

Bliss by Katherine Mansfield Part 1

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Level: Advanced

Age: Young adults / Adults

Aims: In this lesson the students will:

1. talk about what makes them happy and how we express happiness;
2. predict the main character's lifestyle by thinking about the historical and class context of the story;
3. order the events in the narrative;
4. practise the emphatic use of auxiliary verbs;
5. explore the main character's personality.

Materials: one copy of the worksheet per student; Track 1 (first three paragraphs), Track 2 (full audio for Part 1) and Track 3 (three short extracts from near the end) downloaded from onestopenglish; one copy of full transcript per student

Summary: Bertha is a woman overcome with happiness because she has everything – a beautiful home and family, wealth and fashionable friends – but is it forever? The story is told in four parts. In Part 1, Bertha, almost unable to contain her happiness, questions society's conventions that say she can't express her happiness without appearing strange.

Activity 1

Aims: to engage students with the theme of happiness; to introduce the main character; to tune in to the narrator's voice with a short excerpt and easy questions

1. Write on the board: *Bliss is ...*. Elicit synonyms for *bliss* (*happiness, joy, etc.*) and provide one or two concrete examples of when you might feel perfectly happy (e.g. getting into bed with fresh sheets, cooking a meal that others really enjoy, ...) and write them on the board using the sentence stem: *Bliss is getting into bed with fresh sheets, etc.* Point out the need for a noun phrase or gerund to follow the stem. Ask students to work on their own to write their own sentences.

2. When most of the students have written at least one sentence, invite volunteers to share their ideas with the rest of the class. Ask follow-up questions in response to their ideas, such as "Has that ever happened to you?", and "Why does that make you so happy?"

3. Hand out the worksheet. Ask the students to complete Activity 1. Give them a couple of minutes to do so and then put them in pairs or small groups to compare their answers.

4. Explain that they are going to listen to the first part of a story about a woman named Bertha. Dictate three questions:

1. How is Bertha feeling?
2. Does she show her feelings?
3. What is she frustrated about?

Play Track 1 (first three paragraphs) and ask students to note down their answers to your questions as they listen.

Key: 1. *She is overcome with happiness.*
2. *No, she tries not to show her feelings.* 3. *She is frustrated because she feels that she is not allowed to express her happiness.*

5. Ask students to guess why it is she is feeling so happy.

Activity 2

Aims: to provide background information about the social and historical context of the story

1. Explain that the story is set in London in the early 1900s and that Bertha is a member of the upper middle class, which means that she is wealthy. Ask your students to listen to the following questions and imagine some of the details of Bertha's life. Read these questions aloud to the class, allowing time between each question

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for the students to form answers in their heads, without writing notes.

- What sort of clothes does Bertha wear?
- What is her house like?
- What servants does she have living and working in the house?
- What hobbies does she have?
- What are her duties and responsibilities?

2. Write on the board: *clothes, house, servants, hobbies, responsibilities*. Put the students in small groups to compare their ideas for a couple of minutes, then field answers in a whole-group discussion.

Activity 3

Aims: to provide help understanding the story; to listen for gist; to order the events of the story

1. Point out Activity 2 on the worksheet and ask students in pairs to guess the likely order of events in the narrative. When they have decided on a logical order, ask them to listen to check their predictions. Play Track 2 (full audio for Part 1).

Key: 1. *The fruit is delivered.*; 2. *Bertha arrives home.*; 3. *Bertha goes into the dining room.*; 4. *Bertha looks at herself in the mirror.*; 5. *Bertha arranges the fruit in a bowl.*; 6. *Bertha laughs.*; 7. *Bertha goes upstairs to visit her daughter.*; 8. *Bertha speaks to the child's nurse, or 'Nanny'.*; 9. *Bertha feeds her daughter.*; 10. *Nanny tells her that someone wants to speak to her on the telephone.*; 11. *Bertha's husband tells her that he will be late home.*

Activity 4

Aims: to raise awareness of emphatic use of auxiliary verbs and practise saying them naturally

1. Ask the students to read the dialogue between Bertha and Nanny on the worksheet (Activity 3) and think about how Bertha is treated by Nanny.

Key: *Nanny doesn't seem to respect her employer's position of authority and sees her as a nuisance who 'unsettles' the baby. Bertha seems to accept this situation*

because she asks Nanny's permission to feed her own daughter.

