

Bliss by Katherine Mansfield Part 4

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Level: Advanced

Age: Young adults / Adults

Aims: In this lesson the students will:

1. predict the ending of the story;
2. listen for detail;
3. discuss the meaning and symbolism of the story;
4. explore the adoption of characters' voices when storytelling;
5. act out a dialogue between Bertha and her psychoanalyst.

Materials: one copy of the worksheet per student; one copy of the Psychoanalysis role-play – Observer's notes for every three students; Track 1 (full audio for Part 4) and Track 2 (shorter 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 the final part, the guests start to make their way back home, which signals the end of a pleasant evening. But something is about to happen that will change Bertha's life forever ...

Activity 1

Aim: to encourage students to think about the story so far and predict the ending

1. Explain that the students are going to listen to the end of the story, and that there is a twist. Put students in small groups to guess what the twist might be. Monitor the groups and encourage them to expand on their ideas by giving more details. After a couple of minutes, invite groups to explain their endings to the class. As they are doing so, make summary notes on the board of each group's ideas so that later you will be able to see which group, if any, was close to the actual ending. Ask them to justify their theories: e.g. *Why do you think that is going to happen?*

2. When all groups have presented their ideas, conduct a quick class survey, or vote, to see which ending is most likely to be the real ending, and which is the most entertaining. You can add a category of your own too. Leave the ideas on the board.

Activity 2

Aim: to listen for detail

1. Hand out the worksheet. Draw the students' attention to Activity 1. Explain that

while they listen they have to write one or more character names on each line. Before they begin, instruct them to read the lines and decide which are asking for one name and which for more than one, and what they think the answers are likely to be.

2. Play Track 1 (full audio for Part 4). Allow students time to compare their answers. Then hand out the transcripts and give students time to confirm their answers.

Key: 1. Bertha and Pearl; 2. Face; 3. Harry; 4. Mug, Face and Eddie; 5. Harry; 6. Pearl; 7. Bertha; 8. Bertha; 9. Bertha; 10. Eddie and Pearl; 11. Eddie; 12. Bertha; 13. Harry and Pearl; 14. Bertha

3. Conduct whole-class feedback and use the opportunity to probe with further questions on these significant points:

- Question 6 – Why is Harry being rude to Pearl? (*He doesn't want Bertha to suspect his real feelings.*)
- Question 8 – What does Bertha feel for the first time? (*sexual desire for her husband*)
- Question 9 – Why is Bertha glad that the guests are leaving? (*because she wants to be alone with Harry*)

Bliss

by Katherine Mansfield Part 4

- Question 12 – What does she see? (*Harry and Pearl whispering intimately to one another*)
- Question 13 – Why does Harry offer to call Pearl a cab so loudly? (*He's trying to hide the real reason he has seen Pearl to the door.*)
- Question 14 – Why is Bertha worried about the future? (*It was happy and assured moments before but is now suddenly looking extremely unsafe and full of unhappiness.*)

4. Refer the students to their predictions on the board. Ask the class whose were closest.

Activity 3

Aims: to get a deeper understanding of the story; to prepare for the psychoanalysis activity

1. Have the students skim the transcript, underlining any sentences that are particularly important for the meaning of the story. Let them work with a partner on this to encourage discussion. Field a few sentences with the class, asking students to explain why they underlined particular sentences.
2. Put pairs together into groups of four. Point out Activity 2 on the worksheet and give them plenty of time to chat about and make notes on the six sentences. Monitor, offering help and suggestions.

Key (suggested answers):

1. *Harry is deliberately hiding his true feelings for Pearl by being outwardly hostile to her. Bertha is a very innocent woman who would never suspect infidelity and sees the best in everyone.*
2. *Perhaps she has unconsciously sensed the attraction between Harry and Pearl. It is also possible that her attraction to Pearl is a sexual one, and her earlier special moment with Pearl has awoken her sexual appetite.*
3. *She is treating him like a child, someone she understands better than he understands himself. However, she completely misinterprets his motives for*

going to Pearl, and consequently is made to look the child, blind to the adult world of sexual love and lust.

4. *If the pear tree is symbolic to Bertha, it could represent many things: her life – perfect and vulnerable; Harry, reaching towards the moon (Pearl being the moon – her name suggests it, and her fingers are described as 'moonbeam'); or her friendship with Pearl, which at the end of the story is shown to be a fantasy. Whether Pearl associates the tree with any of these things is left deliberately open to interpretation.*

5. *Bertha is not in control of her own life but, like a child, is dependent on her husband and others for happiness. This may be a comment on her unassertive personality or it could be an early feminist comment on the injustice in society that prevents women from leaving their husbands in cases of infidelity because of their economic dependence on men.*

6. *Although Bertha's world has suddenly changed around her, Bertha, like the tree, cannot move. Alternatively, despite the knowledge that the emotional stability that allows her to be happy no longer exists, the appearance of happiness will be maintained; her material life is no different, still 'as full of flower'.*

3. Have the students complete the sentences in Activity 3 with their final interpretations of the symbols in the story. Let them compare with a partner.

