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The Netherlands

Marital Bliss or Self-Delusion? Crisis and Epiphany in Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss" and "Marriage à la Mode"

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Citation
Abadie, C. (2025). *Marital Bliss or Self-Delusion? Crisis and Epiphany in Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss" and "Marriage à la Mode"*.

Version:	Not Applicable (or Unknown)
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Marital Bliss or Self-Delusion?
Crisis and Epiphany in Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss" and "Marriage à la Mode"

Richard Bergh, *Nordic Summer Evening*, 1899, oil on Canvas

Master's Thesis

Literary Studies: Literature in Society

Leiden University

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21-06-2025

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Introduction

"'Oh, what is going to happen now?' she cried." (Mansfield 110)

Bertha Young's agonised cry encapsulates the very essence of Katherine Mansfield's short story endings: her question remains unanswered as the ending remains unresolved, a common factor in Mansfield's marital plots "Bliss" (1918) and "Marriage à la Mode" (1921). In these two short stories, Mansfield uses fantasy, illusion and epiphany to catalyse internal marital crises, subvert idealised notions of domestic happiness, and challenge reader expectations. These stories utilise satire and complex narrative techniques to expose the fragility of bourgeois marriages and the psychological depth (or shallowness) of their characters, culminating in endings that choose not to resolve matters. Both stories foreground an internal psychological crisis over a conventional plot, something that can be seen as a characteristic of modernist fiction. The intrusive "third" acts as a catalyst for this internal shift, forcing the central character to confront uncomfortable truths about their marriage, their spouse, and themselves. This thesis argues that Mansfield's mastery lies in depicting this crisis not as a neatly resolved turning point, but as a "moment of suspension" in which the reader is left with the epiphany in non-resolution. These moments, characterised by ambiguity and a lack of closure, leave both the characters and the reader in a state of uncertainty. The endings do not provide definitive answers but rather pose enduring questions, suggesting that the marriages are simultaneously changed forever and yet remain unchanged, challenging the reader to contemplate their unresolved fate. By resisting traditional narrative arcs and moralistic conclusions, Mansfield's "Bliss" and "Marriage à la Mode" suggest the unknowability of human relationships and subjective experience, and continue to defy neat interpretation.

KATHERINE MANSFIELD STUDIES

These two short stories are as relevant as ever in the field of Katherine Mansfield studies, as is evidenced by the multiplicity of readings that they continue to offer. This is particularly true for “Bliss”: despite the large amount of scholarship already devoted to this short story, it continues to be a subject of debate in academic discussion due to its symbolism, psychological complexity and queer readings. It has been studied yet again in the 2025 issue of *Katherine Mansfield Studies*, in the chapter by Anna Hoovler called “Secret Selves and Shadowy Others: Divisive Femininity in Katherine Mansfield’s ‘Bliss’ and ‘A Cup of Tea’”.

The field of Katherine Mansfield studies first flourished in the 1970s and 1980s, and came back to the fore in the last decade and a half. In her review “The Explosion of Mansfield Studies” (2011), Alice Kelly credits the recent “explosion” in this field of study to the efforts of the Katherine Mansfield Society (hereafter KMS) led by dedicated scholars. The KMS began with conferences in London (2008) and Menton (2009) and created the *Katherine Mansfield Studies* journal in 2009, published by Edinburgh University Press.This peer-reviewed annual publication encourages interdisciplinary research, featuring contributions from both established academics and emerging scholars. It includes critical essays, creative works inspired by Mansfield, and reviews of recent publications related to her and her contemporaries. In 2013 this journal was converted to a book publication, *Katherine Mansfield Studies*, still published by Edinburgh University Press; this is still ongoing, with the latest publication, Volume 17: *Katherine Mansfield’s Women,* coming out in August 2025. The KMS also regularly holds conferences, annual birthday lectures and essay competitions. The 2025 conference of the Katherine Mansfield Society will take place in July at the University of Birmingham, with keynote speakers including Dr. Lauren Elkin, Professor Elleke Boehmer and Dr. Andrew Harrison. Titled “Placing Katherine Mansfield”,

