

Bliss



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD

Katherine Mansfield Beauchamp was born into a wealthy, well-respected family in Wellington, New Zealand, in 1888. Mansfield had two older sisters as well as a younger brother, with whom she was particularly close. In 1893 the family moved to the countryside. Mansfield was extremely happy in rural New Zealand and drew upon her childhood memories in later stories such as “Prelude.” Mansfield wrote fiction from a young age, publishing short stories in her school newspaper and later in a New Zealand literary journal. Mansfield moved to London, England, in 1903 and attended Queens College. She travelled Europe from 1903 to 1906 before returning to New Zealand, where she began working on short stories and published work in an Australian journal called *Native Companion*. Mansfield returned to London in 1908, missing the cosmopolitan life of the city and the vibrant, European literary scene. Mansfield had relationships with both men and women throughout her life and was married twice. She left her first husband, George Bowden, on the night of their wedding—possibly because of a lesbian relationship with the South African writer, Ida Baker, whom Mansfield had known since college. Mansfield later married John Middleton Murray, the editor of the literary journal *Rhythm*, which Mansfield contributed to. Their marriage was very volatile and they separated in 1917; Mansfield spent the rest of her life in the company of Ida Baker. Mansfield was deeply affected by the death of her brother, who died in 1915 in World War I. Mansfield was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1917 and travelled to France for her health. During her stay in a hotel in Bandol, she wrote several of her most well-known stories, including “Bliss.” She died from tuberculosis in 1923, and many of her stories were published after her death by her ex-husband, Murray.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

“Bliss” reflects social attitudes towards homosexuality and towards women in early twentieth century Britain. In 1918, when “Bliss” was written, most women in Britain could not vote, although in 1918 a law was passed granting wealthy women over thirty the right to do so. British society in this period was still heavily governed by social etiquette and the rules of propriety, which looked down upon expressions of emotion as well as open discussions of sex or anything to do with the body, and which was bound up in strict rules about class and behavior. As a result, middle and upper-class women, like Bertha, were expected to behave in certain prescribed ways to

maintain their position in society. They were not free to work, openly discuss their emotions, nurse their own children, or have relationships outside of marriage, as these behaviors would be viewed as improper. “Bliss” also deals with the repression of homosexuality in Britain in this period. Homosexuality was illegal in England until 1967, and gay people still faced discrimination throughout the twentieth century. “Bliss” was also written in the final year of World War 1, which had an extremely traumatic effect on Europe, and which paved the way for Modernist literary and artistic movements since people felt that, in the aftermath of such a huge, unprecedented war, society must become very different and work to create something new.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

With its descriptions of upper middle-class life in the early twentieth century, “Bliss” is very similar to the work of Virginia Woolf. Woolf, a friend of Mansfield, was also a Modernist writer working in London during this period. “Bliss” is similar to Woolf’s 1925 novel [Mrs Dalloway](#): both focus on women’s interior lives and center around a woman who is throwing a party at which she hopes something life affirming will take place. Their interest in Modernism and the visual arts (particularly modern styles like Fauvism and the work of the French Impressionists) leads to a focus on aesthetics and external appearances in their stories. These aspects help represent the inner lives of their characters. Mansfield was also influenced by the French Symbolist poets, such as Arthur Rimbaud, and this is evident in her use of strong visual images throughout her stories. The observations of people and social situations, and use of humor in “Bliss,” are further reminiscent of the works of nineteenth century playwright Oscar Wilde. Wilde, who was gay, also addresses the repression of homosexuality in British society in his poem “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” which Wilde wrote while in prison accused of sexual deviance. Homosexuality is a recurring theme in many novels from this period in British literature, including *The Well of Loneliness* by Rydcliffe Hall and *Maurice* by E. M. Forster. The theme of women’s roles in society, which were changing in early twentieth century in Britain, is also reflected in works by Woolf, such as her essay collection [A Room of One’s Own](#). In its description social situations and misunderstandings, “Bliss” is also similar to the novels of Jane Austen as well as nineteenth century “novels of manners,” such as those by Edith Wharton or Henry James.

KEY FACTS

- Full Title: Bliss

- **When Written:** 1918
- **Where Written:** Bandol, France
- **When Published:** 1918
- **Literary Period:** Modernist
- **Genre:** Literary fiction
- **Setting:** A London townhouse in the early twentieth century.
- **Climax:** At a dinner party, which she is hosting, Bertha Young discovers that her husband, Harry, and her friend, Pearl Fulton, with whom she is secretly in love, are having an affair.
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Women's Rights. Although Mansfield was not involved in the Suffragette movement, which was active in Britain when Mansfield was staying there, she was aware of its efforts to win women the right to vote, work, and have equal rights. In Mansfield's home country, New Zealand, women had had the right to vote since 1893. It was one of the first countries to grant women this right.

Relations with the Māori people. While Mansfield had been happy growing up in New Zealand, as a young adult she became depressed and disillusioned by the racist attitudes shown by white settlers towards the native Māori people. She includes Māori characters in some of her later fiction, such as the short story "How Pearl Button was Kidnapped." On her return to New Zealand after college, Mansfield also had a romantic relationship with a Māori woman, Maata Mahupuku.



PLOT SUMMARY

Thirty-year old Bertha Young is overcome by a feeling of excitement, or "bliss," while preparing to throw a dinner party for a group of her friends. Returning home in the afternoon before the party, Bertha thinks that, although she is an adult woman, she still has moments where she wants to "run instead of walk" or "take dancing steps" to express the great sense of joy that she is feeling. Bertha realizes that there is "no way" she can behave like this without being seen as "drunk and disorderly" and feels frustrated by this. Entering her house, Bertha asks her maid if the fruit she has ordered for the party has arrived on time. The maid tells her that it has, and Bertha says that she will go and arrange it before the guests arrive.

Once in the dining room, Bertha throws off her coat and looks at herself in the mirror, realizing that the feeling of "bliss" is still there and that it is growing stronger as the evening approaches. She feels as though she is waiting for something "divine" to happen. Bertha arranges the fruit on the dining room table, thinking about how she has chosen certain fruits in certain colors to match the décor of the room. Although she

thinks this is "rather absurd," she notes that it made sense to her earlier in the day, when she was picking out the fruit, and that the end result is "incredibly beautiful." Beginning to laugh, she feels that she is growing "hysterical" and rushes upstairs to the nursery, where her daughter, Little B, is being cared for by her Nurse. Nurse tells Bertha what she and Little B have been doing all day and, although Bertha disapproves of the Nurse letting Little B play with a strange dog, she is too timid to complain to her about it. Bertha asks Nurse if she can finish giving Little B her supper. Nurse reluctantly agrees, and Bertha enjoys feeding her daughter, which fills her with the same feeling of "bliss" that she experiences when she thinks about the upcoming dinner party.

After feeding her daughter, Bertha thinks about the guests that she has invited to her party. She has invited Mr. Knight and Mrs. Knight, who are interested in theatre and interior design, a fashionable writer called Eddie Warren, and a "find" of Bertha's called Pearl Fulton, whom Bertha has "fallen in love with, as she always did fall in love with beautiful women who had something strange about them." Bertha thinks that she would like to get to know Pearl, but that Pearl is reserved and will not let people in beyond a certain point. Bertha wonders if there is anything more to Pearl's character. Her husband Harry has said that he does not think so and has joked that there is nothing but "a good stomach" behind Pearl's mysterious façade. Bertha likes Harry's jokes and thinks fondly about how she admires this quality in her husband. While Bertha is putting the finishing touches to the drawing room, she is surprised to find herself passionately hugging one of the sofa cushions that she is arranging.

Bertha looks out of the window at her garden and admires the **pear tree**, which is glowing white under the **moon**. She thinks that the beautiful tree is a "symbol of her own life" and notes that the colors of the sky and tree match her outfit for the evening, even though she hasn't planned this. She turns away from the window when she sees two **cats** crossing the lawn and the sight of them give her a shudder. She is almost overcome by happiness thinking about her life and is only roused from this state by the arrival of the Knights. Mrs. Knight tells Bertha that her colorful dress made people stare at her on the train. Eddie Warren then arrives and complains that his taxi driver was "most sinister" and that, in the moonlight, this driver seemed to have something "timeless" about him. Harry arrives late, and Bertha is so delighted with her guests that she almost forgets that Pearl Fulton has not yet arrived.

Finally, Pearl arrives, and the guests sit down to eat. Over dinner they discuss the theatre, as Eddie Warren and Norman Knight intend to write a play. Bertha thinks what a "decorative group" her guests make and feels almost overcome with tenderness for them. She is still thinking about the pear tree, which she thinks will have turned silver in the moonlight, like Pearl, who is dressed completely in silver. Looking at Pearl,

Bertha feels that she knows exactly what Pearl is feeling and that the two of them have formed an unspoken connection, which sometimes happens between women but never between men. After dinner, Pearl asks Bertha if she has a garden and Bertha takes this as a “sign” of their connection. She takes Pearl to the window and shows her the pear tree. The two women look out over the garden and Bertha feels that she and Pearl understand each other perfectly.

