

Bliss by Katherine Mansfield Part 3

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Level: Advanced

Age: Young adults / Adults

Aims: In this lesson the students will:

1. test one another on their knowledge of the details of the story up to now;
2. listen in order to complete a summary of Part 3;
3. look at the use of 'soft' consonants to create mood;
4. discuss Bertha's relationship with Pearl Fulton;
5. write letters between Bertha and Pearl.

Materials: one copy of the worksheet per student; Track 1 (full audio for Part 3) and Track 2 (short extract) downloaded from onestopenglish; one copy of the 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 3, Bertha's new friend, Pearl Fulton, arrives at the dinner party. Bertha can't help feeling that she and Pearl share something very special without quite realizing what it could be.

Activity 1

Aim: to recap the story so far

1. Explain that the students are going to test each other on the story so far in a competitive game. Put them in teams of three or four, and ask them to write some questions about the story to ask the other teams. You might want to suggest one or two to help them get started, such as: 'What's the main character's name?'

Whether you allow them to read the transcript for ideas is up to you, but don't let them read it during the game itself. Monitor to suggest questions – you could ensure at this point that the following important questions are asked:

- How many guests are at the dinner party? (*three so far*)
- What are the guests' professions? (*Norman Knight is a theatre director; Mrs Knight is interested in interior decoration; Eddie Warren is a poet.*)
- Who arrived at the very end of Part 2? (*Harry, Bertha's husband*)

2. When each team has a few questions, they can start the game. Pitch one team against another (in a large class there will be more

than one game played at the same time).

Explain that they should take turns asking and answering questions and get points for correct answers. If there are differences of opinion and they haven't looked at the transcript, let them do so when the game is over. The team with the most correct answers wins.

3. Ask the class which questions from the game are particularly significant or important for understanding the story, and why they think so.

Activity 2

Aim: to listen for gist

1. Hand out the worksheet and direct the students' attention to Activity 1. Explain that it gives them a brief summary of what happens in Part 3 and seven questions that they need to answer. Ask them to read the summary and the questions. Give them time to clarify any doubts or problems.

2. Play Track 1 (full audio for Part 3). Students write their answers on the worksheet.

3. Allow the students time to compare their answers with a partner, and to discuss anything else they've understood. Before checking their answers, ask the students if there's anything they felt confused about,

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or didn't feel they'd understood very well. Hand out the transcript so that they can check their answers. Circulate, monitoring and helping where necessary, then get the answers from the class.

Key: *Harry goes upstairs to get changed for dinner.; 2. Pearl Fulton still hasn't arrived.; 3. They move into the dining room.; 4. Bertha thinks about Pearl.; 5. The other guests talk about people they know, playwrights and the theatre.; 6. Bertha doesn't know what the sign will be, but she is convinced that she and Pearl are feeling the same way and have a special understanding.; 7. Bertha and Pearl stand by the window and look at the pear tree together.*

Activity 3

Aim: to examine the effect of 'soft' consonants on the mood of the text

1. Tell the students that they are going to listen to a short extract and that they should think about where in the story the extract is from and whose point of view the situation is described from. Play Track 2 (short extract). (*It comes from the end of the evening and it is described from Bertha's point of view.*) Ask them to describe the mood of the text. Play Track 2 again. Elicit some ideas from the class.

Key (suggested answers): *magical; fantastical; mystical; dreamlike; sensual*

2. Suggest that one of the techniques employed by the writer to create the mood is the use of lots of 'soft' consonants and limiting the use of harder-sounding consonants. Direct students to Activity 2 on the worksheet. Ask them to listen once more and underline the soft consonants that they hear more than once. Let them compare in pairs afterwards.

Note: Although 'softness' is a subjective quality, you might wish to explain in more detail which consonants are generally considered soft. These tend to be voiced sounds (so /b/ rather than /p/, for example), fricatives such as /f/ and /v/, and /s/ and /z/, the nasal sounds /n/, /m/ and /ŋ/, and semi-vowels such as /w/, /j/

and /r/. Hard sounds, in contrast, are the plosives such as /p/, /k/ and /tʃ/.

3. You might decide to play Track 2 once more for students to check their answers. Now ask them to practise reading the text aloud to themselves and each other as softly and dreamily as possible.

Key:

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?

Activity 4

Aims: to explore Bertha's relationship with, and feelings towards, Pearl; to personalize the theme of unspoken understanding

1. Put the students into groups of three or four and ask them to discuss the questions in Activity 3 on the worksheet. When they have talked about all six questions, field answers with the whole class.

