolically. Bertha's intuitions about love and her child have used the same analogy: what good is the rare violin if it is shut up in a case and never played? Indeed, Katherine Mansfield uses the same analogy to Ottoline Morrel: "What might be so divine is out of tune - or the instruments are all silent and no body is going to play again." It is obviously not enough for the artist to have the vision; there must be a language to communicate it and a community of listeners who speak the language to understand it when it is spoken. It is Shelley's question again: "Oh to Whom?"

Yet supposing Bertha had the tongues of angels to aid her, it has traditionally been her language which has drawn most criticism from her readers. One might suggest that that is so, not because Bertha's speech is so empty and vacuous, but because she sounds like a woman, or our concept of how a particular kind of middle-class woman sounds. Indeed, if one compares her speech to the characteristics of female speech identified by Robin Lakoff in *Language and Woman's Place*, the resemblance is striking. The thesis of Lakoff's book is that because women have accepted secondary roles in public and private life, they are accustomed to think of themselves as powerless. Their status is reflected by their women's speech. When they use women's speech, they reinforce all over again the conviction that they are powerless. Thus, in women's speech, Bertha's feeling of joy will seem insignificant, not only to her husband, but to her critics as well.

When Melanger criticizes Bertha's language he is reacting against it in Harry's stead: "The breathless ecstasy of the passage quoted (the passage beginning 'Really - really - she has everything') gives the lie to the words themselves. The twice repeated 'really' and overenthusiastic 'everything' reveal the emptiness of the lines." Of the nine characteristics which denote female language for Lakoff, six are Bertha's. She uses "so" and "such" as intensifiers. She has a range of adjectives which only women use, like "divine" and "little precious" and "incredibly beautiful." She uses the tag question to avoid self-assertion; she hedges; she speaks in italics. Further, the author has for her a variety of sentence forms to imply elevated emotion and sensitivity: the rhetorical question, the exclamation, repetition, the abrupt shift in syntax signaled by the dash, the unfinished sentence. When Bertha's breathless, exclamatory perceptions are contrasted with Harry's talk about digestion or the small talk of the dinner guests, the distance between their sensibilities is emphasized. Also emphasized is the difference in female and male speech.

Thus, a major effect of Bertha's speech is to reinforce her sad awareness that she will not be able to communicate her vision, unless a sympathetic woman friend will share it. Because her language for experience must stress its affective and subjective qualities, there will be few reference points in such a language beyond the self unless there is congruence of emotion. Yet Harry's response to Bertha's emotion is to deny it and to hood his own. Bertha, in trying to tell her husband about her "bliss" during the phone conversation, recognizes that it will seem absurd to him and breaks off their exchange. Her very sensitivity to her husband's insensitivity, her secret admiration for his deflating jokes about her enthusiasms, insures that she will not ask for intimate communication with him. Thus she will remain the impersonal "good pal" she perceives he wishes her to be in their marriage.

Bertha's set generally seems to discount the language of emotion and enthusiasm or to parody it by exaggerating the banal until genuine emotion seems suspect. Bertha feels her estrangement from them throughout the dinner party with the result that she grows more and more tense. The woman who felt "bliss" earlier now feels a kind of hysteria at her inability to communicate with them. Because Pearl has seemed sympathetic, she desperately waits for a "sign" that she has shared her emotion. But she is unable to distinguish true intimacy from false, and so the moment at the window before the pear tree turns out to be one more imposture. "Your lovely pear tree" thus becomes a symbol of the desirability of human intimacy and the betrayal of it.

It is important that the reader not undervalue Bertha's vision, although in terms of the story it is unrealized. For it is one of the poles of feeling in the story. Without it, Bertha's disillusionment is empty of significance, as empty as one of her guest's stories. Since it is the pear tree that draws together the characters and their emotions in the story, it is well to look more closely at the images the author associates with the tree. By the time Bertha and Pearl stand before the pear tree in their moment of intimacy, both of the women have been identified with it. Moreover, Bertha's bliss, supposedly enveloping both the women at this moment, has also been identified with it. The earlier imagery for the bliss has been a series of sun images, which Bertha internalizes. Now the sun image is linked with the moon through the candle metaphor, which seems to project an