Activity 4

Aim: to explore the adoption of characters' voices when storytelling

1. Explain that Mansfield uses the characters' direct speech to add detail to their personalities but she sometimes doesn't say who is speaking. Ask the students to read the two extracts of the transcript that are marked 'Track 2' and to try to remember which character is speaking in each instance.

2. You may want to discuss the possible reasons for Mansfield keeping the characters' identities from us like this. *Possible answers: The voices serve as 'vignettes', or small*

Bliss

by Katherine Mansfield Part 4

descriptive passages that capture the mood of the scene. What the people say, or who says it, is not as important as the general feeling, especially from Bertha's point of view (although some of the utterances belong to her). Another possible reason is that it means that the reader has to think more about what is said in order to decide who must be speaking, therefore involving the reader in the story more.

3. Play Track 2 (short extract). The students listen to the voices and check their answers.

Key:

1. 'What I want to do ...' – Mug; 2. 'You know, my dear, I am going to decorate ...' – Face; 3. 'The trouble with our young writing men ...' – Mug; 4. 'A dreadful poem about a girl ...' – Eddie Warren; 5. 'Egyptian? Turkish? Virginian? ...' – Harry; 6. 'No, thank you, I won't smoke,' – Miss Fulton; 7. 'Then you can come part of the way in my taxi.' – Miss Fulton; 8. 'I shall be so thankful not to have to face ...' – Eddie Warren; 9. 'You can get a taxi at the rank ...' – Harry; 10. 'That's a comfort. I'll go ...' – Miss Fulton; 11. 'Let me help you.' – Harry

4. Ask the students to listen again, this time noting any adjectives they can think of to describe the voices. If you think this may be difficult for your class, you could write the following suggestions on the board: *soft, old, sexy, boring, slow, deep, high, animated, angry, very English (!), confident*. Play Track 2 again.

Key (suggested answers):

1. Mug – gruff; 2. Face – old; 3. Mug – no-nonsense; 4. Eddie Warren – deep, slow; 5. Harry – abrupt; 6. Miss Fulton – hurt; 7. Miss Fulton – soft; 8. Eddie Warren – moaning; 9. Harry – abrasive; 10. Miss Fulton – soft; 11. Harry – keen

5. Ask students to work in pairs. Have them read out the sentences to each other in the manner of the characters. You might want to do one first to help students get over any embarrassment they may feel. They could judge who does the best job of impersonating the different characters. Invite volunteers to 'be' Harry, Miss Fulton, Mug, Face and Eddie Warren.

6. Ask members of the class whether they are good at reading stories aloud. Ask if they have practised much; perhaps they have younger brothers or sisters, or children, that they read aloud to.

Activity 5

Aim: to explore the feelings and personality of the main character after the revelation of her husband's infidelity

1. Draw a picture, or show an image from the internet of a psychoanalyst and a patient lying on a couch. Explain that the new field of psychoanalysis and psychological treatment was, in early-twentieth-century London, very fashionable and much discussed. Dreams and symbols were given great importance by followers of psychoanalysts such as Freud and Jung. Ask the students to imagine that several days have passed since the dinner party and a friend of Bertha's has suggested she make an appointment with the famous psychologist Dr Helmut Liebermann of Stuttgart, who has an excellent reputation for cases of this kind.

2. Elicit some ideas from the class of things that Bertha might say during the session. Write them on the board. You might like to drill one or two to help the students 'get into character':

- 'How could I have been so stupid?'
- 'I thought there was something special between us.'
- 'I don't know what I'm going to do.'

It may also be a good idea to provide some typical phrases that a psychoanalyst might say, especially an opening question to start the role-play:

- 'What seems to be the problem?'
- 'Lie back and tell me all about it.'
- 'How did that make you feel?'

3. Tell the students that they are going to act out the dialogue between Bertha and her psychoanalyst. Put them into groups of three. Explain that one student will be Bertha, one the psychoanalyst and one an observer whose job is to make notes during the session. Give the observers the Observer's notes. If space and furniture allow, you might suggest they set up the

Bliss

by Katherine Mansfield Part 4

room as realistically as possible. You could even have the 'patients' lying down with the doctor facing away from his patient (as Freud used to do!). Gentle music may help the students lose their inhibitions.