this conference will focus on the significance of place in her writings and will further examine how to situate her work within current critical conversations and new scholarly debates. Furthermore the Katherine Mansfield Society's upcoming 2026 issue, to be titled *Katherine Mansfield's Men*, will seek to explore how she forged her identity as a woman and writer in relation to the men in her life, from her literary influences like Chekhov to her editors and critics, as well as the men in her personal life such as her brother and her friends. It will also explore the male characters in Mansfield's fiction and gendered critical reception of her work.

The leading scholars of the KMS are, first and foremost, Gerri Kimber, Todd Martin, Delia da Sousa Correa and Janet Wilson, who have been the editors of almost every book publication of *Katherine Mansfield Studies*. Other important scholars are Claire Davison, Clare Hanson, Sydney Janet Kaplan, Angela Smith and Maurizio Ascari. The books of the KMS each read Mansfield alongside a particular theme, and feature a collection of academic essays relating to that theme. Tracing the themes of each annual KMS publication reveals the trends in scholarship over the last twenty years. A few examples are: *Katherine Mansfield and Modernism* (2010); *Katherine Mansfield and the (Post)Colonial* (2013); *Katherine Mansfield and the Arts* (2011); *Katherine Mansfield and Psychology* (2016); and *Katherine Mansfield and Children* (2021).

Scholars have studied her as a New Zealand writer, as a Modernist writer, as a post-colonial writer and as a feminist writer. Her short fiction has been read with a focus on certain themes such as gardens, symbolic objects (Huang, Zhongfeng. "The Image of Hats in Katherine Mansfield's 'The Garden Party.'" 2025), parties, and the nature of the self (Gerri Kimber, "'True to Oneself! Which Self?': Katherine Mansfield in Her Letters" (2024)). Other scholars have focussed on her literary influences, her relation to other writers, or her indebtedness to Impressionism. She has often been read alongside her contemporaries, in

particular Virginia Woolf (Ruchi Mundeja, “Rooms Not Quite Their Own: Two Colonial Itinerants, Katherine Mansfield and Jean Rhys, and Narratives of Roomlessness” 2020) and D.H. Lawrence. Other themes that have been central to Mansfield criticism include social class (“Inter- and Intra-Class Distinctions: Physical, Linguistic, and Competitive Features in Katherine Mansfield’s Burnell Family Stories” by Adrianne Cheek Miles, 2021); death; and of course autobiography. Critics have examined her sense of isolation, first as an outsider from New Zealand and then in her sickness as she went from place to place seeking treatment, separated from her husband and her social circle (*Katherine Mansfield, Illness and Death* (2024) edited by Aimée Gasston, Gerri Kimber and Todd Martin). Also, critics have studied the commercial aspect of Mansfield’s writing: the rising field of Modern Periodical Studies contributes to the renewed interest in Katherine Mansfield. This field is led by the *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies* which has been published annually since 2010. And the KMS’s *Katherine Mansfield and Periodical Culture* (2019). This thesis especially joins the discussion around Mansfield’s depiction of bourgeois marriage as well as the role of psychology and of fantasy in her short stories, and Mansfield’s interest in subjective experience and sense of self.

Something is known about Mansfield’s thoughts and private life thanks to her letters and journals, which were published posthumously by her husband John Middleton Murry. The collections are a compilation of diary entries and letters to friends and family. Because of this wealth of insight into Mansfield’s private thoughts, scholars have long engaged in biographical readings of her written works, and several biographies have been published by scholars such as Antony Alpers and Claire Tomalin. However I am reluctant to offer a biographical reading of Mansfield’s work; it must be noted that just because her personal writings are available does not mean that they are to be taken as definitively representative of her lived experience. Mansfield knew that they would be shared around and discussed just

like William's letter to Isabel in "Marriage à la Mode", so these writings may be just as much fiction and stylistic experimentation as her other writings. While acknowledging the value of this historical context, this thesis focuses primarily on the textual evidence within the stories themselves to explore their narrative strategies and thematic concerns.

