

Imagery in Katherine Mansfield's Short Story "Bliss"

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Introduction:

Since the death of Katherine Mansfield, the kind of attention her short stories have received has followed an understandably meandering path. There is no doubt that she joins D.H.Lawrence and Aldous Huxly among others in parading those she knew in real life through the pages of her fiction-and no one more consistently than herself.(Magalaner,p.413).

The vision of the human condition which emerges from Katherine Mansfield's stories is a painful one. It is predicated upon the notion that to be human is to be a victim and that life preys upon those least capable of defending themselves against the impossible and intolerable situations it presents. Each stage and condition of life has inescapable situations peculiar to it. Women are victimized by the basic fact of their sex: demanding and insensitive men brutalize them, child birth exploits them, and female self-sacrifice is regarded by the male world as routine and expectable. The young and naïve are victimized by the process of learning the lessons life waits to teach: the fact of death, the relentless passage of beauty and vigor, the disappointment of idealism. The old are victimized by loneliness and sickness,by fear of death,by the thoughtless energy of the younger world around them.Mansfield's sympathies are torn between her commitment to life itself, the potential beauty of experience,and the apparent denial of that potential beauty when the chips are down.

To enter into a relationship with another person is,according to Mansfield,to be victimized by the one most loved,most trusted .The only option is to become a victimizer,to inflict the pain,betray the trust.

To see life in such terms is clearly to preclude the grandeur and the sense of positive potential necessary for tragedy, even if one were serious to entertain the possibility of tragedy in the twentieth century. Irony is the perfect mode of expression for such a vision, since irony always assumes a victim. (Magalaner, p.457).

Mansfield's stories clearly reflect this ironic vision, and clear patterns of imagery emerge from the body of her work; they illustrate in miniature what the fiction shows us in large. Mansfield depends almost exclusively on the natural world for her figurative: trees, flowers, birds, insects, mice, rats, cats and dogs, the sun and moon, and the sea. It is as the mechanized and militarized world in which she lived did not exist in any fundamental way in her imagination. She hated cities and war.

Katherine Mansfield revolutionized the 20th century English short story. Her best work shakes itself free of plots and endings and gives the story, for the first time, the expansiveness of the interior life, the poetry of feeling, the blurred edges of personality. She is taught worldwide because of her historical importance and because her prose offers lessons in entering ordinary lives that are still vivid and strong. And her fiction retains its relevance through its open-endedness - its ability to raise discomfiting questions about identity, belonging and desire. (<http://www.nzedge.com>) .

Mansfield's creative years were burdened with loneliness, illness, jealousy, alienation - all this reflected from her work in the bitter depiction of marital and family relationships of her middle-class characters. Her short stories are also noted for their use of stream of consciousness. Like the Russian writer Anton Chekov, Mansfield depicted trivial events and subtle changes in human behavior.

In her last years Mansfield lived much of her time in southern France and in Switzerland seeking relief from tuberculosis. She died on January 9, 1923. Her last words were "I love the rain. I want the feeling of it on my face".) <http://www.malaspina.org>.

KATHERINE MANSFIELD 'S "BLISS"

Mansfield's family memoirs were collected in "Bliss" (1920), which secured her reputation as a writer. "Bliss" 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's 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 carefully, 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.

Most obviously, during the dinner itself, all the arty chit-chat centers on the imagery of eating. Throughout "Bliss" Mansfield ironically plays of a conventional love triangle against an unconventional one, forcing the readers 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 the lack of self-knowledge,the degree of ignorance in her bliss.In her essay examining Katherine Mansfield's theory of fiction,Eileen Baldeshviler 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.(Anderson,p.403) "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. Certainly we may suppose that Mansfield felt her own essential freedom when lost in the soul of Bertha Young and her short-lived bliss.(Fullbrook,p.16) "Bliss"takes account of the impact of socially dictated patterns which structure the individual's conception of what should legitimately satisfy desire,and enacts the wonder and distress that follows from an awakening to the insufficiency of those definitions.Katherine

Mansfield sees desire as diffuse and unpredictable, and in the story shows her awareness of the fine mesh of social definition that is supposed to contain,express and contrast the desires of an advanced western woman.