4. Let the role-play go on long enough to really explore Bertha's problems and for the doctor to draw a conclusion to the session. Move around the room, listening in to different role-plays and ensuring that the observers are making decent notes. You could collect noteworthy instances of their English to talk about afterwards, such as significant errors and particularly natural sentences.

5. When most of the 'sessions' have come to a close, let the observers give their groups feedback. Invite the observers to present their 'findings' to the class.

Follow-up tasks

1. If the students have been writing a journal entry for this eventful day in Bertha's life, they can complete it now; or they might want to rewrite the day's entry with Bertha's revised perspective on her life.

2. On online literary sites and encyclopaedias you can find several interpretations of *Bliss*. Suggest students research to find the most plausible interpretation of the symbolism in the story.

3. Students could write a script for a short film of the story and act it out or even record it. (There has never been a film made of it!)

Bliss

by Katherine Mansfield
Part 4

Activity 1

Listen and decide which character(s), Bertha, Harry, Eddie, Pearl, Norman Knight ('Mug') or Mrs Knight ('Face'), are being referred to.

1. ... are quietly looking out at the garden when the light is turned on. Bertha and Pearl
2. ... makes coffee. _____
3. ... expresses a lack of interest in children. _____
4. ... are still talking about work. _____
5. ... offers cigarettes to the guests. _____
6. ... doesn't want a cigarette. _____
7. ... wants to talk to Harry about something later. _____
8. ... feels something they have never felt before. _____
9. ... is grateful that the Knights leave so quickly. _____
10. ... decide to share a taxi. _____
11. ... wants to show Bertha something in a book. _____
12. ... witnesses something totally unexpected. _____
13. ... act as if nothing has happened. _____
14. ... is worried about the future. _____

Activity 2

In groups, discuss the significance of the following sentences. Use the questions to guide you. Make summary notes.

1. *'Oh, Harry, don't dislike her. You are quite wrong about her. She's wonderful' ...*
Why do you think Bertha misinterprets her husband's feelings for Pearl?
2. *For the first time in her life Bertha Young desired her husband.*
Why do you think she feels this for the first time at this moment?
3. *Bertha knew that he was repenting his rudeness [...] What a boy he was in some ways [...] so - simple.*
What is Bertha's attitude to her husband here? What is the irony?
4. *'Your lovely pear tree!' she murmured.*
Do you think Pearl's comment is meant to be significant, or is she just complimenting Bertha on her garden?
5. *'Oh, what is going to happen now?' she cried.*
Why does Bertha say this and not: 'What am I going to do now?'
6. *But the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still.*
What does the final sentence mean to you?

Activity 3

Write your personal interpretation of the symbols in *Bliss*: the pear tree, the cats, the moon. You can use the following sentence stems.

- I think _____ symbolizes ...
I take _____ to stand for ...
For me, _____ represents ...

Bliss

by Katherine Mansfield
Part 4

You will be observing Bertha's session with Dr Liebermann. Do so silently. Sit far enough away so that you don't distract the patient but close enough to hear what is being said. Make notes below, under each question. You will be asked to talk about the session afterwards.

- How does the dialogue start?
- How does Bertha define the problem?
- Which seems more important to her, her relationship with Harry or Pearl?
- How is she feeling about the situation?
- What suggestions or recommendations does Dr Liebermann offer?
- Is Bertha happy with his suggestions? Do you think she will act on any of them?
- What is their interpretation of the pear tree and other symbols, if any?

Psychoanalysis role-play – Observer's notes

Bliss

 by Katherine Mansfield
 Part 4

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?

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

Then the light was snapped on and Face made the coffee and Harry said: ‘My dear Mrs Knight, don’t ask me about my baby. I never see her. I shan’t feel the slightest interest in her until she has a lover,’ and Mug took his eye out of the **conservatory** for a moment and then put it under glass again and Eddie Warren drank his coffee and set down the cup with a face of **anguish** as though he had drunk and seen the spider.

‘What I want to do is to give the young men a show. I believe London is simply **teeming with first-chop**, unwritten plays. What I want to say to ‘em is: “Here’s the theatre. Fire ahead.”’

‘You know, my dear, I am going to decorate a room for the Jacob Nathans. Oh, I am so tempted to do a fried-fish scheme, with the backs of the chairs shaped like frying pans and lovely chip potatoes embroidered all over the curtains.’