2. After discussing Bertha and Nanny's relationship, elicit from the class some of the auxiliary verbs in the dialogue (*has, should, have, do, oughtn't*, etc.). Point out the strong and weak forms of the first auxiliary verb and the speaker's choice to use either:

- Has she been **good**, Nanny?
- **Has** she been **good**, Nanny?

Ask which they think is more likely and why. (The first is more likely, as in the context there is no reason to suggest that Bertha may doubt the truth of her daughter's good behaviour.) Have the students work in pairs to underline any auxiliary verbs they think will be stressed.

3. When most pairs have finished, play Track 3 (three short extracts from near the end) for them to check their predictions.

4. Ask the students to listen to Track 3 again and underline any other words that are stressed. They may want to hear it a second time to identify all the stressed words with accuracy.

5. In their pairs, have the students act out the dialogue, taking it in turns to be Bertha and Nanny. Remind them to pay particular attention to the strong form auxiliary verbs.

Activity 5

Aims: to further explore Bertha's character

1. Ask the students to skim the transcript in order to choose a sentence that tells them something about Bertha's personality. You could use the first sentence as an example which, on a very basic level, gives us her age but also indicates that there is something childlike about her. You may have already talked about one or two other significant sentences during the lesson. Each student should choose at least one more sentence.

2. Put students into groups of 4–6 and have them share their sentences and explain what they think these sentences say about Bertha. When all members of the group

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have spoken, ask them to decide on five adjectives or short phrases which sum Bertha up. Invite the groups to share their choice of adjectives / phrases with the whole class and justify them.

3. Now let each group choose one of its members to be interviewed by the others in the group as if they were Bertha. The volunteer (or nominee!) is asked questions which they should try to respond to in the style of Bertha. Explain that the others can ask all sorts of questions and can ask 'Bertha' to justify her answers. Offer one or two examples, such as *If you were an animal, what would you be?* and *What ambitions do you have for your daughter?*. They should all take turns at being Bertha.

Follow-up tasks

1. The students start writing a journal written as if they were Bertha.
2. They research middle class domestic life in Britain during the early twentieth century.

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Activity 1

Think of your answers to the following questions.

- How happy with your life would you say you are on a scale of 1–5 (5 = very happy)?
- Are you more often in a good or a bad mood?
- How do you express your happiness? Tick the forms of expression that apply to you:
 - I sing around the house.
 - I tell someone how I'm feeling.
 - I show my family and friends more affection than normal.
 - I feel warm inside.
 - I sometimes cry in public.
 - I tend to talk a lot.
 - I do little dances.
 - I help out around the house.
 - I've been known to laugh out loud for no apparent reason.
 - I can't stop smiling.
 - I jump around.

Activity 2

Listen and order the events of the story.

- Bertha laughs.
- Bertha feeds her daughter.
- Bertha arranges the fruit in a bowl.
- Bertha goes upstairs to visit her daughter.
- The fruit is delivered.
- Bertha speaks to the child's nurse, or 'Nanny'.
- Bertha goes into the dining room.
- Nanny tells her that someone wants to speak to her on the telephone.
- Bertha looks at herself in the mirror.
- Bertha arrives home.
- Bertha's husband tells her that he will be late home.

Activity 3

Decide which auxiliary verbs in the dialogue are stressed and which are not. Underline the stressed auxiliary verbs.

Nanny: Now, my lovey, eat it up like a good girl.

Bertha: Has she been good, Nanny?

Nanny: She's been a little sweet all the afternoon. We went to the park and I sat down on a chair and took her out of the pram and a big dog came along and put its head on my knee and she clutched its ear, tugged it. Oh, you should have seen her.

Bertha: Oh, Nanny, do let me finish giving her her supper while you put the bath things away.

Nanny: Well, M'm, she oughtn't to be changed hands while she's eating. It unsettles her; it's very likely to upset her.

Bertha: Oh, I must!

Nanny: Now, don't excite her after her supper. You know you do, M'm. And I have such a time with her after!

...

Bertha: Now I've got you to myself, my little precious.

Listen and check.

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Track 1

Transcript and glossary

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? ...

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**?

'No, that about the fiddle is not quite what I mean,' she thought, running up the steps and feeling in her bag for the key – she'd forgotten it, as usual – and **rattling** the letterbox. 'It's not what I mean, because – thank you, Mary' – she went into the hall. 'Is **nurse** back?'

'Yes, M'm.'

'And has the fruit come?'