ideal order of relationship in nature: "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 and taller as they gazed . . . almost to the rim of the moon." Images which link the sun and the moon are for Katherine Mansfield holistic. They suggest the earthly paradise, the condition of pre-lapsarian innocence. A dream story of a childhood experience shared by her brother and herself is called "Sun and Moon." The children are allowed to wait up for a party their parents are giving. They see the feast in all its splendor before the guests arrive. Afterwards, they are allowed to approach the banquet table after the party is over. Their parents are drunk, and the food and ices are spoiled. The result is that the children will have nothing to do with the adult party world and demand to be taken away. In their moment before the pear tree, detached from the real world and its relationships, Bertha and Pearl have the same kind of perfection that the children, Sun and Moon, possess. They are described as "creatures of another world, and wondering what they are to do in this one with all this blissful treasure that burned in their bosoms and dropped, in silver flowers, from their hair and hands?" In their ideal selves there is no distinction between the two women. They equally bear treasures of bliss and offer visionary flowers. What Bertha has discovered is the potential life all women possess. What the vision suggests is that there are possibilities of relationships which are gracious and free.

Finally the story shows that these potential relationships are corrupted and thwarted by the character of human interaction in the world. For against Bertha's momentary glimpse of Pearl's and her own ideal self is projected another demonic vision of the world and its way with women.

Beginning with Face, the women in the real world of the story are threatened with actual and imagined acts of violence. In counterpoint to Bertha's vision, the talk at the party is a continuous barrage of horror stories. In her "monkey" attire, Face feels that the train she has journeyed upon, "rose to a man and simply ate me with its eyes." The actress at the Alpha is the "weirdest little person. She'd not only cut her hair, but she seemed to have taken a dreadfully good snip off her legs and arms and her poor little nose." Art itself gives expression to the violence: they talk about the poem about a "girl who was violated by a beggar without a nose." Indeed, Harry's passion for the white flesh of lobster and green pistachio ices makes erotic love exactly like eating, and together with Face's experiences, vaguely cannibalistic. His vulgarity is given a sinister turn by the double entendre in the joke about his daughter: "My dear Mrs. Knight, I shan't feel the slightest interest in her until she has a lover." At that point in the story, both of the male guests show by their actions that they know, if Bertha doesn't, about the affair with Pearl. Even Pearl, who might seem to have come off the winner in the real world of the story, is shown as vulnerable to the questionable ethics of relationships between men and women. For it seems she will be eaten, after all, in Harry's terms. Her blindness is subtly expressed. Along with the Giaconda smile, she is described as one who "lived by listening rather than seeing." It is clear she is caught up in the force which Bertha imagines as "blind and smiling" when she imagines desire. In these circumstances, the image is ambiguous and even terrible. The only person who seems to have responded to the ideal Pearl is Bertha, and in their world, they must be rivals.

Katherine Mansfield, then, has not written a satire of a foolish woman who overvalues her life's happiness; nor has she written a satire of the pretensions to art of a group of Philistines. What she has done is to write a somber story about the potential for love and beauty in human relationships, which can be glimpsed but not realized. Certainly, a woman like Bertha, condemned to inarticulateness by her female language, cannot realize it. Yet her openness to "bliss" and the potential in life, and her desire to share the vision, do make her the heroine of the story. The question with which Bertha ends the story is not unhopeful. She has been questioning all day. Her "Oh what is going to happen now?" is certainly resigned, certainly an admittance of powerlessness at this final moment. But it does look forward to the future. It acknowledges her losses. It propels her forward into the life she must lead.

Source: Marilyn Zorn, "Visionary Flowers: Another Study of Katherine Mansfield's 'Bliss'" in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol.17, No. 2, spring 1980, pp. 141-47.

Critical Essay #6

In the following essay, Magalaner examines the autobiographical elements in Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss."

Since the death of Katherine Mansfield more than fifty years ago, the kind of attention her short stories have received has followed an understandably meandering path. Shocked by the romantic aura of her early demise - in France, no less, of a sudden consumptive attack, almost in the presence of her husband, and hardly out of her twenties - critics could scarcely be blamed for accentuating the sorrow and the pity of her end and for seeking in her stories clues to the real Mansfield not available in the scattered biographical writings of friends and relatives. In the United States, Sylvia Berkman's serious examination of Mansfield's writings marked the beginning of a new and scholarly approach to Mansfield's fiction. The short stories lent themselves admirably to sensitive interpretation according to the rules of the New Criticism and became, indeed, one of the staples of almost all anthologies of the 1950s and afterward.

