The Hidden Love Triangle in Mansfield’s “Bliss”

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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—” (SSM, p. 348). 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 courting 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 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.

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? (SSM, p. 347)
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?" (SSM, p. 338). 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. (SSM, p. 348)

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 (SSM, p. 342). 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” (SSM, p. 338). 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” (SSM, p. 340). 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!” (SSM, p. 341).

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.7 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.8 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” (SSM, p. 342): 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” (SSM, pp. 340–41). Mention of her falling in love elicits at first only casual attention, since the phrase characterizes Bertha’s hypersensibility 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” (SSM, p. 341). 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” (SSM, p. 344). Her thoughts shuttle back and forth from Harry to Miss Fulton in a pattern of association which gains significance as the crisis builds.9 When Pearl does arrive, Bertha smiles, “with that little air of proprietorship that she always assumed while her women finds were new and mysterious” (SSM, p. 344). 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—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” (SSM, p. 345). 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” (SSM, p. 346). 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,10 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” (SSM, p. 346). 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” (SSM, p. 343). 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 (SSM, p. 341). 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" (SSM, p. 340). The latter phrase also occurred in the description of Bertha's thoughts upon taking hold of Pearl's arm after her arrival (SSM, p. 344). "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" (SSM, p. 338). 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" (SSM, p. 348). 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
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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.¹¹ “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.’”¹²

Certainly we may suppose that Mansfield felt her own essential freedom when lost in the soul of Bertha Young and her short-lived bliss.

¹ Anne Friis, Katherine Mansfield: Life and Stories (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1946), p. 132.
² Ibid., p. 136.
³ All page references in the text (cited parenthetically as SSM) are to The Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield (New York: Knopf, 1970).
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7 Friis, Katherine Mansfield, p. 177; Eisinger, “Mansfield’s ‘Bliss,’” Item 48.

8 Helen E. Nebeker, “The Pear Tree: Sexual Implications in Katherine Mansfield’s ‘Bliss,’” Modern Fiction Studies, 18 (1972–73), 545–51. Nebeker and I have independently concluded that homosexuality is central to the story and to this extent corroborate each other.

9 If, as Saralyn Daly argues (Katherine Mansfield, p. 85), Bertha’s close association of Pearl and Harry suggests her suspicion of their affair, she fears it, I suggest, not as Daly thinks, because it would mean her losing Harry to Pearl, but vice versa.

10 With “poor, dear Eddie,” the dilettante poet, Mansfield gives her story a certain tone and atmosphere appropriate to her subject, as one brief fragment of his speech discloses: “I have had such a dreadful experience with a taxi-man; he was most sinister. I couldn’t get him to stop. The more I knocked and called the faster he went. And in the moonlight this bizarre figure with the flattened head crouching over the little wheel,” and so forth (SSM, p. 343). Bertha associates Eddie with the silver moon at the moment she imagines an identification between it and the silver Pearl. Bertha’s thinking of Eddie and of the moon as his moon reflects her dim sense of relationship between Eddie’s probable propensities and her own nascent feelings. Similarly, at the end of the story Bertha associates Eddie with the image of a black cat following a gray cat, as he follows Miss Fulton to the door. The image represents Bertha’s sexual thoughts almost surfacing as they creep after Miss Fulton; it recalls as well the cats she saw in the garden beneath the pear tree earlier in the afternoon (SSM, p. 341). Mansfield offers in the cats a generalized floating symbol of sexuality and animality—as with the monkeys in the pattern of Face’s dress—which expresses Bertha’s ambivalence toward sexuality.


12 Ibid., p. 423.