'Yes, M'm. Everything's come.'

'Bring the fruit up to the dining-room, will you? I'll arrange it before I go upstairs.'

It was **dusky** in the dining-room and quite chilly. But all the same Bertha threw off her coat; she could not bear the tight **clasp** of it another moment, and the cold air fell on her arms.

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**.

Mary brought in the fruit on a tray and with it a glass bowl, and a blue dish, very lovely, with a strange **sheen** on it as though it had been dipped in milk.

'Shall I turn on the light, M'm?'

'No, thank you. I can see quite well.'

There were tangerines and apples stained with strawberry pink. Some yellow pears, smooth as silk, some white grapes covered with a silver bloom and a big cluster of purple ones. These last she had bought to tone in with the new dining-room carpet. Yes, that did sound rather **far-fetched** and absurd, but it was really why she had bought them. She had thought in the shop: 'I must have some purple ones to bring the carpet up to the table.' And it had seemed quite **sense** at the time.

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.

Nurse sat at a low table giving Little B her supper after her bath. The baby had on a white **flannel** gown and a blue woollen jacket, and her dark, fine hair was brushed up into a funny

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little peak. She looked up when she saw her mother and began to jump.

‘Now, my **lovey**, eat it up like a good girl,’ said Nurse, setting her lips in a way that Bertha knew, and that meant she had come into the nursery at another wrong moment.

‘Has she been good, Nanny?’

‘She’s been a little sweet all the afternoon,’ whispered Nanny. ‘We went to the park and I sat down on a chair and took her out of the pram and a big dog came along and put its head on my knee and she clutched its ear, **tugged** it. Oh, you should have seen her.’

Bertha wanted to ask if it wasn’t rather dangerous to let her clutch at a strange dog’s ear. But she did not dare to. 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?

‘Oh, I must!’ she said.

Very offended, Nanny handed her over.

‘Now, don’t excite her after her supper. You know you do, M’m. And I have such a time with her after!’

Thank heaven! Nanny went out of the room with the bath towels.

‘Now I’ve got you to myself, my little precious,’ said Bertha, as the baby leaned against her.

She ate delightfully, holding up her lips for the spoon and then waving her hands. Sometimes she wouldn’t let the spoon go; and sometimes, just as Bertha had filled it, she waved it away to the four winds.

When the soup was finished Bertha turned round to the fire.

‘You’re nice – you’ve very nice!’ she said, kissing her warm baby. ‘I’m fond of you. I like you.’

And, indeed, she loved Little B so much – her neck as she bent forward, her exquisite toes as they shone transparent in the firelight – that all her feeling of bliss came back again, and again she didn’t know how to express it – what to do with it.

‘You’re wanted on the telephone,’ said Nanny, coming back in triumph and seizing her Little B.

Down she flew. It was Harry.

‘Oh, is that you, Ber? Look here. I’ll be late. I’ll take a taxi and come along as quickly as I can, but get dinner put back ten minutes – will you? All right?’

‘Yes, perfectly. Oh, Harry!’

‘Yes?’

What had she to say? She’d nothing to say. She only wanted to get in touch with him for a moment. She couldn’t absurdly cry: ‘Hasn’t it been a divine day!’

‘What is it?’ rapped out the little voice.

‘Nothing. *Entendu*,’ said Bertha, and hung up the receiver, thinking how more than idiotic civilization was.

Track 3

Track 3

Track 3

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Glossary

bowl a hoop an old-fashioned child's game

bliss complete happiness

bosom (mainly literary, old-fashioned) a woman's chest, or the clothes covering it

drunk and disorderly to be noisy and violent in a public place because you are drunk; an offence in the UK

fiddle (colloquial) violin

rattle if something rattles, it makes short, sharp knocking sounds as it moves or shakes

nurse (old-fashioned) woman whose job it is to look after a young child; also 'nanny'

M'm (abbreviation, old-fashioned) 'Madam', a way of addressing a female employer

dusky not very bright, because of shadows or because night is coming

clasp (mainly literary) way of holding something tightly

infallible certain to work or have the effect you intended

sheen a shine on the surface of something

far-fetched difficult to believe because it is very unlikely

sense (rare) it made sense, it seemed reasonable

curious unusual and interesting (when used to describe a thing)

flannel soft cotton cloth used for making clothes and sheets

lovey (informal) 'dear', a term of affection

tug to pull someone or something by making a short strong movement

entendu (French) 'understood'