If only as a corrective, perhaps the time has come to put Katherine Mansfield back into her stories. Though her own attitude toward autobiography in art is ostensibly ambivalent - as I shall try to demonstrate later - there is no doubt that she joins D. H. Lawrence and Aldous Huxley among others in parading those she knew in real life through the pages of her fiction - and no one more consistently than herself. One need look no further than her letters and her *Journal* for evidence that her acquaintances and her relatives furnished materials out of which her fictional people developed. Her despair at the death of her brother "Chummie" during the First World War gave way to her expressed determination to re-create his and her New Zealand existence, complete with sheep, grandmother, mists, parents, and siblings as a memorial to her beloved. The Burnell family, the Sheridan family, Laurie, Laura, the coachman, all are firmly based in autobiography, even when they take on the independent life of fictional characters. And the essential John Middleton Murry, Mansfield's husband, is more thoroughly encapsulated in the few pages of Mansfield's "The Man without a Temperament" than in the hundreds of pages of his own autobiography.

It may be instructive to look once again at a frequently discussed short story of Katherine Mansfield called "Bliss" to demonstrate, if possible, the significant ways in which the author as human being, as wife, as woman, and as emotional and intellectual entity plays a role in the story. Numerous additional parallels might have been traced, but I want merely to indicate the extent of the practice by offering and following up one or two examples.

This short story, completed by Mansfield in 1918, offers the reader one day in the life of Bertha Young, a fashionable thirty-year-old wife and mother. From afternoon to late evening, the graph of her emotions moves from the heights of joyous exhilaration (bliss) to the depths of despair, as she discovers her husband's infidelity in the suddenly grasped relationship between Harry and Bertha's special friend, Pearl Fulton. It is a day

for other discoveries, too: that Bertha's mystical relationship cannot be regained; that Bertha's relationship to her own child is less firm than the child's ties to her nurse; that Bertha's position as hostess to a bizarre group of bohemian pseudo-intellectuals does not qualify her to enter into communion with them, or them with her; in short, that Bertha's plunge from innocence to awareness will affect her future existence in every regard.

On the first page of "Bliss," Katherine Mansfield defines the feeling of "absolute bliss" that has taken possession of Bertha momentarily in these terms: "as though you'd suddenly swallowed a bright piece of that late afternoon sun." From this point on, the story depends heavily upon the imagery of food, of eating and drinking, and on other suggestions of oral satisfaction like smoking cigarettes. Bertha's first duty upon entering her home is to arrange the fruit tastefully, a simple task engendering an emotional reaction in her that verges on the "hysterical." Her next encounter is a muted struggle with Nanny over the right to feed her own child the evening meal. The remainder of the story centers on the dinner party, the guests, the conversation at table, coffee and cigarettes in the drawing room, the episode of the pear tree and the moon in the garden, and Bertha's culminating epiphany of her betrayal by Pearl and her own husband.

Even when the plot does not require allusions to digestion, chewing, biting, swallowing, drinking, the alimentary canal, indigestion, and the like, "Bliss" intrudes such allusions at every turn. Pearl's aloof smile is jokingly attributed by Harry to a frozen liver, or "pure flatulence," or perhaps to "kidney disease." The reader is told gratuitously that the Youngs' new cook makes "the most superb omelettes." Mrs. Norman Knight complains that the bourgeois passengers on the train "ate" her with their eyes and then goes on to characterize the episode as "too absolutely creamy." This same guest is imagined by Bertha as having "made that yellow silk dress out of scraped banana skins," and she sees Mrs. Knight's earrings as "little dangling nuts." Harry's infatuation with Pearl Fulton is disguised through his ability to "talk about food and to glory in" a "shameless passion for the white flesh of the lobster" and "the green of pistachio ices - green and cold like the eyelids of Egyptian dancers," a predilection that recalls to the reader a reference on the same page to the "heavy eyelids" of Pearl Fulton.