Bertha and Pearl rejoin the others for coffee. Harry offers Pearl a cigar and Bertha thinks that his manner indicates that he really dislikes Pearl. Bertha has a moment of panic when she remembers that her guests will leave soon and she will be left alone with her husband, with whom she does not have a sexual relationship. She has “desired” him for the first time in her life that evening, however, and this slightly allays her fear. The guests begin to get ready to leave and, as Pearl goes into the hall to get her coat, Harry follows her. Bertha thinks gratefully that Harry is doing this to make amends for being rude to Pearl. She goes to get a book for Eddie Warren to borrow and, on her way past the hall, looks up and sees Harry with his arms around Pearl. They are smiling and whispering to each other about arranging a time to meet. Bertha goes back into the living room and gives the book to Eddie. Pearl and Eddie make to leave and, as Pearl is saying goodbye to Bertha she whispers, “Your lovely pear tree.” After they leave Harry goes to lock up and Bertha rushes to the window overlooking the garden, wondering what is going to happen next.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Bertha Young – The protagonist of the story, Bertha Young is a wealthy, middle class woman who is married to Harry and has a young daughter, Little B. Bertha is a sociable woman who seems to feel things very strongly and who wishes to be open about her emotions. She is prevented from approaching life in this frank way, however, because of the rules of propriety governing British society of the period. She does not have a bold or daring personality and, for this reason, has trouble questioning the authority of people around her or being honest about her own wishes. Nevertheless, Bertha tries hard to communicate with the people around her and expresses her internal desires through her external appearance as well as through the thoughtful way that she decorates her house. Bertha, who is also interested in modern social questions and contemporary artistic movements, attempts surround herself with interesting and informed companions. Although Bertha is extremely excited by her feelings for Pearl Fulton, a friend whom she has invited to her dinner party, Bertha comes across as sexually naïve and seemingly does not recognize her attraction to Pearl as romantic. Bertha’s sexual naivety, and potential homosexuality, also affects her relationship with her

husband, with whom she avoids having a sexual relationship. Although Bertha is a grateful woman who works hard to be content with her life, she is burdened by the restrictive social conditions of the period she lives in and is often not able to recognize the true nature of her emotions.

Pearl Fulton – Pearl Fulton is a friend of Bertha Young’s, whom Bertha has invited to her dinner party and who is secretly engaged in an affair with Bertha’s husband, Harry. Pearl is a mysterious and reserved woman who is depicted ambiguously throughout the story. The reader does not receive much insight into Pearl’s internal state, and most of the information the reader receives about Pearl is either about her external appearance or comes from Bertha’s perception of her friend. Pearl is associated with beauty throughout the story. Named for a precious object, she is dressed in a silver outfit reflective of her name, and this silver outfit is further connected to the symbols of the **pear tree** and the **moonlight** in the story. Bertha describes Pearl as reserved and notes that there is a point of familiarity that Pearl will not go past with her. Bertha interprets this reserve as mysterious and believes that it implies that Pearl is feeling the same attraction to Bertha that Bertha feels for her. This is not confirmed by the events in the story however, and the revelation of Pearl’s affair with Harry suggests instead that Pearl is a dishonest person who uses her friendship with Bertha, and Bertha’s obvious admiration of her, to get close to Bertha’s husband.

Harry Young – Harry, Bertha Young’s husband, is having an affair with Pearl Fulton, with whom Bertha is also seemingly in love. Harry appears, on the surface, to be a frank, daring person who does not care about propriety and pushes the boundaries of social decorum through his controversial sense of humor. Bertha admires this quality in Harry, particularly when he makes irreverent jokes about Pearl that undercut Bertha’s idealized image of her friend. Rather than being enamored with Pearl, as Bertha is, Harry claims that Pearl’s beauty and mystery have nothing behind them but “a good stomach” or “pure flatulence,” and Bertha admires such irreverence. Harry also seems to be a good husband and a sympathetic person because he has accepted the fact that Bertha is not sexually attracted to him and that they are merely “good pals” instead of lovers. However, Harry’s openness and amiability are called into question by the story’s ending, in which Bertha discovers that he is having an affair with Pearl. It then becomes apparent that much of Harry’s behavior has been a façade to hide his real emotions, such as when he offers Pearl a cigar and appears to “really dislike her.” This suggests that Harry is a manipulative person who understands how to construct his external appearance and manner so that Bertha will not suspect his infidelity.

Eddie Warren – Eddie Warren is a neurotic and fashionable writer whom Bertha Young has invited to her dinner party. Eddie Warren comes across as imaginative and easily alarmed,

as exemplified in his interaction with a taxi driver whom he imagines has been transformed by the **moonlight** into a sinister, supernatural being. Eddie does not seem comfortable interacting socially and maintains both an expression of “anguish” and a nervous manner throughout the party. A playwright, his neuroses are comically exaggerated by Mansfield to suggest his artistic and highly-strung character. Although Eddie is famous within artistic circles, his artistic talent and depth of perception are called into question at the end of the story when he tells Bertha that he thinks the most profound sentence ever written is: “Why must it always be tomato soup?” Although Eddie feels that there is something “eternal” about this sentence, it is clear to the reader that it is a banal and meaningless phrase. This causes the reader to suspect that the attention given to Eddie Warren by the fashionable, London public has given the illusion that he is a brilliant playwright, when in fact he is quite an ordinary one, just as the taxi driver he is so afraid of is just an ordinary taxi driver who looks strange in the light from the moon.

Mrs. Knight – Mrs. Knight is the wife of Mr. Norman Knight and one of Bertha Young’s guests at her dinner party. She presents herself as a bold, unconventional woman, making an entrance to the dinner party by complaining that “the middle-class is so stodgy” and “utterly without a sense of humor.” She tells Bertha that she caused a scene on the train on the way to the party by wearing an orange coat decorated with monkeys. Instead of becoming embarrassed by the fact that people were staring at her, Mrs. Knight tells Bertha that she asked one woman if she’d “never seen a monkey before,” drawing more attention to herself and her outfit. That she tells this story as a humorous anecdote implies that Mrs. Knight takes pride in her role as an unconventional, slightly shocking person and sees herself as more enlightened or original than others of her station. Mrs. Knight’s behavior reflects Bertha’s choice of “modern, thrilling friends,” as well as Mansfield’s own personal experience with bohemian socialites in London. However, although Bertha claims that her friends are interested in “social questions,” Mrs. Knight gives little evidence of this throughout the evening and, instead, is associated with aesthetics and external decoration: she is interested in “interior design” and her unconventionality is a facet of her outfit rather than her behavior.

Mr. Norman Knight – Mr. Norman Knight is one of Bertha Young’s guests at her dinner party and is the husband of Mrs. Knight. Mr. Knight comes across as a man who lives a conventional life but who is ironic and self-aware about the clichés that he embodies. Mr. Knight makes several ironic references to the middle-class conventions he follows—such as having nothing to do with his daughter until she has a suitor that he can object to—and seems to satirize himself and the society to which all the characters belong in a good-natured and undisruptive way. Like the other guests, who are described as “modern and thrilling” but who give little actual evidence of

being so, Mr. Knight makes no reference to “social questions” throughout the evening. The only physical detail offered about Mr. Knight is the fact that he wears a monocle that keeps one of his eyes behind glass. This suggests that Mr. Knight is a detached personality who does not become emotionally involved in causes and who, in contrast to Bertha, does not have a strong emotional response to other people.

Nurse – Nurse is an employee of Bertha Young and cares for Bertha and Harry’s young daughter, Little B. Nurse seems to have a very close bond with Little B, even though she is Bertha’s daughter and not her own, and is resentful of Bertha’s attempts to spend time with the baby. Although Bertha’s wish to bond with her daughter is genuine, Nurse views her desire to feed her daughter as interference and this type of interaction, between an upper-class woman and her child, as unconventional and improper.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Little B – Little B is the infant daughter of Harry and Bertha Young



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



SEXUALITY AND DESIRE

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

Bertha’s attraction to Pearl is not explicitly referenced in sexual terms. However, Bertha’s homosexuality is implied by the fact that she does not feel sexual attraction towards her husband, Harry, and the fact that her attraction to Pearl induces such a

physical response. Bertha feels a “little air of proprietorship” toward Pearl “that she always assumed with her women finds,” suggesting that she is possessive of Pearl in the way one might be over a lover. Bertha’s excitement about the dinner party is also explicitly linked to Pearl’s attendance: she feels that she has “fallen in love with” Pearl, “as she always did” with “beautiful women,” and the “fire of bliss” that Bertha feels all day leading up to the party is increased by physical contact with Pearl. When Pearl takes Bertha’s arm, Bertha wonders, “what there was in the touch of that cool arm that could fan—fan—start blazing—blazing—the fire of bliss that Bertha did not know what to do with?” This physical sensation is contrasted with Bertha’s coldness towards Harry, which is evidently something they have already accepted as part of their marriage. Bertha even becomes panicked by the idea of being left alone with her husband and the thought of “the dark room” and “the warm bed.” This suggests that Bertha avoids having a sexual relationship with Harry—a sharp contrast from the glut of warm feelings and excitement she feels in Pearl’s presence, underscoring Bertha’s carefully concealed homosexuality. Indeed, she notably feels the first pangs of desire towards her husband only while she is immersed in the “bliss” brought on by Pearl’s presence, suggesting this sudden desire for Harry is really just displaced longing for Pearl.