‘The trouble with our young writing men is that they are still too romantic. You can’t put out to sea without being seasick and wanting a basin. Well, why won’t they have the courage of those basins?’

‘A *dreadful* poem about a *girl* who was **violated** by a beggar *without* a nose in a lit-tle wood ...’

Miss Fulton sank into the lowest, deepest chair and Harry handed round the cigarettes. From the way he stood in front of her shaking the silver box and saying abruptly: ‘Egyptian? Turkish? Virginian? They’re all mixed up,’ Bertha realized that she not only bored him; he really disliked her. And she decided from the way Miss Fulton said: ‘No, thank you, I won’t smoke,’ that she felt it, too, and was hurt.

‘Oh, Harry, don’t dislike her. You are quite wrong about her. She’s wonderful, wonderful. And, besides, how can you feel so differently about someone who means so much to me. I shall try to tell you when we are in bed tonight what has been happening. What she and I have shared.’

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 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. And, equally, of course, she’d understood that he was different. They’d discussed it so often. It had worried her dreadfully at first to find that she was so cold, but after a time it had not seemed to matter. They were so frank with each other – such good **pals**. That was the best of being modern.

But now – **ardently!** Ardently! The word ached in her ardent body! Was this what that

Bliss

 by Katherine Mansfield
Part 4

feeling of bliss had been leading up to? But then –
‘My dear,’ said Mrs Norman Knight, ‘you know our shame. We are victims of time and train. We live in **Hampstead**. It’s been so nice.’

‘I’ll come with you into the hall,’ said Bertha. ‘I loved having you. But you must not miss the last train. That’s so awful, isn’t it?’

‘Have a whisky, Knight, before you go?’ called Harry.

‘No thanks, old chap.’

Bertha squeezed his hand for that as she shook it.

‘Good night, good-bye,’ she cried from the top step, feeling that this self of hers was **taking leave** of them for ever.

When she got back into the drawing-room the others were on the move.

‘... Then you can come part of the way in my taxi.’

‘I shall be *so* thankful *not* to have to face *another* drive *alone* after my *dreadful* experience.’

‘You can get a taxi at the rank just at the end of the street. You won’t have to walk more than a few yards.’

‘That’s a comfort. I’ll go and put on my coat.’

Miss Fulton moved towards the hall and Bertha was following when Harry almost pushed past.

‘Let me help you.’

Bertha knew that he was **repenting** his rudeness – she let him go. What a boy he was in some ways – so impulsive – so – simple.

And Eddie and she were left by the fire.

‘I *wonder* if you have seen Bilks’ *new* poem called *Table d’Hote*,’ said Eddie softly.

‘It’s *so* wonderful. In the last anthology. Have you got a copy? I’d *so* like to *show* it to you. It begins with an *incredibly* beautiful line: “Why must it always be tomato soup?”’

‘Yes,’ said Bertha. And she moved noiselessly to a table opposite the drawing-room door and Eddie glided noiselessly after her. She picked up the little book and gave it to him; they had not made a sound.

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: ‘Tomorrow,’ and with her eyelids Miss Fulton said: ‘Yes.’

‘Here it is,’ said Eddie. “‘Why must it always be tomato soup?’” It’s 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.’

‘Oh, no. It’s not necessary,’ said Miss Fulton, and she came up to Bertha and gave her the slender fingers to hold.

‘Good-bye. Thank you so much.’

‘Good-bye,’ said Bertha.

Miss Fulton held her hand a moment longer.

Bliss

by Katherine Mansfield
Part 4

'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.

Glossary

bosom (literary, old-fashioned) a woman's chest, or the clothes covering it; the imaginary place where you feel deep emotions

conservatory a room with glass walls and a glass roof, built next to a house and used for relaxing in or for growing plants (here, it probably refers to his monocle)

anguish a feeling of great physical or emotional pain

teem with to contain an extremely large number of people, animals or objects that are all moving around

first-chop (very rare) top quality; more commonly 'first-rate'

violate (old-fashioned) rape someone

desire (formal) a strong feeling that you want to have sex with someone

pal (colloquial, old-fashioned) a friend

ardently (literary) showing very strong feelings of love towards someone

Hampstead a middle-class district of north-west London

take leave (old-fashioned) if you take leave of someone, you say goodbye to them

repent to recognize that you have done something wrong and to feel ashamed and sorry about it

toss to throw something somewhere gently or in a slightly careless way

quiver to shake with short quick movements

hideous very ugly or frightening in appearance

grin to smile showing your teeth

cab taxi

murmur to say something in a very quiet voice

shut up shop (colloquial) lock the doors and secure the house or office/business before going to bed/leaving