Most obviously, during the dinner itself, all the arty chit-chat centers on the imagery of eating. A play by Michael *Oat* is entitled *Love in False Teeth*. The playwright's newest effort is given as "Stomach Trouble." And as they dine, "their spoons rising and falling - dabbing their lips with their napkins, crumbling bread, fiddling with the forks and glasses and talking," Pearl fingers a tangerine, Mrs. Knight tucks something "down the front of her bodice - as if she kept a tiny, secret hoard of nuts there, too," and the group hears of a "fried-fish scheme" of interior decoration, chairs "shaped like frying pans and lovely chip potatoes embroidered all over the curtains." A call for new writers to desert the romantic for the realistic is put in terms of the necessity to vomit in contemporary literature: "The trouble with our young writing men is that they are still too romantic. You can't put out to sea without being seasick and wanting a basin. Well, why won't they have the courage of those basins?" Literary allusions steeped in the imagery of food end with mention of two poems: ''*Table d'Hôte*" and "Why Must it Always be Tomato Soup" (sic).

I have discussed elsewhere the internal aesthetic relevance and artistic appropriateness of such imagery to this short story. My intention here is quite different. It is to demonstrate that the abundance of such imagery in "Bliss" is entirely consistent with Katherine Mansfield's own patterns of thought and feeling, not at all merely a device for literary exploitation.

Mansfield sums it up in a particularly meaningful letter to her husband, John Middleton Murry:

Darling, this is just a note, sent with the letters. Eat all that extra ration of meat - eat *all* [italics Mansfield's] you can - as I do. God! this darling boat - swinging lazy with the tide. Give Fergusson my love. . . . Tell me as soon as you know about your holiday and try and eat fruit while the warm weather lasts - and remember what you are to me. It's no joke. *My love seems all to be expressed in terms of food* [italics mine].

This letter, dated May 22, 1918, was written just three months after Mansfield completed the short story "Bliss." Murry, in his autobiography, quotes another letter from Katherine Mansfield in which she first expresses her overwhelming love for him and her happy anticipation of his arrival: "What drowsy bliss slept in my breast!" She continues, "I thought of what I would have ready for you," but she substitutes for amorous embraces a more explicit and less emotionally charged menu - "soup and perhaps fish, coffee, toast (because *charbon de bois*, which is *much* cheaper than coal, makes lovely toast, I hear), a pot of confitures, a vase of roses . . ." [ellipses Murry's].

While it is perhaps natural for one in love to wish to offer food and drink to the beloved, a rather more specialized perversity allows the loved one to *become* the food itself, as Bertha is transformed into a fruit and Pearl into lobster and ices. Thus, in a letter to Murry written only a few days before "Bliss" was completed, Mansfield makes the imaginative leap:

1:15. Well. I wish you had eaten my *tournedos*; it was such a good 'un. The great thing here is the meat, which is superb. Oh, but now I am turned toward *home* everything is good. I eat you. I see you. . . . I'd die without you. "Hang there like fruit, my soul, till the tree die!" The tree *would* die.

Though I shall resist developing it at this point, the emerging scenario and its relevance to "Bliss," certainly seems clear enough: the loving wife's desire to share her food with her absent husband, the transformation of the husband into the meat which the wife will enjoy, and the invocation by the wife of her own soul, seen as the fruit of a fruit tree which would die if the husband deserted the wife. During the ten days that followed the posting of this letter, Mansfield would be composing her short story. She would also be writing Murry to complain of the all-devouring solicitude of her long-time friend and companion, Ida Baker, whose tangled relationship to Mansfield and Murry recalls distortedly the triangle in "Bliss": "'It's no good looking cross because I love you [she imagines Ida Baker saying to her], my angel, from the little tip of that cross eyebrow to the *all* of you. When am I going to brush your hair again?' I shut my teeth and say 'Never!' but I really do feel that if she could she'd EAT me."

I shall resist also turning this article into a catalogue of Mansfield's allusions to food in so many of her private writings. In fantasy, she visualizes her reunion with her husband as a communion at table: "Ah, Love, Love, when I come back - we shall be so happy. The very cups and saucers will have wings, and you will cut me the only piece of bread and jam in the world, and I will pour you out a cup of *my* tea." In the same letter, she sees Ida Baker as a "ghoul" demanding desperately to overpower with attentions a weaker person "more or less delivered up to her." "As long as I am to be massaged she's an angel, for then *c'est elle qui manage*." When rebuffed in her charity, however, Ida Baker is "all hungry fury." Mansfield recalls how Ida "ate me before my eyes, and I really *revolted*." Summing it up, she decides, in appropriate imagery, that "Her passion for me feeds on my hate" and that is what "I can't stomach."