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

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

Of course, given that homosexuality was not openly acknowledged in society in the Edwardian period and homosexual relationships often existed on the fringes of mainstream culture, Bertha has no frame of reference in which to think about her desire for Pearl, other than as something which must be concealed or expressed in an ambiguous way. The image of the pear tree is thus further symbolic of forbidden desire as it relates to the biblical story of the Garden of Eden, in which Adam and Eve were forbidden from eating fruit from the Tree of Life (but sinfully did so anyway). Although Bertha’s life is very free in some ways because of her upper-middle class status and material wealth, the pear tree symbolizes the limitations in her life; the tree itself remains out of reach beyond the window, reflecting the social difficulty that Bertha would face being openly gay in this period and society.

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



WOMEN'S ROLES AND SOCIAL CONSTRAINT

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

Bertha’s antagonism towards the constraints of polite society is evident early in the story, as these constraints prevent her from expressing the strong emotion that she feels. Bertha feels that “although” she is thirty, she still has moments when she wants

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

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

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

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

The fact that women in the story are frequently compared with inanimate objects further underscores the objectification of women’s bodies in the period and the tendency to view upper

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

Bertha also demonstrates her desire to rebel against gender roles in society through her choice of unconventional friends, like Mrs. Knight. Mrs. Knight demonstrates her unconventionality through her fashion sense—drawing attention to herself by wearing a bright orange coat decorated with monkeys, which makes people stare on the train. Bertha, however, is not depicted as a bold character and, instead, only internally wishes to disrupt conventions. This is evident in her timidity in front of the nurse and the fact that, even though she “wishes to run instead of walk,” she refrains from doing so. However strong her moments of bliss, at the end of the story she remains prisoner to the expectations placed on all women at the time.



AESTHETICS, APPEARANCE, AND PERFORMANCE

“Bliss” is written in a Modernist style, reflected in the focus on aesthetics throughout the story.

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

Bertha tries to use both her external appearance and the presentation of her home to communicate her feelings and personality to the people around her. For example, she has paid special attention to the appearance of her living room in

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

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

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

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

Ultimately, all the characters in the story—even Bertha—are merely putting on performances, as their appearances don't reflect their inner states. Although Bertha describes her guests as "modern, thrilling" people, who are interested in "social questions," they give little indication of this during the dinner,

suggesting that this is merely a performance in keeping with fashion rather than a true reflection of their interests. During the party, Bertha describes her guests as a "decorative group" suggesting their superficiality and their lack of substance.

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



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE PEAR TREE

The pear tree in "Bliss" symbolizes Bertha's attraction to Pearl Fulton, a friend she has invited to her dinner party. The tree also represents hidden desire more generally throughout the story. Bertha associates the pear tree with the sensation of "bliss" that she feels as she is preparing for the party that Pearl will attend. Looking at the tree through a window, Bertha feels that it is a "symbol of her own life" and that its "wide open blossoms" represent the possibility of change, which is available to her if she is able to break away from social convention and admit her attraction to, or form a romantic connection with, Pearl. The tree further represents Bertha's internal state as its colors in the **moonlight** are the same colors that Bertha has chosen to wear that evening. Because the tree is outside and separated from Bertha by the window, however, it comes to reflect a desire outside the realm of domesticity and upper middle-class conventionality. Using a tree as a symbol of desire also corresponds with the Tree of Life from the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden, in which Adam and Eve are barred from eating the fruit from this tree and yet do so anyway—disobeying God yet gaining knowledge; Bertha, by contrast, seems to deny or repress her own knowledge of her genuine emotional state (that is, her love

for Pearl). During the dinner party, Bertha and Pearl stand and look through the window at the pear tree together. To Bertha, this moment represents their unspoken connection and suggests to her that Pearl is feeling the same way that she is feeling. In this moment, to Bertha, the pear tree looks like a huge flaming candle in the light from the moon and this symbolizes the strength of Bertha's desire.



MOONLIGHT

Moonlight represents transformation and illusion in the story. Bertha sees the moon rising when she is looking out at the **pear tree** before the dinner party and associates this with the transformative potential of the evening, which she believes will bring about some change in her life and lead to the fulfilment of her hidden desire for Pearl Fulton. The moon continues to have a transformative effect over the evening: when Eddie Warren arrives, he complains that the moonlight has made his socks whiter and transformed his taxi driver into a "sinister" and "timeless" figure whom Eddie was afraid would kidnap him in an "eternal taxi." Pearl is also associated with the moon: dressed all in silver, she has a pearl-like appearance reflective of her name and similar to the white glow of the moon. This represents the idea that Pearl herself has had a transformative effect upon Bertha's life, just as the moon has transformed the night outside and made ordinary things seem mysterious and extraordinary. It is Pearl's presence which is responsible for Bertha's feeling of "bliss," which has transformed the world around her and made her feel "tender" towards everything and everyone. However, just as the moonlight has had an artificial effect upon the appearance of the taxi driver and made him appear like an "eternal" creature, Pearl's affinity with how Bertha feels also proves to be an illusion. It is revealed that Pearl is, in fact, having an affair with Bertha's husband Harry. As such, it is likely that her friendliness towards Bertha is a means to allow Pearl to spend time with Harry while deflecting suspicion.



CATS

The appearance of cats in the story imbue Bertha's joy with a sense of foreboding and symbolize the harmful nature of dishonesty—both to others, and to oneself. While looking out over her garden at the **pear tree**, Bertha sees two cats crossing the lawn: first a grey one and then a black one who is like "his shadow." Although Bertha has been contemplating the pear tree as a symbol of the possibility of joy in her own life, the sudden appearance of the two cats beneath the tree makes her "shiver" and she thinks: "what creepy things cats are." The idea of the black "shadow," underneath the image of Bertha's "bliss" foreshadows the idea that things are not quite as they appear in the story and that Bertha's desire for joy will not come to fruition. The two cats creeping across the lawn

also reflects Harry and Pearl's behavior; sneaking about in order to have an affair. The fact that the cats give Bertha a shiver, although she does not know why, suggests that Bertha does not fully understand her own motives. This is corroborated by the fact that Bertha feels that her attraction to Pearl is platonic and otherworldly, rather than sexual, reflecting Bertha's sexual naivety and lack of self-knowledge more generally.




QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Stories* published in 1991.

Bliss Quotes

●● Although Bertha Young was thirty she still had moments like this when she wanted to run instead of walk, to take dancing steps on and off the pavement, to bowl a hoop, to throw something up in the air and catch it again, or to stand still and laugh at—nothing—at nothing, simply. What can you do if you are thirty and, turning the corner of your own street, you are overcome, suddenly, by a feeling of bliss—absolute bliss!—as though you'd suddenly swallowed a bright piece of that late afternoon sun and it burned in your bosom, sending out a little shower of sparks into every particle, into every finger and toe.

Related Characters: Bertha Young

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis



This opening passage, which introduces the character of Bertha Young, also introduces the reader to a fundamental aspect of Bertha's character: the fact that she feels at odds with the society that she lives in. Bertha feels compelled to act in a certain way because of societal pressures and assumptions about how people *should* behave, yet her feelings contradict this.

Bertha is a grown woman and yet wants to act in a way that is associated with childhood: running, jumping, playing games, and laughing for no reason. Even Bertha's surname "Young" suggests that, although she appears to be a thirty-year old woman, internally she does not feel like one. However, this does not imply that Bertha is an immature character, but that the society in which she lives expects adults to act in an unnecessarily sensible or mature way.

Bertha wants to act in a childish, physical way to express the feeling of “absolute bliss” which overwhelms her. This seems quite a reasonable thing to want and the ways in which Bertha wishes to act seem totally harmless. The fact that her “bliss” is associated with the sun shining also suggests that this is a positive emotion, in contrast to the social restriction which Bertha clearly feels. The phrase “What can you do” also suggests that Bertha’s “bliss” is a spontaneous feeling which she cannot resist or control, and it seems unreasonable of society to ask this of her simply because she is “thirty.”

☝ 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?

Related Characters: Bertha Young

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

“Bliss” is set in Britain in the early 1900s, where behavior among upper and middle-class people was strictly governed by the rules of propriety. These rules discouraged emotional expression and were considered to be a beacon of “civilization.” There were restrictive rules about how women should behave, and upper and middle-class women were discouraged from partaking in physical activities or drawing attention to the fact that they had physical bodies.