It is because this social theme that "Bliss" is crowded with people,in this case members of a smart London arty set,the kind of sophisticated social group that Katherine Mansfield often pilloried.The bantering cleverness of her satire of the set-Mrs Norman Knight with her coat pathemed with monkeys,plays crudely for shock values,Eddie

Westren enthuses about a line in the latest poem in the latest review: "why must it Always be Tomato soup?"_ gives a representation in the narrative of the pretensions it mocks.The group is wrapped in conventions,though it takes itself to be frightfully liberated and knowing.

Liberation and knowledge are exactly what are in question for Bertha Young,the thirty-year-old hostess of the party that takes place in the story and whose consciouness is reflected in the writing.As far as she consciously knows, she has everything she has been told she could want.

As she consciously rifles through her asserts,Bertha tries hard to find the item that will 'prove'to herself she is happy.The barely suppressible waves of emotion that Bertha identifies as "bliss" at the opening of the story are really signs of the hysteria that threatens to overcome her and that negates her conviction of well beingShe feels that this "bliss",despite her modern 'freedom' is something she must hide.

IMAGERY IN "BLISS"

The 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 (Magalaner,p.416). Mansfield sums it up in a particularly meaningful letter to her husband, John Middleton Murry: Darling ,this is just a note with the letters . Eat all that extra ration of meat-eat all you can-asI 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 .

(letters to J.MM.p.257) .

This letter dated May 22.1918 was written just three months after Mansfield completed the short story "Bliss". While it is 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: Well, I wish you had eaten my tourmedon; 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. (letters to JMM, pp158-159).

Here we have the transformation of the husband into the meat which the 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 the 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. (letters to JMM, p163).

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 consumed. We are what we eat nutrition editors tells, but Mansfield invested the idea with symbolic overtones that go far beyond the scientific.

Many years later, Murry found it "different" 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 named to Ida."How I should beat her if I were married to her! It's an awful thought"(letters to JMM,p328).

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(letters to JMM, p860).

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 monogamous society.Yet their association as "pals" rather than true lovers reveals either a flash 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 three characters.

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."(Journal,p232).

Indeed,later on in her journal Mansfield elvates 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 one to expand the female in him.Being male'whole'Yes,but that's a process.By love serve ye one another..."(Journal,p259).(And this love, incidently, 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 part of you."(letters to JMM,p125).

In "Bliss" Pearl Fulton is Bertha's acknowledged "find", she is the only one with whom Bertha can communicate completely. Harry, is formally married to one of these 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 that she and he have shared, she does not realize that the shared object is Pearl who, at parting, will also exchange messages with Harry silently, with no need to speak aloud. In the Bertha-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.

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. 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 feel 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 received - accepted - absorbed the beauty of the leaves even into one's physical being. Do you feel like that about things? (letters to JMM, p.564).

It is clear that Murry did feel like that (though Harry, fictional shadow, would not have the sensitivity to be aware of such rarefied matters). Murry expresses their oneness even more clearly and with real certainty.

Thus in the world inhabited by Mansfield and Murry (and Ida Baker) human identities can 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. (Magalaner, p420) 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 Mag as indistinguishable halves of a married couple, and even of the gray cat and the black cat, its shadow, out in the garden.

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 at the story end, is "as lovely as ever and as still." (Magalaner, p422).

When images are seen in relation to each other they form patterns of victims_victimizers that are emblematic of Mansfield's work. Cats are always viewed as predators. In "Bliss" the image is more complex and elusive, containing all the ironies of the relationship between Bertha Young and Pearl Fulton and giving us a crucial insight into Bertha's sexual fears and inadequacies.

But it is with victims rather than victimizers that Mansfield's interest and sympathy lie. John Middleton Murry writes that "this conflict between love and Disillusion: Disillusion and Love which made its appearance at this time (1913) in Katherine Mansfield's life was to endure to the end. It is the ground patterns of her life and work.

Murry adds that the conflict was "between the idealism of love and bitterness of life-what Katherine called "the snail under the leaf". The leaf which first appears to be fresh, alive, and perfect and which is then

discovered to be spoiled by the unpleasant yet inevitable presence of the snail is the recurring image in Mansfield's writing.