Significantly, the two persons to whom Katherine Mansfield felt closest in her adult life, Ida Baker and John Middleton Murry, she imagines as eating her or being eaten by her - and sometimes as involved in a combination of both processes. Consuming and being consumed - in human interaction, in love, in sex, in hate - blurs the distinction between the consumer and the consumed. We are what we eat, nutrition editors tell us, but Mansfield invested the idea with symbolic overtones that go far beyond the scientific.

Eventually, Mansfield discovers that her role of dependence upon Ida Baker and Murry has been instrumental in forging an unacceptable bond among the three. They have become an unhealthy trinity, impossible as a threesome, difficult to separate into viable couples: Katherine and Ida, on the one hand; on the other, Katherine and Murry. Her complaint to Murry about their marriage is first of a lack of ardor: "You never once held me in your arms and called me your wife." But this grievance is coupled with distress that she and Murry have no marital privacy while Ida shares their married life. "I am jealous - jealous of our privacy - just like an eagle. If I felt that you and she discussed me even for my own good - I'd . . . dash myself on the rocks below." Many years later, Murry found it "difficult" to "reconcile affection for and dependence upon" Ida with Mansfield's "passionate hatred of her." So tangled does the thread of the multiple relationship become that Mansfield actually imagines herself married to Ida. "How I should beat her if I were married to her! It's an awful thought." To Murry, Mansfield confides:

. . . our hate had got to such a pitch that I couldn't take a plate from her hand without shuddering. This *awful relationship* living on in its secret corrupt way beside my relationship with you is very extraordinary; no one would believe it. I am two selves - one my true self - the other that she creates in me to destroy my true self.

Years later, weeks before her own death, she was still trying to sort out her many selves, revealing to Murry that he matters "more and more" to her now that "I am not so 'identified' with you" and recording in the same letter Ida's past identification with her also: "She had got to the pitch of looking after me when she gave me a handkerchief without my asking for it. She *was* me [italics Mansfield's]."

Katherine Mansfield's *Journal* neatly sums up her view that the self is manifold:

Of course, it followed as the night the day that if one was true to oneself . . . True to oneself! which self? Which of my many - well really, that's what it looks like coming to- hundreds of selves? For what with complexes and repressions and reactions and vibrations and reflections, there are moments when I feel I am nothing but the small clerk of some hotel without a proprietor, who has all his work cut out to enter the names and hand the keys to the wilful guests.

These reflections lead us back to "Bliss," and to the strange relationship among the principals, Bertha, Harry, and Pearl. Married for some years, Bertha and Harry typify the conventional pair, male and female, in monogymous society. Yet their association as "pals" rather than true lovers reveals either a flaw in their marriage or a larger imperfection in contemporary society. Perhaps it reveals both. But what concerns the reader of the story is the specific relationship among the three characters.

I would suggest that the Bertha-Harry, Bertha- Pearl, Pearl-Harry combinations comprise one ever- shifting personality unit and that sanction for this view may be found not only in the story but in Mansfield's autobiographical references. That Mansfield considered herself to be almost mystically part of Murry is evident from numerous allusions in her private writings. "Mysterious fitness of our relationship! . . . he and I, different beyond the dream of difference, are yet an *organic whole*. We are . . . the two sides of the medal, separate, distinct and yet making one." Indeed, later on in her *Journal*, Mansfield elevates to a principle her idea of the "relationship between 'lovers.'" "We are," she says, "neither male nor female. We are a compound of both. I choose the male who will develop and expand the male in me; he chooses me to expand the female in him. Being made 'whole.' Yes, but that's a process. By love serve ye one another . . . ." (And this love, incidentally, is expressed in the concern of the lover regarding the food taken by the beloved: ". . . We had bouillabaisse. I wondered what you had. Yes, I am not one but *two*. I am you as well as myself. You are another part of me, just as I am a part of you." But, as I have quoted above, Mansfield feels herself invaded and violated by Ida Baker - "I am two selves - one my true self - the other that she creates in me to destroy my true self."