Bertha is antagonistic towards the rules and conventions of “civilized society.” She resents the fact that expressions of emotion or joy are viewed as shocking or improper and that people will assume you are “drunk and disorderly” if you engage in one. This rejection of emotional openness is criticized by Bertha as “idiotic.” This criticism of “civilization” also reflects Mansfield’s distaste for a society in which certain types of relationships (such as homosexual, romantic relationships) are deemed inappropriate or unacceptable. Homosexuality was illegal in Britain until the 1960s. The implication that “civilization” and the rules which govern it, such as propriety or social convention, are “idiotic” suggests that a society which rejects expressions of love and affection between people of the same sex is not really a very “civilized” or enlightened society.

Bertha’s comment that her body is like a “rare fiddle locked

in a case” also suggests that the physical restrictions placed on women are “idiotic.” Mansfield implies here, through Bertha, that women should have autonomy over their own bodies and how they choose to use them.

☝ But in her bosom there was still that bright glowing place that shower of little sparks coming from it. It was almost unbearable. She hardly dared to breathe for fear of fanning it higher, and yet she breathed deeply, deeply. She hardly dared to look into the cold mirror—but she did look, and it gave her back a woman, radiant, with smiling, trembling lips, with big, dark eyes and an air of listening, waiting for something. . . divine to happen. . . that she knew must happen . . . infallibly.

Related Characters: Bertha Young

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

Bertha arrives at her home, still under the influence of the overwhelming “bliss” that she feels and looks at herself in the mirror as she ponders this feeling.

This passage is the first indication that Bertha’s “bliss” is not a straightforward joyful emotion and that it may even be tinged with desperation and fear. The use of the word “unbearable” suggests that her “bliss” is not an entirely stable emotion but a feeling that is building to something and may become totally overwhelming if it is not quelled or contained. The fact that she “hardly dares to breathe” suggests that Bertha too, senses this, and is afraid of being consumed by the feeling or transformed into something other than herself by it. The use of the word “fanning” associates her feeling of “bliss” with fire, which can be both beautiful and destructive.

The fact that Bertha “hardly dares” to look in the mirror suggests that she is afraid that this transformation may have already become to take place and that she will see evidence of her “bliss” in her reflection. The fact that her reflection seems to be “waiting for something” suggests that her “bliss” is not a product of her life as it is, but of some change that she is hopeful will take place. This suggests that Bertha is not happy in her current life and is desperate for some “divine” change to occur, although she also seems to be afraid of what this change might be.

When she had finished with them and had made two pyramids of these bright round shapes, she stood away from the table to get the effect—and it really was most curious. For the dark table seemed to melt into the dusky light and the glass dish and the blue bowl to float in the air. This, of course in her present mood, was so incredibly beautiful. . . . She began to laugh. "No, no. I'm getting hysterical." And she seized her bag and coat and ran upstairs to the nursery.

Related Characters: Bertha Young (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes Bertha arranging the fruit, which she has specifically chosen for her party to compliment the colors and décor of the dining room. Although Bertha acknowledges that this seems slightly “absurd” she notes that, in her state of “bliss,” this had seemed like a perfectly sensible thing to do.

Aesthetics are an important aspect of Mansfield’s work and reflect her interest in Modernist artistic movements popular in Europe at the time in which she was writing. The use of strong images in Mansfield’s work also reflects her interest in the Symbolist poets, who used striking images to symbolize emotions and internal states. This image of the fruit carefully arranged into “pyramids of bright round shapes” is reminiscent of the paintings of the French Impressionists, such as Monet, Degas, or Cezanne, whose work focused on the careful composition of shapes and colors to capture scenes from nature or still life.


The “curious” effect of the table “melting” into the dusk, and the bowl “floating” in the air, suggests the general atmosphere of enchantment and transformation in the story. It also supports Bertha’s belief that, by perfectly organizing the aesthetics of her external surroundings, she can communicate her internal state to the people around her. The thought of this “in her present mood” makes Bertha so happy that, again, her joy borders on hysteria or madness. Rather than be overwhelmed by it, she rushes off to try and escape.

She stood watching them, her hands by her side, like the poor little girl in front of the rich little girl with the doll. The baby looked up at her again, stared, and then smiled so charmingly that Bertha couldn’t help crying: “Oh, Nanny, do let me finish giving her her supper while you put the bath things away.”

“Well, M’m, she oughtn’t to be changed hands while she’s eating,” said Nanny, still whispering. “It unsettles her; it’s very likely to upset her.”

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?

Related Characters: Nurse, Bertha Young (speaker), Little B

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis



Bertha goes to the nursery and watches the Nurse feeding her daughter, Little B. Bertha is jealous of the connection between the Nurse and her daughter and wishes that she could spend time with her daughter in this way.

Bertha’s situation here represents the norm for middle and upper-class women in early 1900s in Britain. It was very common for children to be raised by a nanny and, because society was strictly divided into roles by class, it was deemed improper for women of Bertha’s class to look after their own children since physical jobs like childcare were viewed as roles for lower-class women. Although Bertha is privileged because of her class, her social place is also restrictive because it limits the amount of affection that she can bestow upon her own child. As a result of this, Bertha is jealous of Nurse even though, in literal terms Nurse is poor and Bertha is rich and views this relationship as inverted when she feels like a “poor little girl in front of a rich little girl with the doll.”

Nurse too feels that it is improper for Bertha to feed Little B and is resentful that Bertha tries to interfere and go against the conventional rules of society. The repetition of the analogy of the “fiddle being locked in a case” (or “in another woman’s arms”) suggests the absurdity of a society which compartmentalizes relationships and relies so strictly on dividing everything up into roles.

What Miss Fulton did, Bertha didn't know. They 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. The provoking thing was that, though they had been about together and met a number of times and really talked, Bertha couldn't yet make her out. Up to a certain point Miss Fulton was rarely, wonderfully frank, but the certain point was there, and beyond that she would not go.

Related Characters: Pearl Fulton, Bertha Young

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

Pearl Fulton is a friend of Bertha's and one of the guests who Bertha has invited to a dinner party which she is hosting that evening. It is implied that Pearl is quite a recent friend of Bertha's and that Bertha has not yet had the chance to get to know Pearl well.

The fact that Bertha frequently "falls in love" with "beautiful women" suggests that Bertha is gay, even if she is not aware of this, and that she frequently develops crushes on her female acquaintances. This is reinforced by the idea that Bertha wants something more from her relationship with Pearl although she does not know exactly what it is that she wants. The idea that Bertha finds Pearl's reserve "provoking" suggests that Bertha is desperate to have an intimate relationship with Pearl, but that Pearl is reluctant to confide intimately in Bertha. Although this desire is not necessarily sexual it does imply that Bertha wishes to form a close emotional connection with Pearl, which implies a romantic relationship.

Bertha is fascinated by Pearl and clearly spends a lot of time thinking about what may be behind Pearl's reserved façade. This also implies that Bertha is romantically obsessed with Pearl and that she is projecting certain fantasies onto her. For example, Bertha wishes to find out what is "strange" about Pearl, as though it must be something brilliant and exciting. In reality Pearl may be a totally ordinary woman or may be hiding something unpleasant.

Was there anything beyond it? Harry said "No." Voted her dullish, and "cold like all blond women, with a touch, perhaps, of anemia of the brain." But Bertha wouldn't agree with him; not yet, at any rate.

"No, the way she has of sitting with her head a little on one side, and smiling, has something behind it, Harry, and I must find out what that something is."

"Most likely it's a good stomach," answered Harry.

He made a point of catching Bertha's heels with replies of that kind . . . "liver frozen, my dear girl," or "pure flatulence," or "kidney disease" . . . and so on. For some strange reason Bertha liked this, and most admired it in him very much.

Related Characters: Bertha Young, Harry Young (speaker), Pearl Fulton

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

Bertha has clearly discussed her interest in Pearl with her husband, Harry, although Harry is not aware that Bertha is in love with Pearl. Harry has a habit of contradicting Bertha and making jokes about things that Bertha says in earnest, which is something Bertha likes and admires in him.

Bertha feels that there must be more to Pearl's personality than she has so far discovered. Bertha finds Pearl so beautiful and enchanting that she cannot believe there is nothing behind Pearl's reserve. Bertha's obsession with Pearl, —and with finding out what, if anything, lies behind Pearl's façade—demonstrates that Bertha is infatuated with Pearl.