In a "plotless" short story, the crisis is not external (an outside factor that happens to the character) but internal (a moment of change, of epiphany or decision within the character) (Casertano 105). In her endings, Katherine Mansfield seeks to answer the question, "What is it that happens in that moment of suspension?" (Casertano 103). Mansfield uses the "third" party in a marriage as a narrative device to catalyse an internal crisis in which there is both irreparable change internally but no visible change externally. One character finds themself in a "moment of suspension" (Casertano) which is both a moment of seeing themself and their partner clearly, and a moment in which a choice must be made. This moment both subverts the idealised notion of bourgeois marital bliss and challenges the reader's understanding of the characters. KM depicts the psychology of the moment in which the character is "in suspension". With an ending that refuses to resolve matters, the reader is left in suspension just like the character before their fall; the story has ended but we do not know if the marriage has too.

"Marriage à la Mode" can productively be studied alongside "Bliss" because of their thematic similarities even as these are offset by narrative differences. The stories share the common trope of the bourgeois marriage that seems ideal on the outside but on the inside is full of tension or is even falling apart. However, there are more striking similarities beyond this, such as the satire of the pseudo-bohemian group of artist friends, or what Saralyn Daly calls the "condemnation of groups" in *Katherine Mansfield* (1965). According to Daly, in 1920 Mansfield had "completed in 'Bliss' the exploratory appraisal of the world that revolves around the arts, and by the end of 1921 she would record her conclusions in 'Marriage à la

Mode'" (Daly 23). Another point of comparison is the role of fantasy, whether as a tool for denial or as a way to live in falsehood and pseudo-artistic excesses. Cherry Hankin notes Mansfield's "ability to depict with almost uncanny psychological insight the workings of fantasy in the minds of her fictional characters" (Hankin 467). Both stories pose the troubling question of the knowability of the other, as well as of the self: does the protagonist really know their spouse? Do they really know themselves?

THE SHORT STORY AND THE MANSFIELD MOMENT

There is much to be said about the short story as a literary kind; so I will endeavour to keep it short (pun intended), first giving a brief overview of the short story, then of the modernist short story specifically, and finally of the short story as practised by Mansfield. This last approach is of particular interest because it entails what scholars have coined "the Mansfield Moment".

In *A Companion to the British and Irish Short Story* (2008) Cheryl Alexander Malcolm and David Malcolm state that it is well established that the British short story has been long neglected in academia, though this neglect is "relative rather than absolute" (Malcolm and Malcolm 5). This is perhaps due to the short story's implicit status as lesser than other literary kinds; Cherry Hankin deplores in 1978 the thought that the short story is seen as "the poor relation of poetry, on the one hand, and of the novel, on the other" (Hankin 465). Scholars agree that it is difficult to provide a definition for the short story. There are two main questions to attempt to solve this problem. The first is, what makes a short story short? The second is, what makes a short story a story? The former question, about length, has been posed by Adrian Hunter in *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English* (2008). It contrasts the short story with the novel: most short stories are shorter than

most novels (with debatable exceptions, such as Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"). The shortness influences the amount of story material that can be included, and the depth of character explored (Malcolm and Malcolm 6). It seems that the short story, novella and novel exist on a sort of continuum rather than in separate categories; the limits are blurry and debatable. The latter question, on what makes a short story a story, opposes the short story to other forms of prose such as prose poetry, and questions whether the contents really constitute a story. Indeed, is it still a story if it lacks a plot, a conflict or an ending? This is where modernist experimentation will come in.