In "Bliss," Pearl Fulton is Bertha's acknowledged "find." She is the only one with whom Bertha can communicate completely - and without the need of speaking. Both women are associated with the colors green and white, Pearl with the green of pistachio ices and the white meat of the lobster, Bertha with a white dress, jade beads, and green shoes and stockings - the colors of the pear tree in bloom. Harry is formally married to one of these green and white women. His "find," ironically, is not his wife at the moment but Pearl. And when Bertha imagines how she and Harry will communicate in bed that night, how she will tell him what she and he have shared, she does not yet realize that the shared object is Pearl who, at parting, will also exchange messages with Harry silently, with no need to speak aloud.

"Everything has its shadow," Katherine Mansfield tells Murry in a letter of 1920. I propose that in the Betha-Pearl combination Harry is really dealing with two aspects of one personality - with two faces of Eve, the innocent and virginal type represented by Bertha, and the moon-like Pearl whose charms belong to everyone. In a story which

boasts a gray cat and a black cat, "its shadow," so that the reader finds it difficult to decide whether he is dealing with one or two cats, the implications of Harry's situation are not obscure. And further, if the man and woman, according to Mansfield, are really an organic whole, if she and Murry are not two but one, it is quite possible that Bertha-Harry-Pearl, sharing each other, consuming and being consumed by each other, alternately warm and cold, attracting and repelling, neither fully male nor fully female, form a unitary trio indissoluble in nature rather than a human triangle subject to marriage, divorce, legal separation, and other civilized mechanical arrangements.

For Mansfield does reject in her life the constraints of "reality" by which most human beings live. She *can* be part of Murry voluntarily, part of Ida Baker by violation of personality. She can feel deep affection for her female companion at one moment, loathing the next. She can have total confidence in the fidelity of Murry in one letter and be sure that he is unfaithful in the next.

She can even be a tree, as Bertha is in "Bliss":

I wonder if you [Murry] would feed on this visible world as I do. I was looking at some leaves only yesterday . . . and suddenly I became conscious of them - of the amazing "freedom" with which they were "drawn" - of the life in each curve - but not as something *outside oneself*, but as part of one - as though like a magician I could put forth my hand and shake a green branch into my fingers from . . . ? And I felt as though one receive - accepted - absorbed the beauty of the leaves even into one's physical being. Do you feel like that about things?

It is clear that Murry *did* feel like that (though Harry, his fictional shadow, would not have had the sensitivity to be aware of such rarefied matters). Murry expresses their oneness even more clearly and with real certainty. In a letter to Mansfield quoted in his autobiography, he says:

It's no use talking about these identities of ours. I have not the slightest doubt (seriously) that we are manifestations of the same being. . . . Don't think I'm mystical if I explain it like this. The night *when we discovered the Heron together* [their dream house], we became one being. . . . The Heron is more than the symbol of our love, it is the creation of our one being. From that night on we have been fused in soul, so that our correspondences now seem to me the most natural and inevitable thing in the world.

Murry adds thoughtfully, "Now, I am perfectly aware that if I were to say this to anybody else but you, they would think me raving. But to me it is simple truth in exactly the same way as 2 + 2 = 4." Thus in the world inhabited by Mansfield and Murry (and the ever immanent Ida Baker) human identities can and do merge, people can absorb the characteristics of plants and trees, and even the moon can acquire human attributes, as in the poem by Mansfield in which the question is asked:

"Is the moon a virgin or is she a harlot?" Asked somebody. Nobody would tell.

In "Bliss," where virginal matron and harlot meet as Bertha-Pearl, there is no need to pursue the question. The relation of Bertha and Pearl, a mystically hybrid fruit of the

single pear tree (pair tree?), is matched by the creation and literary accentuation of pairs throughout the story: of masculine Harry and effeminate Eddie as stalkers of Pearl Fulton, of Face and Mug as indistinguishable halves of a married couple, and even of the gray cat and the black cat, its shadow, out in the garden.