Harry, in contrast to Bertha, is dismissive of Pearl. At this point in the story it is not clear yet to the reader whether Harry and Pearl have met before, but Harry seems determined not to be taken in by Pearl's beauty and to assume that Pearl is probably a shallow or vapid person. Harry deliberately undercuts Bertha's romantic assumptions about Pearl by reminding Bertha that Pearl is nothing but a human being with the same bodily functions as everybody else. Although this seems slightly unfair of Harry, Bertha admits that she "admires this in him very much." This suggests that Bertha likes to hear Pearl being humanized as this makes her seem more real to Bertha, who is desperate to discover the real Pearl. Bertha also likes Harry unconventionality, which is evident in his decision not to objectify Pearl or to focus only on her beauty.



At the same time, the later revelation of Harry and Pearl's affair casts this moment in a different light, as Harry is likely

trying to avoid suspicion by pretending not to like Pearl.

●● The windows of the drawing-room opened on to a balcony overlooking the garden. At the far end, against the wall, there was a tall, slender pear tree in fullest, richest bloom; it stood perfect, as though becalmed against the jade-green sky. Bertha couldn't help feeling, even from this distance, that it had not a single bud or a faded petal. Down below, in the garden beds, the red and yellow tulips, heavy with flowers, seemed to lean upon the dusk. 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 and began walking up and down. . . .

Related Characters: Bertha Young (speaker), Pearl Fulton

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

As she waits for her guests to arrive for the dinner party, Bertha looks out over her garden, which looks beautiful in the gathering dusk.

Bertha's pear tree becomes a symbol of her unfulfilled desire for Pearl Fulton, and her unexplored homosexuality more generally, throughout the course of the story. This is implied by the fact that the pear tree is described as "perfect" and the idea that it "had not a single bud or faded petal." The pear tree is unspoiled and ideal, just as Bertha's desire for Pearl Fulton is unspoiled because it has never been explored. However, although the idea of a relationship with Pearl is very beautiful to Bertha, just like tree, it is also a sad image because it implies that Bertha will never get close enough to Pearl to form a real connection and instead her love is doomed to remain in this idealized, untouched state.



This also corresponds with the tree as a symbol of forbidden desire and has Biblical links to the perfect but forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden, which Adam and Eve ate from and which, as a result, brought sin into the unspoiled world. The image of the cats underneath the tree suggests this "shadow" underlying Bertha's desire and suggests that her "bliss" is not a "perfect" state but one which has potentially damaging consequences for Bertha,


specifically because of the limitations placed on sexuality in the period.

●● And she seemed to see on her eyelids the lovely pear tree with its wide open blossoms as a symbol of her own life. Really—really—she had everything. She was young. Harry and she were as much in love as ever, and they got on together splendidly and were really good pals. She had an adorable baby. They didn't have to worry, about money. . . .

"I'm absurd. Absurd!" She sat up; but she felt quite dizzy, quite drunk. It must have been the spring. Yes, it was the spring. Now she was so tired she could not drag herself upstairs to dress. A white dress, a string of jade beads, green shoes and stockings. It wasn't intentional. She had thought of this scheme hours before she stood at the drawing-room window.

Related Characters: Bertha Young (speaker), Harry Young

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 147-148

Explanation and Analysis

Bertha lies on the couch before the dinner party and is almost overcome with her feelings of excitement and "bliss." In this state she finds it hard to get ready but is pleased when she realizes that her outfit matches the colors in her garden.

Bertha views the pear tree as a "symbol of her own life" because she feels that her life is filled with opportunities that should make her very happy. She is aware of her social privilege because of her class and financial situation. However, the fact that she feels she *should* be happy, and repeats all the reasons for this to herself, suggests that she is not really happy and that this conventional idea of happiness does not line up with what she really wants. The fact that thinking about her life exhausts her is further evidence of this.



Bertha's outfit—"a white dress, a string of jade beads"—matches the colors in the garden. Although this is accidental, Bertha notes its significance. This demonstrates that Bertha feels that internal states can be represented or symbolized by external appearances. This is reminiscent of her decision to coordinate the drawing room according to color in order to communicate her feeling of "bliss" to her guests. However, it also demonstrates that Bertha is a naïve


character who does not take into account the fact that external appearances can also mask and disguise internal states as well as illuminate them.

☞ And then Miss Fulton, all in silver, with a silver fillet binding her pale blond hair, came in smiling, her head a little on one side. “Am I late?”

“No, not at all,” said Bertha. “Come along.” And she took her arm and they moved into the dining-room. 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. Miss Fulton did not look at her; but then she seldom did look at people directly... 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.

Related Characters: Bertha Young, Pearl Fulton (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

Pearl Fulton is the final guest to arrive at Bertha’s dinner party. When she arrives, and Bertha takes her arm, Bertha feels her sense of “bliss” flare up once more and takes this as confirmation that Pearl Fulton is feeling the same.

Pearl is dressed in silver and, therefore, associated with the moonlight, which is transforming the night outside the dinner party just as Bertha’s love for Pearl is transforming the whole evening for her and making the party seem enchanted. Because Bertha connects people’s external appearance with their internal thoughts, to her, Pearl symbolizes something transformative and enchanting, like the moon. The fact that Bertha feels her “bliss” start “blazing” when she takes Pearl’s arm demonstrates that this feeling of bliss is related to feelings of love, and that Pearl is the source of it.



Pearl does not look at Bertha and Bertha notes that Pearl “seldom” does look at people directly. This suggests that Pearl is an evasive person and supports Bertha’s earlier statement that Pearl is reserved. This feeds Bertha’s curiosity about Pearl as she thinks that Pearl is mysterious. This mysterious quality, and the lack of information that

Bertha has about Pearl, allows Bertha to project her own feelings of love onto Pearl and makes her believe that Pearl reciprocates her feelings. She believes this to such an extent that it is as though Pearl has given her verbal confirmation of this, although, in reality there is no evidence that she has.

☞ At that moment Miss Fulton “gave the sign.”

“Have you a garden?” said the cool, sleepy voice. This was so exquisite on her part that all Bertha could do was to obey. She crossed the room, pulled the curtains apart, and opened those long windows. “There!” she breathed. 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.

Related Characters: Bertha Young, Pearl Fulton (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 152-153

Explanation and Analysis

After dinner Pearl asks Bertha if she has a garden. Bertha shows her the pear tree from the window and feels that she and Pearl have a significant connection as they stand at the window together.

This moment represents the moment of intimacy that Bertha has been hoping for with Pearl. She believes that Pearl also wants to connect with her and that Pearl’s question about the garden is her own, symbolic way of showing Bertha this. Bertha feels strongly about this moment as it gives her the opportunity both to be alone with Pearl and to show Pearl the object she thinks of as representing her desire and the inner, hidden aspects of her self that she wishes Pearl to see: the pear tree in the moonlight.



In this moment, the two women seem to become separate from the party and the world of domesticity, social convention, and heterosexual marriage which it represents.

In contrast to this, Bertha feels that she and Pearl are “unearthly creatures” who belong to another world. Moonlight is also significant because the moon is often associated with femininity in pagan mythology and Bertha is searching for a connection with another woman. The images of nature, such as the “silver flowers” dropping into their hair, suggests that homosexual relationships are natural and precious, like “treasures,” and that it is the society which condemns them which is unnatural.

●● At those last words something strange and almost terrifying darted into Bertha's mind. And this something blind and smiling whispered to her: “Soon these people will go—The house will be quiet—quiet. The lights will be out. And you and he will be alone together in the dark room—the warm bed.”— She jumped up from her chair and ran over to the piano. “What a pity someone does not play!” she cried. “What a pity somebody does not play.”

For the first time in her life Bertha Young desired her husband. Oh, she'd loved him – she'd been in love with him, of course, in every other way, but just not in that way.

Related Characters: Bertha Young (speaker), Pearl Fulton, Harry Young

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

As the party begins winding down, Bertha remembers that soon she will have to go to bed with her husband. This thought frightens her because she tries to avoid a sexual relationship with her husband, although she has “desired him” for “the first time in her life” during the party.

Bertha is afraid of the implication that being left alone with her husband will involve going to bed with him and possibly having sex. This is evident through the image of the “dark room” and the “warm bed.” The panic which this thought instills in her is evident in the fact that she “jumps up” and “runs” to the piano. This suggests that she is desperate to be distracted from this thought and that she is returning to her earlier, slightly hysterical mood as the enchantment of the party, and her time with Pearl draws to a close.

Bertha has never felt sexual desire for her husband, though she loves him in other ways, and this suggests that theirs is a marriage of convention or convenience and supports the idea of Bertha's underlying homosexuality. However, Bertha



has felt sexually attracted to her husband that evening, during the spell of the dinner party and under the influence of her “bliss.” This does not suggest that Bertha is heterosexual but rather that the influence of Pearl is so strong on her that her bliss spreads and infuses other things, much like the moon suffuses everything with white light.

●● While he looked it up she turned her head towards the hall. 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: “To-morrow,” and with her eyelids Miss Fulton said: “Yes.”

“Here it is,” said Eddie. “Why Must it Always be Tomato Soup?” So deeply true, don't you feel? Tomato soup is so dreadfully eternal.”