The short story as we understand it today emerged as a form in the nineteenth century. Adrian Hunter explains that until the turn of the century, the short story was seen as a "condensed novel" and likens it to a doll's house, "a fully realized world in miniature" (Hunter 1). The change happened when writers decided to do away with the narrative material that is normally necessary for continuity and coherence, and instead used these "tactical omissions" to "suggest and imply meaning, rather than stating it directly" (Hunter 2). The literary avant-garde embraced this idea at the turn of the century, with Russian writers such as Anton Chekhov and French writers like Guy de Maupassant prominent among them, and it "became the basis of modernist experimentation in the short form" (Hunter 2). Many scholars attribute the success of the short story form not only to the novelty of its "ambiguous, evasive, non-didactic story style" but also to its connection with "the breakdown of certain cultural and moral certainties" which is a key characteristic of modernism (Hunter 2). A defining feature of the modernist short story is the foregrounding of "moment-by-moment experience" (Malcolm and Malcolm 7), often replacing an external plot-driven narrative with a focus on internal psychological crisis. This involves a shift from "telling" to "showing", often by getting rid of the narrator (D'Hoker 156). Instead, meaning is conveyed through a mixture of narrative modes such as description, dialogue and interior

monologue; other defining features of the short story include focalisation, symbolism, epiphany and representational techniques such as the slice-of-life and the vignette (D'Hoker 156).

This stylistic shift parallels the changing commercial horizons at the turn of the century: short stories were far more lucrative for writers than the Victorian three-descker novel (Richardson 45) and readers were ready for short-form fiction. Richardson explains that "in a speeded-up world, short stories offered immediate gratification" (45). The new magazine culture and expanding audiences both in Europe and the United States ensured the proliferation of women's magazines and periodicals; just the right size to last a train commute, they were sold in railway bookstalls. Able to keep up with rapidly changing tastes, short stories were "concerned with questions, rather than answers" and "captured, with their fragmented nature, their open-endedness, the spirit of the age" (45), reflecting moral and social uncertainties of the time. Women writers used the short story to experiment, "breaking out of tired literary codes, outgrowing happily-ever-after romances and questioning existing relationship patterns and sexualities" (Richardson 49). This is indeed what we see with Katherine Mansfield.

Alongside the woman question came the marriage question, reflecting significant changes in legislation surrounding women's rights to property, to marital safety and to their own children. Only in 1884 could married women no longer be imprisoned for leaving their husbands, for example, but women's emancipation still had a long way to go; grounds for divorce were in the husbands' favour for several more decades, and marital rape was not legally recognised until 1991. Marriage was in the spotlight and debate peaked with Mona Carid's article "Marriage" in which she declared marriage "a vexatious failure" (Richardson 62); this article inspired Edwin Arnold's response "Is Marriage a Failure?" as an open question for men and women around the country to give their opinions. The Woman Question

became the Marriage Question and, in true modernist fashion, sparked many creative engagements but remained – and still remains – an open question. The short story was ideal for exploring this question and its possibilities because it could be plotless, foregrounding instead characters' psychology and subjectivity; it "demonstrates the complexity of human relations, and resists positing solutions" (Richardson 64). The short story had an interest in subjectivity, privileging one point of view and dramatising "the uniquely knowing and unknowing self" (Richardson 67). Plot was reduced in favour of psychological development; in fact "The rise of the short story and the birth of psychoanalysis coincided; both are underpinned by a fascination with the workings, the knowing, and unknowability, of the mind" (Richardson 68).

Katherine Mansfield stands out as a key figure of the modernist short story, particularly known for her "plotless" narratives and her exploration of the "transitory, ephemeral nature of experience" (Malcolm and Malcolm 202). James H. Justus distinguishes two main types of Mansfield stories, "both frothy": the first, which he illustrates with "Marriage à la Mode" deals with "Young couples who. . . egoistically doubt each other's capacity to measure up to their private notions of worth, sophistication, fidelity and so on", who are "not concerned with social issues and indeed are only perfunctorily concerned about anything or anyone outside themselves" (Justus 1). The second kind concerns "the well-to-do young innocent whose romantic dreams are shattered abruptly by the realism of the actual world, a realism most often represented by poor people or cynical men" (Justus 1): this is exemplified by Bertha in "Bliss", amongst others. Critics have wondered whether there is such a thing as a "Mansfield story"; Justus argues that "there is no single paradigm Mansfield story just as there is no single such story in Lawrence, Joyce or even Conrad" (14) and yet "there is a quality of the writing which does alert us, which makes us realise there *is* something called 'a Mansfield story'. . . the great common emotion is loneliness" (Justus 19).