To Lady Ottoline Morrell, Katherine Mansfield had confided a year before the writing of "Bliss":

. . . *who* is going to write about that flower garden. It might be so wonderful, do you know *how* I mean? There would be people walking in the garden - several *pairs* of people - their conversation - their slow pacing - their glances as they pass one another. . . . The "pairs" of people must be very different and there must be a slight touch of enchantment - some of them seeming so extraordinarily "odd" and separate from the flowers, but others quite related and at ease. A kind of, musically speaking, conversation *set* to flowers . . . And I see B - , who hasn't the remotest idea of getting them into harmony. Perhaps that's not fair. But it's full of possibilities. I must have a fling at it as soon as I have time.

There seems little doubt that these outlines eventually were fleshed out to accommodate the governing principle of "Bliss" and maybe to give form to "The Garden Party" and one or two other stories.

I have deliberately avoided a detailed, fact-byfact biographical approach to Mansfield's "Bliss" for I believe that conclusions drawn from such a study would not be particularly meaningful here. I have refrained from drawing parallels that are there to be drawn between Mansfield's autobiographical writings and the associations suggested in her short story: her flirtation from time to time with lesbianism; her great fear of abandonment; her realization, whether justified or not, that Murry was interested in other women because his own wife was unable to satisfy his emotional and other needs. These details are already public and accessible; moreover, demonstrating their applicability to "Bliss" would have little more than a statistical corroborative effect.

For Mansfield, though she knew the immense value of autobiographical materials in fiction, quickly perceived that the faithful rendering of such details fell far short of basic artistic necessity. At the same time, she recognized that the cathartic value of such verisimilitude to the writer was essentially limited. Like Joyce and Gide - perhaps like all artists of Distinction - she saw early that autobiography in fiction was merely the jumping-off place for the creation of meaningful art. During the last few years of her short life, she engaged in an intensely personal attempt to eradicate the personal element in life and art so that what transcended the personal and individual would shine forth as continuing and permanent.

To Hugh Walpole, Mansfield had written:

I sympathise more than I can say with your desire to escape from autobiography. Don't you feel that what English writers lack today is experience of Life. I don't mean that superficially. But they are self-imprisoned. I think there is a very profound distinction

between any kind of *confession* and creative work - not that that rules out the first by any means.

Three days later, she writes to Murry that "we only live by somehow absorbing the past - changing it. I mean really examining it and dividing what is important from what is not (for there IS waste) and transforming it so that it becomes part of the life of the spirit and we are *free of it*. It's no longer our personal past, it's just in the highest possible sense, our servant. . . ." Then, in an aside, she adds, "I used to think this process was fairly *unconscious*. Now I feel just the contrary. . . . "

During the same year, Mansfield wrote:

. . . there are signs that we are intent as never before on trying to puzzle out, to live by, our own particular self. *Der Mensch muss frei sein* - free, disentangled, single. Is it not possible that the rage for confession, autobiography, especially for memories of earliest childhood, is explained by our persistent yet mysterious belief in a self which is continuous and permanent; which, untouched by all we acquire and all we shed, pushes a green spear through the dead leaves and through the mould, thrusts a scaled bud through years of darkness until, one day, the light discovers it and shakes the flower free and - we are alive - we are flowering for our moment upon the earth? This is the moment which, after all, we live for, - the moment of direct feeling when we are most ourselves and least personal.

The idea for the artist, then, is so to arrange the details of the autobiographical past that the precious kernel of selfhood is separated from the chaff of vital statistics of a life - that, in short, the true Self emerges from the welter of information regarding the past life of the self. In the particular, Joyce had said, lies the universal.

Perhaps Bertha Young grows older in "Bliss" because she is at the end able to separate the details of her household tragedy, to absorb her past, and to be "alive - . . . flowering for our moment upon the earth," like the pear tree which, as the story ends, is "as lovely as ever and as still."

Source: Marvin Magalaner, "Traces of Her 'Self' in Katherine Mansfield's 'Bliss'" in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3, autumn, 1978, pp. 413-22.

Topics for Further Study

Read another of Katherine's Mansfield's London stories, such as "Marriage à la Mode." Then compare Mansfield's use of satire and imagery in the stories, as well as her presentation of characters and relationships. Which story do you think is more successful? Why?

In "Bliss," Mansfield mentions several poems and plays. Locate and read one of these "modern" poems and plays of the early 1920s. How does this poem or play relate to the themes of Mansfield's story? Does it add to your understanding of that era? In what way?