The snail appears in several letters, but more significantly to Murry: Oh, it is agony to meet corruption when one thinks all is fair—the big snail under the leaf—the spot on the child's lung—what a wicked, wicked God! But it is more than useless to cry out. Hanging in our little cages on the awful wall over the gulf of eternity we must sing—sing. (K M. JMM, p. 344)

This image of the snail under the leaf is the emblem of Mansfield's ironic vision. It is the image of that which qualifies every leaf, every act, every love. To sing, to create art, in spite of the snail, is to triumph over the corruption while still, paradoxically acknowledging its presence and power.

For Mansfield the bird is almost always small and gentle. In addition, the bird is often seen in motion; the image of flight is the image of escape, and escape is understandably endemic to the notion of victimization.

There is also the mouse image, moreover, the insect is one of Mansfield's most prevalent images, the spider which is the perfect image of the ironic vision. The fly image, which fills Mansfield's stories, and notebooks, functions, like the bird image, as a total statement of Mansfield's vision.

When she was ill and had made another of her excruciatingly taxing journeys into exile, she wrote that she felt "like a fly who has been dropped into the milk-jug and fished out again" (K M. JMM, p. 116).

Mansfield offers in the cats a generalized floating symbol of sexuality and animality—as with the monkeys in the patterns of Face's dress—which expresses Bertha's ambivalence toward sexuality. (Anderson, p. 97).

Katherine Mansfield deploys various emblems of female sexuality through the story and shows Bertha responding to them. Arranging bowls of fruit becomes such a sensuous activity that Bertha can hardly control

herself. In a control of the imagery, Katherine Mansfield provides the analogues to the danger of sensuous response that so torments Bertha in images at the 'wild' life of the animals and plants that persist in their elemental forms in the city. Even in Bertha's bright modern world, in which consciousness is supposed to have banished secrets, there is her garden, full of its own life in the dusk of her psyche. (Anderson, p98).

Bertha attempts a 'modern' reaction to the scene "what a creepy thing cats are!" she stammered. The garden, with its flaming Blackean pear tree, heavy Rubenseque tulip and lawrencian cats, is redolent with sexual suggestion for Bertha, who only unconsciously registers her response to the scene. The image is well chosen. The walled garden itself has been a classic image for unawakened female sexuality since the Middle Ages: here it works as a feature of Bertha's ordinary landscape that suddenly explodes into meaning for her. Katherine Mansfield makes all these associations work in this metaphorical garden of the unawakened woman. The paradox is that Bertha's 'fast' set bases its swagger on its freedom regarding sexual matters. Bertha's acquiescence to these mores is then radically fraudulent, though she does not know this. Everything she is, is based on a lack of knowledge.

Bertha dresses for her party in the colours of her garden, the bridal colours of white and green of the pear tree and the sky. If Bertha is dressed as a bride, her most interesting guest, Pearl Fulton, is dressed in the silvery, pearly colours of the moon, echoing primitive connections between the moon and full female sexuality.

Bertha feels herself in sudden, wordless intimacy with Pearl who surveys the same indirectly through 'heavy eyelids'. Her bedroom eyes and bedroom manner work powerfully on Bertha who is pulled toward her. Again the 'bliss' returns and Bertha looks for a sign that Pearl has also felt the disturbing link between them. Bertha tries to account for her feeling. "I believe this does happen very-very rarely between women. Never between men," she thinks while looking again for a sign from the first adult object of her newly awakened but misunderstood

desire. Pearl gives the sign. She asks to see Bertha's garden.

While Bertha dramatically reveals the garden of her sexual potential in triumph to a creature who has finally become the focus for her crystallized desire in a way that Bertha herself does not understand, she does not know that she is standing with a woman who is already emblematically identified with the full moon high above the garden, and already in her own communion with the phallic implications of the pear tree which Bertha disregards, but which are also a part of its significance symbolically, both women are bathed in the light of the moon of female sexuality, but Pearl already is the moon, Bertha is merely the guardian of a garden, hidden behind windows and curtains, stunned by the moon's light. (Anderson, p.100).