“If you prefer,” said Harry's voice, very loud, from the hall, “I can phone you a cab to come to the door.”

Related Characters: Harry Young, Eddie Warren (speaker), Pearl Fulton, Bertha Young

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

Harry goes to help Pearl Fulton with her coat as she prepares to leave the party. Bertha takes this as a sign that Harry wants to make amends for being rude to Pearl earlier in the evening. Glancing into the hall, however, Bertha discovers that Pearl and Harry are having an affair and are in the process of arranging a time and place to meet.



Harry presents himself as a cool, collected person who is disinterested in beautiful women like Pearl. This illusion is shattered by the revelation that he is having an affair with Pearl. The use of the word “violently” suggests that Harry feels passionately about Pearl and contradicts the image of Harry as a reserved man who is perfectly happy with his and Bertha's sexless marriage. The use of the word “hideous” further supports this and suggests how repulsive Bertha finds Harry's open expression of sexual desire towards



Pearl.

The image of Pearl laying her “moonbeam” fingers on Harry’s cheek suggests that Pearl is bestowing the gift of her affection onto Harry instead of Bertha. It also suggests that this infidelity is what is behind Pearl Fulton’s mysterious façade and undermines Bertha’s belief that she can interpret the feelings of the people around her. Harry calls “loudly” from the hall to maintain the façade that he is helping Pearl with her coat. This incident completely undercuts Bertha’s naïve belief that external appearances always correspond with internal states.

●● Miss Fulton held her hand a moment longer. “Your lovely pear tree!” she murmured. And then she was gone, with Eddie following, like the black cat following the grey cat. “I’ll shut up shop,” said Harry, extravagantly cool and collected. “Your lovely pear tree—pear tree—pear tree!” Bertha simply ran over to the long windows. “Oh, what is going to happen now?” she cried. But the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still.

Related Characters: Harry Young, Bertha Young, Pearl Fulton (speaker), Eddie Warren

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

As Pearl Fulton is leaving, she mentions the pear tree to Bertha again. After she is gone, Bertha rushes to the window to look at the tree and wonders what is going to happen next.

The fact that Pearl references the pear tree reinforces the idea that Pearl is an ambiguous character and complicates the idea that she can be completely explained away because of her affair with Harry. It is possible that Bertha’s intuition is correct, and that Pearl is attracted to Bertha and reciprocates her desire. There is also the possibility that, just as Bertha has felt desire for Harry because her desire for Pearl is so strong, that Pearl is under this same influence and is attracted to Harry because it is more socially acceptable to have an affair with a man than to have a same sex relationship with Bertha.

Bertha’s memory of the two cats, as she watches Pearl and Eddie leave, however, suggests that Bertha’s fantasy for the evening has been ruined. As if to reassure herself that this is not the case, Bertha rushes to the window and looks at the pear tree, hoping to find some resolution or intuition about what will happen next. The pear tree, however, is as “still” and “full of flower” as ever, which suggests that the evening has not provided any resolution for Bertha, or any release for her feeling of “bliss,” and that her desire for Pearl is just as strong and just as unfulfilled as ever.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BLISS

Even though Bertha Young is nearly thirty, she still sometimes feels the urge to “run instead of walk,” to skip on and off the pavement, or to play games like chasing a “hoop” or catching a ball, the way she used to do when she was a child. At other times she has the urge to just “stand still” and laugh for no reason at all. She wonders what a grown woman can do if she is still, periodically, overwhelmed by a feeling of “absolute bliss,” as though she has swallowed a piece of the sun and it shines inside her.

Bertha thinks that civilized society is “idiotic” because, if she were to act as she liked and express her feelings of joy, people would think her “drunk and disorderly.” She wonders why she has been given a body at all if she cannot use it any way she likes and instead must “keep it locked up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle.”

Bertha arrives home and asks her maid if the fruit that she has ordered has been delivered. The maid tells her that everything has arrived, and Bertha says that she will arrange the fruit herself. She goes into the dining room and throws off her coat, unable to stand the “tight clasp” of it any longer.

Even though the room is cold, Bertha feels warmed by the feeling of bliss which is still burning inside her. She “hardly dares to breathe” for fear of “fanning” this feeling. As she looks at herself in the mirror, she feels a sense of anticipation and thinks that she has the look of a woman who is waiting for something “divine” to happen.

Bertha wishes to express her internal state, which is one of “absolute bliss,” through her actions and behavior. She feels a sense of delight that she associates with childhood and wishes that she had the freedom of a child to “run instead of walk” or laugh at nothing if she feels like it. As Bertha is a grown woman, she does not know how to express this feeling in a way deemed appropriate for an adult. The image of the sun shining inside Bertha also alludes to internal states being hidden behind external facades.



Bertha is frustrated because she feels that there is no way she can express the joy she is feeling without society condemning her behavior. As an upper-middle class woman in Britain in the early 1900s, Bertha’s life is defined by the rules of propriety. Expressions of emotion were seen as improper according to social conventions in this period, which also viewed women as weak and delicate. This is implied when Bertha describes her body as a “rare fiddle” locked in a case. This suggests the belief that women were fragile and needed protection.



The “tight clasp” of Bertha’s coat suggests the restrictions placed on Bertha, both literally (as in the tight, restrictive clothing that was fashionable for women in the early 1900s) and metaphorically (in her desire to express her joy and behave in ways which society would deem improper for a woman). The fact that she finds the clasp hard to bear suggests that Bertha longs to throw off restrictive social conventions.



There is a sense of anticipation throughout “Bliss,” which builds until the story’s climax and suggests that some change is about to take place in Bertha’s life. Although Bertha is happy with her life, the “bliss” she feels is compared with a fire, which suggests that it can be destructive if it is not contained. She is waiting for something “divine” to happen which suggests a lack of fulfillment in her life as she is excited by the prospect of change or progression.



The maid brings in the fruit for Bertha to arrange. Bertha looks at the beautiful colors of the fruit, which she has chosen specifically to match the décor and the color of the carpet in the dining room. She thinks that this does seem like a rather “absurd” thing to do but remembers that, at the time, when she was choosing the fruit, it seemed like a totally sensible decision. When she has finished, she looks at the fruit and sees that it does match the carpet perfectly. In her excited and joyful mood this looks “incredibly beautiful” to her. She starts to laugh at the beauty of the scene but, afraid that she is growing “hysterical,” she hurries out of the room and rushes upstairs to the nursery.

Bertha's preoccupation with aesthetics and with coordinating the décor of the room suggests that she is interested in artistic movements popular in the early twentieth century. The image of the fruit matching the carpet is reminiscent of the work of the French Impressionist painters, who were interested in painting scenes of everyday life and arranging compositions around shape and color. There is evidence that Bertha's “bliss” borders on something “hysterical.” This suggests that Bertha's joy is mixed with desperation and that she is not as happy with her circumstances as she tries to convince herself.



In the nursery, Nurse is feeding Bertha's infant daughter, Little B, her supper. When the baby sees Bertha, she gets excited and the Nurse becomes visibly annoyed that Bertha has come in and interrupted them. Nurse tells Bertha what she has done with the baby that day and that, when she took Little B to the park, Little B played with a dog. Bertha wants to tell Nurse that it is “rather dangerous” to let Little B play with a “strange dog” but she is too timid. Watching Nurse feed the baby, Bertha feels like a “poor little girl” watching a rich child play with a beautiful doll. She wonders why she has bothered to have a child if that child is always to be looked after by someone else.

Although Little B is Bertha's child, Bertha is treated like an intruder when she tries to involve herself in her daughter's life. It was conventional in this period in Britain for upper and middle-class women to employ nannies to take on the responsibilities of childcare. Although Bertha conforms to this convention, she clearly wishes that she could take a more active role in caring for her daughter. Although Bertha is hugely privileged in some ways, and is Nurse's employer, Bertha is not brave enough to question social convention and does not feel that she has any authority over how Little B is raised. She feels jealous of Nurse even though she is a servant because she is lucky to spend so much time with Little B.



Little B smiles at Bertha and Bertha is so delighted that she can no longer contain herself and begs Nurse to finish feeding Little B herself. Nurse is irritated and does not think that this is a good idea because she thinks it will overexcite Little B. Bertha insists however, and Nurse leaves the pair alone. Bertha enjoys feeding her daughter and finds that holding and playing with Little B gives her the same feeling of “bliss” that she has felt all day and that she does not know what to do with.

The fact that Nurse is irritated by Bertha's request shows that Nurse views it as improper for Bertha to take an interest in her child. Even though Bertha is Little B's mother, Nurse feels that childrearing should be beneath a woman of Bertha's class and that Bertha is crossing class boundaries by asking to feed Little B. Nurse is also jealous of Bertha's relationship with the baby, just as Bertha is jealous of Nurse. Bertha feels the sense of “bliss” again while holding Little B because, even though Bertha does not realize it, her “bliss” is connected with feelings of love.