J. F. Kobler wrote, "A first-time reader of a Mansfield story may have similar feelings of bliss while experiencing the story and may well not understand their source." Write a paragraph describing your initial reactions after reading "Bliss" for the first time.

Mansfield drew on her intimate knowledge of the bohemian London art scene to write "Bliss." Based on this story, what are your perceptions of the scene and the people who populated this segment of society?

Compare and Contrast

1920s: Between 1910 and 1920, the number of divorces in Britain tripled, from about 600 to 1,700. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1923 made it easier for a wife to obtain a divorce. This legislation allowed a woman to divorce her husband without having to prove cruelty or desertion in addition to adultery.

Today: With the advent of the Divorce Reform Act, which passed in 1971, divorce could be obtained by either party without grounds. Like in the United States, divorce is common in modern day Great Britain.

1920s: By 1918, as part of the Franchise Act, British women over the age of twenty-eight had the right to vote. Yet it was not until 1928, with the passage of the Representation of the People Act, that women were given equal rights in terms of voting.

Today: For a few decades, several women have held important political positions in Great Britain. The most powerful of these women was Margaret Thatcher, who served as the country's prime minister from 1979 to 1990.

1920s: About ten percent of British people own their own homes.

Today: Approximately two-thirds of British people own their own homes. Owner-occupied homes are the most prevalent form of housing.

1920s: At the beginning of the decade, women make up about thirty percent of the British workforce. This number drops as Britain undergoes an economic crisis later in the decade.

Today: Women make up more than 44 percent of the British workforce.

What Do I Read Next?

Like "Bliss," Ellen Glasgow's 1923 story "The Difference" explores the consequences of adultery when a Victorian woman learns of her husband's affair.

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) chronicles one day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway, an upper-class Londoner.

Evelyn Waugh's satirical novel, *A Handful of Dust* (1934), examines the complex nature of contemporary morality.

"Weekend" (1978), a short story by Ann Beattie, explores the relationship between a husband and wife after the husband's numerous affairs.

Edith Wharton's short story "Roman Fever" (1934) challenges Victorian morality while exploring a pivotal moment in a woman's life.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (1920) explores the Jazz Age generation that emerged in the United States 1920s. This novel reveals the new morals and cynical attitude of younger Americans.

Further Study

Berkman, Sylvia, *Katherine Mansfield, A Critical Study*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1951.

A thematic and stylistic analysis of Mansfield's stories.

Boddy, Gillian, *Katherine Mansfield: The Woman and the Writer*, Victoria, Australia: Penguin Books, 1988.

An overview of Mansfield's life, including numerous photographs and the major short stories.

Daly, Saralyn R., *Katherine Mansfield*, Revised Edition, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994.

An overview of Mansfield's writings.

Mansfield, Katherine, *The Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, edited by John Middleton Murry, Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1983.

Selections from Mansfield's journals edited by her husband.

—, *Selected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, edited by Vincent O'Sullivan, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.

Selected letters written by Mansfield.

—, *Selections, Critical Writings of Katherine Mansfield*, edited by Clare Hanson, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987.

Mansfield's non-fiction writing, including essays and book reviews.

Tomalin, Claire,*Katherine Mansfield, A Secret Life*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988.

A biography of Mansfield.

Bibliography

Aiken, Conrad, Review of *Bliss, and Other Stories, Freeman*, May 11, 1921, p. 210.

Cowly, Malcolm, Review of *The Garden Party, and Other Stories, Dial*, August, 1922, pp. 230-32.

Dieckmann, Katherine, "Body English: The Short, Sexy Life of Katherine Mansfield," *The Village Voice Literary Supplement*, May, 1988, p. 27.

Hanson, Claire, and Andrew Gurr, *Katherine Mansfield*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981.

Kobler, J. F., *Katherine Mansfield: A Study of the Short Fiction*, Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1990.

Magalaner, Marvin, *The Fiction of Katherine Mansfield*, Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971.

Review of *Bliss, and Other Stories, Athenaeum*, January 21, 1921, p. 67.

Review of *Bliss, and Other Stories, Spectator*, January 15, 1921, p. 83.

Review of *Bliss, and Other Stories, Times Literary Supplement*, December 16, 1920, p. 855.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Short Stories for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535