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# Blissful Analysis

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## 1 Plot and Structure

“Bliss” contains all of the elements of plot: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. It is divided into four parts. The exposition occurs in the first two sections, the rising action occurs mostly in the third section, and the climax, falling action, and resolution all occur in the last section. The main conflict is within Bertha, striving to understand how she is connected to Pearl Fulton. The exposition exposes Bertha’s blissful nature. It also uses Little B and the Nanny in a parallel manner to highlight more of Bertha’s character. Most of the dinner party is the rising action. Bertha feels that there is some sort of connection between her and Miss Fulton, once during the eating, and later looking at the pear tree.

The climax occurs when Bertha sees Pearl and Harry embracing. At that moment, she understands that Harry is the connection between them. Immediately following the climax everyone finishes leaving, and Harry and Berth are left together, ending that falling action and moving into the resolution, where “the pear tree was as lovely as ever and

as full of flower”. Bertha pointed out her link to the pear tree, and its continuing on shows that Bertha will continue on, either in her literal form or in Little B.

## 2 Language and Style

Mansfield uses hyperbole extensively in her story. The ludicrously positive images, such as “in her bosom there was still that bright glowing place—that shower of little sparks coming from it,” (424) reinforce the reader’s perception of Bertha as disgustingly cheerful. Along with the sparkle images, Mansfield uses many comparisons with fruit and other foods, e.g. “a strange sheen as though it had been dipped in milk,” (425).

The hyperbole is not used as often in the last section, which is also more negative in its content than the previous sections. The language reflects the content.

## 3 Theme

The theme of “Bliss” is that, as Thomas Gray relates in his poem “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” “where ignorance is bliss, ’Tis folly to be wise.” (ll. 99–100) This theme is first suggested by the title of the work, since ‘bliss’ is not an everyday word, and has connotations of spaciness. It is confirmed when the reader finds that the plot pivots on a fact that Bertha does not know until the end: Harry is cheating on her. She could have figured it out, had she wanted to: “For the first time in her life Bertha Young desired her husband. [...] It had worried her dreadfully at first to find that she was so cold, but after a time it had not seemed to matter.” (p. 431). Why did it not matter? Bertha never asked

herself. She was much happier not knowing—ignorance is bliss.

## 4 Irony and Symbol

Irony is abundantly present in “Bliss.” The principal irony of the story is that Bertha wants Harry to like Miss Fulton (“ ‘Oh, Harry, don’t dislike her.’ ”, 431), but he already does: “His lips said: ‘I adore you.’ ” Also, Bertha thinks that “Pearl Fulton[...] was feeling just what she was feeling,” but little does she know that the emotion that they finally share is desire for Harry.

There are several significant symbols in the story. First, Bertha “seemed to see on her eyelids the lovely pear tree with its wide open blossoms as a symbol of her own life.” (427).

The cats are also symbolic. Miss Fulton is explicitly compared to the grey cat (432), and earlier, “The sight of [the cats], so intent and so quick, gave Bertha a curious shiver.” (427). Miss Fulton is also intent and quick in her stalking of Harry. Furthermore, Pearl Fulton is often described as being silver, and silver and grey are very similar colors. The grey cat is an obvious symbol.

The story’s focus on the pear tree makes little sense without a symbolic interpretation of it, so symbolism is important to the story.

## 5 Character

Numerous characters are introduced. With the exception of Bertha, all of them are static. Little B, the Nanny, Mr. and Mrs. Norman Knight, and Eddie Warren are also all minor characters. Little B highlights the negative aspects of (Big) Bertha, while Little B's Nanny represents the controlling aspects of Bertha's life. The Knights and Eddie both further the pseudo-intellectual image evinced throughout the story.

There are two static but major characters, Harry and Pearl Fulton. Together they destroy Bertha's illusionary lifestyle through the climactic scene of them embracing. Harry turns out to be a cheater, albeit one that is clever enough not to be caught by the blissfully blind Bertha. Pearl Fulton is sly about her intentions, causing Bertha to even think " 'Oh, Harry, don't dislike her.' " (431). In reality, Harry is having an affair with the little vermin whose heart is full of evil.

Bertha is blissful. She seems almost ditzzy in her everyday transactions, such as acquiring fruit for the dinner. Furthermore, her personality is subservient; it allows the Nanny to dictate what can be done with Little B. It is only when she sees her husband obviously cheating on her with someone that she had brought into the household that she becomes disillusioned with her blissful state and awakens to reality.

## 6 Setting

As a whole, the setting helps to reinforce the pseudo-intellectual image from the story. The broad positioning is in London, as explicitly mentioned " 'I believe London is simply

teeming...’ ” (430). In addition the author’s background is given as being a resident of London, leading one to infer that she would write about that which is familiar to her. Some British terminology also shows through the language used, such as ‘perambulator.’

The house is a nicer, more upper class dwelling. It would have a garden, allowing the pear tree symbol to be included without sacrificing the realism. However, contrasting with the upper class nature is that none of the characters are ever mentioned as having titles, so none of them are of the true upper class.

The time period is early 20th century. Mention is made of coffee makers and taxis, so there are at least electricity and mass transit services. However, after World War II the large manor houses in the cities largely disappeared, limiting the time period to earlier in the 20th century.

## **7 Point of View**

‘Bliss’ is written in third person limited omniscient. The reader knows only what Bertha knows, making the surprise discovery of adultery just as dramatic for the reader as it is for Bertha. The limited nature also brings the reader only into Bertha’s thoughts, drawing the reader closer to Bertha and turning her into a character for which more sympathy is felt. Further, seeing only Bertha’s perspective, from the reliable narrator, creates a less morally ambiguous situation by not clouding the reader’s perception with the rationalizations of other conflicting characters.