Key: *Students' own answers*

2. Ask the students to imagine that the two women write letters to one another the following day. Invite suggestions of what they might write about, such as thanks and comments on food, what they were wearing, and so on. Discuss the likely style of the letters (in early 20th century middle-class society a formal style was adopted in all but the most intimate of relationships). Elicit suitable openings for the letters, such as:

*Dear Miss Fulton, / Mrs Young,
I am writing to thank you for ...*

3. Put the students in two groups, A and B. Have the A students write letters as Bertha and the B students as Pearl. They can collaborate to come up with ideas and to help each other express them naturally, but

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they should not copy one another's letters word for word. As you monitor, encourage those writing Bertha's letter to try and express her feelings for Pearl. Encourage those writing Pearl's letter to decide to what extent she would mention their moment together at the window.

Meanwhile, write these evaluation questions on the board:

- To what extent are these letters 'realistic'? Why? Why not?
- Is the level of formality appropriate to Bertha and Pearl's relationship? To their class? To the point in history?
- Has Bertha managed to express her feelings without going too far?
- Has Pearl been polite about the dinner party?

4. When they have finished, pair up the As and Bs. They exchange and read the letters, then write back, still in character.

5. Discuss with the whole class any interesting differences of point of view between the women that became apparent in their correspondence, as well as any feedback on the language used.

Follow-up tasks

1. Continue Bertha's journal with an account of the dinner party and her special moment with Pearl.
2. Ask the students to imagine that the story is set in the modern day. Instead of exchanging formal correspondence after the party, the students write five or six exchanges between Bertha and Pearl as if they were doing so on their social network pages the next day. The following lesson, you may want to follow this up by comparing the registers in the letters with the online versions.

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Activity 1

Read the summary and answer the questions.

1. When Harry gets home he goes upstairs.
Why does he go upstairs?
2. Bertha realizes that one guest still hasn't arrived.
Who?
3. Once everyone is there, they move out of the entrance hall.
Where do they go?
4. Bertha spends most of the meal thinking about one person.
Who?
5. The other guests seem to get on well and talk animatedly.
What about?
6. Bertha waits for her special guest to give her 'a sign'.
What sign?
7. After the meal, they all drink coffee and relax in front of the fire. Bertha and Pearl share a moment.
What do they do together?

Activity 2

Read the excerpt below and underline any 'soft' consonant sounds.

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?

Now read the excerpt aloud as softly and dreamily as possible!

Activity 3

Discuss these questions in groups

1. How does Bertha feel when she accompanies Pearl into the dining room?
2. Bertha perceives a connection between her and Pearl '... as if they had said to each other: "You, too?". What is it that she thinks they have in common?
3. Do you think Pearl feels the same way? Why? Why not?
4. Do you think Bertha is a good judge of character? Is she correct in her assessment of the other characters in the story?
5. Do you have friends that you seem to understand without needing to say anything, who you just 'click' with?
6. Have you ever thought you had a lot in common with someone but later found out they didn't feel the same way about you?

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Bang went the front door open and shut. Harry shouted: ‘Hullo, you people. Down in five minutes.’ And they heard him **swarm** up the stairs. Bertha couldn’t help smiling; she knew how he loved doing things at high pressure. What, after all, did an extra five minutes matter? But he would pretend to himself that they mattered beyond measure. And then he would make a great point of coming into the drawing-room, extravagantly cool and collected.

Harry had such a **zest for life**. Oh, how she appreciated it in him. And his passion for fighting – for seeking in everything that came up against him another test of his power and of his courage – that, too, she understood. Even when it made him just occasionally, to other people, who didn’t know him well, a little ridiculous perhaps ... For there were moments when he rushed into battle where no battle was ... She talked and laughed and positively forgot until he had come in (just as she had imagined) that Pearl Fulton had not turned up.

‘I wonder if Miss Fulton has forgotten?’

‘I expect so,’ said Harry. ‘Is she on the phone?’

‘Ah! There’s a taxi, now.’ And Bertha smiled with that little air of proprietorship that she always assumed while her women finds were new and mysterious. ‘She lives in taxis.’

‘She’ll **run to fat** if she does,’ said Harry coolly, ringing the bell for dinner. ‘Frightful danger for blonde women.’

‘Harry – don’t,’ warned Bertha, laughing up at him.