Bertha's free-flowing sexual response moves from Pearl to her own husband. For the first time she desires him. As she takes cognizance of this amazing new sensation, she identifies the source of the "bliss" she has been fighting back. And as she looks around to take possession of him when the guests leave, she sees him kissing Pearl. They are lovers. She understands that she has discovered her sexuality only in time to see its first two objects already in full possession of the pleasure. She is only on the threshold of knowing. Bertha is left alone, on the edge of an abyss, her bliss turned to dismay, and with the pear tree, bisexual emblem of her just discovered sexual need.

The ending is one of absolute and bleak exclusion, the outlets for Bertha's belated sexual flowering are suddenly blocked, a possibility is left senseless and dead in her hands. Katherine Mansfield's simultaneous control of a Jazz Age story as characteristic of the period as F. Scott Fitzgerald's and of a deep structure drawing on a pattern of images that effortlessly shapes the story, demonstrates the power of her late technique. The symbols are selected and placed with great tact and evocativeness, suggesting their multiple meanings without ever insisting on them (for example Pearl is associated with the moon. But also with the grey cat dragging its belly through Bertha's walled garden, her sexuality seen as both utterly transcendent and utterly sordid. At the same time the moon and the cat are both functions of Bertha's unconscious, overdetermined in their meaning by her heightened emotional state.) But the most telling aspect of the story is the ending, with Bertha pushed from

the chatter of herself-consciously modern,sophisticated life into the internal crisis whose source she has just discovered and whose cure was theoretically within her reach until the moment she was ready to grasp it.(Fullbrook, p102).

"Bliss"not only raises difficult questions about loyalties inside and outside of marriage and that place that sexuality holds within it, but also about the kind of freedom enacted as self-serving practice.Betrayed by both male and female,and part of a set that would not recognize Pearl and Harry's affair as betrayal at all,Bertha's distress must be masked by the hypocrisy of a social posture of openness.Superficial poses of freedom lead here to inauthenticity as surely as surfaces of repression do.The group still closes ranks against the outsider.Bertha is a victim of a psychological game she had no conscious idea she was playing.

"Bliss" is a complex work because Katherine Mansfield used symbol and ambiguity deliberately to obscure the full sexual significance of her narrative ,and partly because the story operates on two emotional levels.In the foreground there is the sympathetic,if ironic,portray,of Bertha Young which is in itself a study of a repressed and divided personality.Repressing the real nature of her feelings for such beautiful woman as Pearl Fulton on the one hand ,and for Harry on the other,Bertha indulges in the most blatant self-deception .Part of her defence against facing up to the truth is the role-playing which causes her to cultivate a kind of childish immaturity.

Imagery associated with the world of the garden-trees,flowers,fruit and moonlight-is used to define Bertha;but the conversation of the others is dominated by unpleasantly ambiguous references to food and sexuality.(Hankin,p147).

The image of human beings as something to be devoured is continued in the Norman Knight'repeated references to the scene in the train as 'creamy,'and in Bertha's distorted perception that the wife's dress resembles 'scraped banana skins'and her earrings'little dangling nuts,'Mrs Norman Knight's own obsession with food is revealed in her desire to use 'a friend-fish scheme'in the decoration of a room,'with the backs of the chairs shaped like flying-parts'and lovely chip potatoes embroidered all over the curtains.

The pear tree is by nature bisexual ,its'perfect flowers' contain both male and female organs of propagation,sometimes in such bisexual trees,a condition occurs where in the male organ ripens before the stigma matures enough to receive the pollen,and,hence, self-fertilization cannot occur .Furthermore,such flowers often cannot even be cross-pollinated;hence no fertilization is possible.Thus a pear tree in perfect bloom may be sterile,unable to bear fruit, without "a single bud or a faded

petal. Even as it symbolizes perfection, it is in essence incomplete beautiful but non-functional. (Nebeker, p546).

CONCLUSION

Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923) is New Zealand's most famous writer, who was closely associated with D.H. Lawrence, and something of a rival of Virginia Woolf. She was greatly influenced by Anton Chekhov, sharing his warm humanity and attention to small details of human behavior. Her influence on the development of the short story as a form of literature was also notable.

Thus in her pattern of imagery, Katherine Mansfield conveys what she speaks in the body of her world, we are small, weak, trapped in our humanity, and the only way to endure is through irony.

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