Nurse re-enters the nursery and tells Bertha that someone is on the phone for her. Bertha hands Little B back over to Nurse, who takes the baby back triumphantly. It is Bertha's husband, Harry, on the phone. He tells her that he will be late for the dinner party. Bertha wants to explain her feeling of “bliss” to Harry but feels that it would be ridiculous if she were suddenly to exclaim that it has been “a divine day.” Instead, she hangs up the phone and thinks again that civilized society is “idiotic.”

Nurse is pleased when she takes the baby back because she feels that social order has been restored and that she can resume her job caring for Little B while Bertha resumes her job managing the house. Bertha's phone call with Harry demonstrates that social conventions affect Bertha's relationship with her husband. She feels that she cannot openly share her “bliss” with him because he would view it as absurd or improper. However, Bertha believes that it is society, with its rules and restrictions, which is “idiotic,” not her own emotions.



The Youngs have people coming over for dinner. Bertha thinks about the guests she has invited: “the Norman Knights” and Eddie Warren. Mr. Norman Knight is an aspiring theatre director, his wife Mrs. Knight is interested in “interior decoration,” and Eddie Warren is a writer who has recently published some poems and whom it is currently fashionable to invite to dinner. Bertha has also invited a woman called Pearl Fulton, whom she has become friends with recently and “fallen in love with,” as she often does fall for “beautiful women who have something strange about them.”

Although Bertha has met Pearl several times and has had long conversations with her, Bertha still feels that there is a level of reserve about Pearl and that she has not really been able to get to know her. She feels that, although Pearl is “wonderfully frank” about some things, there is a “certain point” beyond which Pearl will not go. Bertha finds this quality mysterious in Pearl and wonders if there is anything more to Pearl’s character.

Bertha’s husband Harry feels that there is not, and that Pearl is, in fact, cold and dull. Bertha refuses to agree with him on this until she has found out for sure. She thinks that she can find something behind some of Pearl’s mannerisms, such as her habit of “sitting with her head a little on one side.” Harry thinks that there is a “good stomach” or “pure flatulence” behind it. Bertha admits that she likes Harry’s habit of contradicting her and of making irreverent jokes.

Bertha goes into the drawing room and begins arranging the sofa cushions. As she does this, she is startled to find herself clutching one of the cushions to her chest and hugging it “passionately.” This action does not quell the feeling of “bliss” which is building in her chest but instead increases it.

The Youngs are clearly a fashionable couple who socialize in artistic and cultural circles. Mansfield herself, during her time in London, socialized in literary and bohemian circles and drew upon this experience writing “Bliss.” The observation that Bertha often falls in love with “beautiful women” suggests that Bertha is romantically and sexually attracted to women, although she does not know or admit this to herself.



Bertha projects her own feelings of love and “bliss” onto Pearl and constructs the idea that Pearl is restrained by social convention, just as Bertha is, but has hidden aspects to her personality which Bertha wishes to uncover. This suggests that Bertha is fascinated by Pearl and wishes to make a genuine, emotional connection with her. It also suggests a hidden side to Bertha’s personality: her unexplored homosexual attraction to Pearl.



Harry’s jokes about Pearl undermine Bertha’s idealized image of the woman. While Bertha believes that Pearl is a mysterious individual with hidden depths, Harry satirizes this idea by suggesting that nothing lies behind Pearl’s manner except her physical body. This demonstrates that Harry is an irreverent person who undermines social conventions of etiquette. The fact that Bertha likes this quality in her husband demonstrates her desire to break with the rules of propriety.



This suggests Bertha’s attraction towards Pearl, which she has concealed even from herself. The fact that she is surprised to find herself hugging the cushions shows the reader that Bertha does not understand her own motives. This shows that she is a sexually naïve person and genuinely does not understand that her feeling of “bliss” is a feeling of love and sexual desire.



The window in the drawing room looks out over the garden. Bertha looks out of the window at the **pear tree** on the lawn and admires it against the dusky, “jade-green” sky. She notices that all its buds and petals are alive and looks down at the flowerbeds underneath it. In this flowerbed, she sees a grey **cat** slinking across the lawn, followed by a black cat. This image makes Bertha shudder.

The pear tree is a symbol of forbidden desire throughout the story. Even if Bertha understood her attraction to Pearl, or if her attraction was reciprocated by Pearl, it is likely that social convention would make it impossible for the women to openly have a relationship. Homosexuality was illegal in Britain until the 1960s and was viewed as sexually deviant for longer still. The image of the two cats symbolizes the fact that Bertha's desires will not be fulfilled and that her sense of “bliss” will go unreciprocated. The fact that the cats make Bertha “shiver” suggests that she is aware of this on some level.



Bertha turns away from the window and paces the room. She feels overwhelmed by the scent of the garden coming in through the window and throws herself down on the couch. She feels that she is “too happy.” Closing her eyes, she seems to see a vision of the **pear tree** and thinks that it is a “symbol of her own life” with all its blossoms and petals open.

Bertha's state here verges on manic or “hysterical” again and there is a sense that her happiness is, in fact, a type of desperation to escape her circumstances. Bertha feels that the pear tree represents her own life because, due to her position of privilege because of her class and financial status, she is free to spend her time however she wants.



Lying on the sofa, Bertha thinks about all the wonderful things that she has that should make her happy with her life. She thinks that she and Harry are very happily married, they have good friends, and a beautiful child, they are financially secure and have a lovely home and garden. Their friends are “modern” and bohemian and interested in cultural and “social questions.” It makes her feel “dizzy” and she suddenly feels exhausted and wonders how she is going to get herself ready for the evening. She notices that her outfit matches the garden outside with the green dusk and the white petals of the **pear tree** under the **moon**.

Bertha thinks about all the things in her life that should make her happy. Were she truly content, however, she likely would not have to remind herself of all the reasons that she should be. The fact that running through this list exhausts her also suggests that it is an effort for her to be happy and that her situation does not really bring her joy. Her outfit matches the pear tree and the garden because these things are symbol of her internal desires. Bertha is interested in expressing these internal desires externally.



Mr. Norman Knight and his wife, Mrs. Knight, arrive. Mrs. Knight is wearing a bright, orange coat decorated with a pattern of monkeys. As she enters the house, she tells Bertha that her coat has caused a stir on the train and that people were so shocked by the color and pattern of her coat that they stared at her on the journey. Mrs. Knight blames the commotion on the fact that the middle-classes are so “stodgy.” Mr. Knight agrees and thinks that it was very amusing when Mrs. Knight snapped at a woman on the train and asked her if she'd “never seen a monkey before.” Bertha thinks that Mrs. Knight does look like a monkey in her yellow dress, and that her earrings look like nuts.

Mrs. Knight is antagonistic towards “civilized” society and social conventions among the British middle-class. She rebels against them by dressing in a way that shocks people. This suggests that, like Bertha, Mrs. Knight wants her external appearance to match her feelings and beliefs. Under the spell of her “bliss,” Bertha feels that the whole evening is enchanted and, as part of this enchantment, she feels that Mrs. Knight really looks like she has been turned into a monkey in her yellow dress.



Eddie Warren arrives next and is very shaken by his experience with the taxi driver who brought him. He tells the group that he could not get the driver to stop the cab and that, in the **moonlight**, the driver looked sinister and “bizarre.” He says that he saw himself being driven away in a “timeless” taxi by an otherworldly taxi driver. When Mrs. Knight compliments Eddie Warren’s white socks, he tells her that they have grown whiter in the moonlight. Bertha feels that Eddie is a very attractive person.

The theme of transformation is continued with the arrival of Eddie Warren. He complains that the taxi driver has been transformed into a “bizarre” figure and that his socks have been made whiter by the moon. Moonlight is symbolic of this transformation and enchantment, which seems to have fallen across the party as a result of Bertha’s “bliss,” which transforms the world and everything in it for her.



Harry arrives and rushes upstairs to get dressed for dinner. Bertha knows that Harry is not really worried about being late but that he enjoys making a show of being “extravagantly cool and collected.” She feels that Harry has a love of being contradictory and for fighting even if there is no need for it and Bertha appreciates this quality in him.

This suggests that Harry is a person who worries about how he presents himself to the world. Bertha admires his contradictory nature because she wishes to rebel against social conventions and Harry symbolizes this rebellion for her.



Enjoying the company of her guests, Bertha almost forgets that Pearl Fulton is still to arrive. When Pearl does arrive, Bertha tells the other guests that Pearl uses taxis all the time. She does this with a knowing manner, which she finds that she often develops with her female friends. Harry says that Pearl will get fat if she never walks anywhere and always gets taxis.

Bertha’s comment about Pearl suggests that Bertha knows Pearl well or likes to think that she does. It suggests that Bertha feels that she and Pearl have an understanding and that she has insight into Pearl’s lifestyle that the others do not.



Pearl Fulton enters the party. Her outfit is all silver and she asks Bertha if she is late. Bertha says no and takes Pearl’s arm. When she does this, she feels the feeling of “bliss” return and strengthen.