Came another tiny moment, while they waited, laughing and talking, just a trifle too much at their ease, a **trifle** too unaware. And then Miss Fulton, all in silver, with a silver **fillet** binding her pale blonde 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. Her heavy eyelids lay upon her eyes and the strange half smile came and went upon her lips as though she lived by listening rather than seeing. 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.

And the others? Face and Mug, Eddie and Harry, their spoons rising and falling – dabbing their lips with their napkins, **crumbling** bread, fiddling with the forks and glasses and talking.

‘I met her at the Alpha show – the weirdest little person. She’d not only cut off her hair, but she seemed to have taken a dreadfully good **slip** off her legs and arms and her neck and her poor little nose as well.’

‘Isn’t she very *liée* with Michael Oat?’

‘The man who wrote *Love in False Teeth*?’

‘He wants to write a play for me. One act. One man. Decides to commit suicide. Gives all the reasons why he should and why he shouldn’t. And just as he has made up his mind either to do it or not to do it – curtain. Not half a bad idea.’

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‘What’s he going to call it – “Stomach Trouble”?’

‘I *think* I’ve come across the *same* idea in a lit-tle French review, *quite* unknown in England.’

No, they didn’t share it. They were dears – dears – and she loved having them there, at her table, and giving them delicious food and wine. In fact, she longed to tell them how delightful they were, and what a decorative group they made, how they seemed to set one another off and how they reminded her of a play by **Chekhov**.

Harry was enjoying his dinner. It was part of his – well, not his nature, exactly, and certainly not his pose – his – something or other – to talk about food and to glory in his ‘shameless passion for the white flesh of the lobster’ and ‘the green of pistachio ices – green and cold like the eyelids of Egyptian dancers’.

When he looked up at her and said: ‘Bertha, this is a very admirable *soufflé!*’ she almost could have wept with child-like pleasure.

Oh, why did she feel so **tender** towards the whole world tonight? Everything was good – was right. All that happened seemed to fill again her **brimming** cup of bliss.

And still, in the back of her mind, there was the pear tree. It would be silver now, in the light of poor dear Eddie’s moon, silver as Miss Fulton, who sat there turning a tangerine in her slender fingers that were so pale a light seemed to come from them.

What she simply couldn’t **make out** – what was miraculous – was how she should have guessed Miss Fulton’s mood so exactly and so instantly. For she never doubted for a moment that she was right, and yet what had she to go on? Less than nothing.

‘I believe this does happen very, very rarely between women. Never between men,’ thought Bertha. ‘But while I am making the coffee in the drawing-room perhaps she will “give a sign”.’

What she meant by that she did not know, and what would happen after that she could not imagine.

While she thought like this she saw herself talking and laughing. She had to talk because of her desire to laugh.

‘I must laugh or die.’

But when she noticed Face’s funny little habit of tucking something down the front of her **bodice** – as if she kept a tiny, secret hoard of nuts there, too – Bertha had to dig her nails into her hands – so as not to laugh too much.

It was over at last. And: ‘Come and see my new coffee machine,’ said Bertha.

‘We only have a new coffee machine once a fortnight,’ said Harry. Face took her arm this time; Miss Fulton bent her head and followed after.

The fire had died down in the drawing-room to a red, flickering ‘nest of baby **phoenixes**’, said Face.

‘Don’t turn up the light for a moment. It is so lovely.’

And down she crouched by the fire again. She was always cold ... ‘without her little red flannel jacket, of course,’ thought Bertha.

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.

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‘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 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?

Track 2

For ever – for a moment? And did Miss Fulton murmur : ‘Yes.’ Just *that*? Or did Bertha dream it?

Glossary

swarm to go somewhere as part of a large crowd, move in large numbers (the use here is very unusual)

zest for life great enthusiasm or interest

run to fat (colloquial, old-fashioned) to get fat

trifle (old-fashioned) slightly

fillet (old-fashioned) a band or ribbon for the hair

blaze (mainly literary) burning strongly, brightly (usually referring to fire)

crumble to break something into very small pieces or to be broken into very small pieces

slip (old-fashioned) cut

liée (French) having an affair with

Chekhov nineteenth-century Russian writer who was a keen observer of human behaviour

soufflé (French) a food that you make with eggs and bake into a high, round shape

tender sensitive towards something because you care about it

brimming full of something

make out to see, hear or understand someone or something with difficulty

bodice the part of a dress that covers a woman’s body from the waist up

phoenix an imaginary bird in ancient stories that lives for 500 years and then burns to death, with a new phoenix rising from the ashes when the flames are gone