Pearl’s silver outfit associates her with the moonlight, which has transformed the night outside just as Bertha’s love for Pearl has transformed the world for Bertha. The reader understands that Bertha’s feeling of “bliss” is caused by Bertha’s attraction to Pearl, because it intensifies when Bertha takes Pearl’s arm.



During the dinner, Bertha feels an inexplicable certainty that Pearl is feeling the same way that she is. The guests discuss theatre and Bertha thinks delightedly what a “decorative” group they make, like characters in a play. When Harry compliments the food, Bertha again feels almost overwhelmed with tenderness and joy. Everything in the world seems good to her and her thoughts keep on returning to the image of the **pear tree** in the **moonlight**. She thinks about these things as she watches Pearl peel an orange and her fingers look silver in the light.

The description of the group as “decorative” suggests that they are only important to Bertha on a surface level. They provide the scenery for Bertha’s real purpose for the evening, which is to spend time with Pearl. The fact that they are like “characters in a play” suggests that the evening has an unreal or illusory quality. Bertha’s fixation on the moon and the pear tree suggests that everything is transformed by her love for Pearl, like everything is transformed by the moonlight. The pear tree is symbolic of Bertha’s hidden desire for Pearl.



After dinner, the group retire to the drawing room and Mrs. Knight, whose nickname is “Face,” describes the burned down fire as a “nest of baby phoenixes.” Pearl asks Bertha to show her the garden and Bertha feels that this is a “sign.” Bertha takes Pearl to the window and the two women stand and look out at the **pear tree** under the **moon**. Bertha thinks the tree looks like a flame, stretching up into the sky, and almost touching the moon.

Mrs. Knight’s description of the fire suggests that the fire too has changed into something else. However, this is only a metaphor. This suggests that, although things seem to be undergoing a transformation, nothing has really changed, and the enchantment is illusory. Bertha believes that she can correctly interpret Pearl’s actions and takes Pearl’s question about the garden as a “sign” that Pearl wishes to be alone with Bertha. Rather than openly communicating her desire (which social convention forbids) Bertha shows Pearl the symbols of her desire: the moon and the pear tree. Bertha sees the tree like a flaming candle because she believes that Pearl understands her and will know how to interpret the symbols that Bertha is showing her, even though this may not really be the case.



Bertha loses track of how long she and Pearl stand by the window but feels that they share a connection; bathed in the “circle of unearthly light” coming through the window from the **moon**. She feels that they are like “creatures” from a different world and that both are under the spell of “bliss” which drops “treasure” and “silver flowers” on them. As Bertha thinks this, she believes that she hears Pearl say: “Yes. Just that.”

Bertha feels that she and Pearl have connected over the image of the garden and believes that this separates them from the others in the room. She feels that she and Pearl no longer belong to the restrictive, domestic world of social conventions and Edwardian morality but exist in their own world of “bliss” where these things do not matter. She even imagines that Pearl confirms this by whispering, “Yes. Just that,” in response to Bertha’s thoughts. However, as it is impossible for Pearl to read Bertha’s thoughts, this is left ambiguous and it is heavily suggested that this exchange only takes place in Bertha’s mind.



The light in the room is switched on, breaking the spell that Bertha feels she is under. The other guests are in the room and are making coffee. Mr. Knight is complaining that he never sees his daughter and that he will take no interest in her until she is an adult and has a suitor. Eddie Warren is talking about a play he wants to write for Mr. Knight’s theatre. Harry complains that modern playwrights are too “romantic” and that you can’t “put out to sea without being seasick and wanting a basin,” and that young writers should have the “courage of those basins.”

Mr. Knight self-consciously satirizes aspects of British society, such as his relationship with his daughter. This demonstrates that the Knights like to present themselves as cynical, unconventional people. However, the Knights give little evidence that they are actually interested in disrupting societal norms, even if they view them as shallow and unnecessary. Harry’s complaint about the idealization of life in fiction suggests that he is an honest person who wishes that other people would be honest too. However, this is undercut by the story’s ending in which it is revealed that Harry is unfaithful to Bertha and that his frankness is a performance.



Pearl sits down, and Harry offers her a cigar. Bertha watches and thinks that, from the way that he is talking to her, Harry is not only bored by Pearl but really dislikes her. Watching Pearl’s reaction, she believes that Pearl feels this too and is hurt by it. Bertha thinks that Harry is “quite wrong” about Pearl and that he would find her “wonderful” (just as Bertha does) if he got to know her.

Bertha is confident that she can interpret Harry and Pearl’s feelings correctly by reading their external appearances. Bertha’s assumption does not account for the fact that Harry and Pearl may be performing for the sake of propriety or in order to hide their true natures or motives.



As she thinks this, Bertha suddenly remembers that the guests will leave soon, and that she will be left alone with Harry. She has a moment of panic thinking about the bed which she and Harry share, before she realizes that, “for the first time in her life,” she “desires” her husband. She thinks that she has always been in love with him but that she has never loved him “in that way.” This troubled her when they were first married but Harry has been very kind about it and they have reached an understanding and are now “good pals.”

Bertha is panicked by the thought of being left alone with her husband. The “warm bed” is associated with a sexual relationship between husband and wife, and Bertha admits that she has never sexually desired her husband until this evening—when, importantly, her world has been transformed by Pearl’s presence. This suggests that Bertha is gay but is unaware of this. She dislikes sex with her husband but feels physically invigorated by Pearl’s presence and physical proximity. This suggests that her sexual attraction to Pearl is so strong that it even transforms her relationship with Harry temporarily.



Mr. and Mrs. Knight say that they need to leave to catch the last train and begin to say goodbye. Pearl and Eddie Warren agree to share a taxi. Pearl goes to get her coat from the hall and Harry follows her. Bertha thinks that he is trying to make amends for being rude to Pearl. Eddie asks Bertha if he can borrow a book of poetry which includes an “incredibly beautiful line”: “Why must it always be tomato soup?”

Bertha again demonstrates that she believes she can correctly interpret other people’s intentions by watching their behavior. Although Eddie Warren is thought of as a great writer in fashionable circles, his claim that “Why must it always be tomato soup?” is “incredibly beautiful” is ironic and suggests that Eddie has been transformed into a great writer by all the attention that he receives, rather than by his own talent.



Bertha says that she does have this book and goes to get it for Eddie Warren. As she comes back past the hall, she glances in and sees Harry take Pearl in his arms. He sees Harry mouth “I adore you” to Pearl and Pearl smiles up at him. Bertha sees Harry’s lips move into a “hideous grin” as he murmurs the word “tomorrow,” while Pearl nods in agreement.

Bertha’s certainty about Harry and Pearl’s motives and feelings, is completely undermined by this revelation. Both have been lying to her and performing, as a loyal husband or a kind friend, in order to trick her and fulfil their own desires. The use of the word “hideous” suggests the horror of this revelation for Bertha and how “hideous” she finds the prospect of Harry having a sexual relationship with Pearl.



Bertha returns to the drawing room and hears Harry say loudly that he can call Pearl her own cab if she’d like. Pearl and Eddie say goodbye and as Pearl takes leave of Bertha, she presses Bertha’s hand and says: “Your lovely **pear tree**.” Bertha watches them leave and thinks that Eddie and Pearl look like the grey **cat** and the black cat that she saw creeping across the lawn that evening.

Harry is strategically performing as a good host here, making his voice louder so that it will seem like he and Pearl have not spoken in the hall. The fact that Bertha references that pear tree may suggest that Pearl is aware of Bertha’s attraction her, and the significance of the tree in Bertha’s mind, but that she is prevented from acting on this by social convention. Or it may indicate that, although Bertha believed that the tree was significant, and that she and Pearl really had a connection, it is, in fact, incidental and Pearl has not understood her meaning at all. Bertha’s memory of the cats under the pear tree suggests the destruction of her hopes.



Harry goes to lock up the house and Bertha rushes to the window. She wonders what is going to happen next and looks out at the **pear tree**, which is as “lovely” and “still” as ever under the **moon**.

Bertha is so overwhelmed with emotion that she feels that something drastic will happen in the aftermath of her revelation about Pearl and Harry. She feels that some change must now occur because she has been in such a state of anticipation all evening. However, the pear tree is “lovely” and “still” under the moon. This suggests that the transforming power of Bertha’s “bliss” was just an illusion, as was her belief in she and Pearl’s connection, symbolized by the pear tree. The tree remains untouched, symbolizing the fact that Bertha’s hopes have come to nothing and that her sexual attraction towards Pearl remains unfulfilled.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Greenall, Lily. "Bliss." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 14 Jan 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Greenall, Lily. "Bliss." LitCharts LLC, January 14, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/bliss>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Bliss* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Mansfield, Katherine. *Bliss*. Vintage. 1991.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mansfield, Katherine. *Bliss*. New York: Vintage. 1991.