This sense of loneliness pervades every story, and is indeed an enduring presence in “Bliss” and “Marriage à la Mode”. Justus also identifies two feminine types: the “sensitive, well-bred young ladies” such as Bertha Young, and the “spoiled, wealthy” women such as Rosemary Fell in “A Cup of Tea” who are “threatened by ennui” (15), and notes that these two feminine types “merge” in Isabel in “Marriage à la Mode” (Justus 15).

Mansfield’s stories often centre on moments of awakening or revelation, akin to James Joyce’s concept of epiphany (Trotter 292). Similarly, Virginia Woolf’s concept of the moment, which she called the “moment of being”, was “not quite an epiphanic revelation altering the course of events but a clarifying and integrative experience of intensity” (Correia 24). Mansfield adapted the epiphanic moment as her own, into what has been referred to by others as the “Mansfield Moment” (Correia 23): rather than offering a clear and fixed conclusion, the moment of suspense is not resolved. Robert Caserio describes the “Mansfield Moment” as a “suddenly expanded moment, minutiae magnified”, characterised by a “sudden alienation and estrangement of daily life from itself” (Caserio 345). Mansfield herself uses words like “blazing moment”, “central point of significance” and “glimpse” to describe the epiphanic moment resulting in “enduring suspense” and a permanent disorientation of ordinary life (Casertano 105). The suspense is created by the story’s ending, instead of being resolved by it. Mansfield compares the moment of revelation to waves “and the high foam, how it was suspended in the air before it fell”, asking herself “What is it that happens in that moment of suspension? It is timeless. In that moment. . . the whole life of the soul is contained. One is flung up—out of life—one is ‘held’, and then,—down, bright, broken, glittering on to the rocks, tossed back, part of the ebb and flow” (*Letters* 202). In “Bliss” and “Marriage à la Mode”, it is the marriage itself that is “flung up” and “held”in a state of indecision: it may or may not be ended. The story ends before the marriage is “tossed back” down to see where it lands.

This thesis will reflect on critical analysis undertaken in previous scholarship as well as close reading of Mansfield's two short stories to develop its arguments, and will draw on an eclectic set of psychoanalytical and contemporary psychological sources. Chapter 1 on "Bliss" will challenge some critics' previous interpretations of Bertha's experience, including readings that suggest that her excitement comes from a subconscious awareness of her husband's affair or an unacknowledged queer desire for Pearl herself. This chapter will argue that the revelation of Harry and Pearl's affair functions as the "eruption of the second story" (Mortimer), that hidden layer of truth that shatters Bertha's emotional defenses and forces a moment of unbearable seeing. This moment, however, does not lead to resolution, but rather leaves Bertha's future and the state of her marriage uncertain, and thus leaves the reader in the same state of suspension as Bertha herself, questioning the knowability of the other and of the self. Chapter 2 on "Marriage à la Mode" will examine the group of pseudo-bohemian friends as the intrusive and usurping third element, destabilising the marriage not through adultery, but through their pervasive influence, superficiality, and performative lifestyle which charms Isabel but alienates William. The story operates as a sharp satire, critiquing not only specific social circles but also potentially the excesses of fantasy, where life is treated as mere fiction and art is consumed but not created. Through satire, the story builds a sense of crisis that culminates in this moment of insight, using intertextuality, cinematic elements, and symbolism. This ultimately underscores the tension between life reflecting art and art reflecting life, between reality and fantasy. Like Bertha, Isabel's self-awareness is presented as unbearable, potentially leading her to revert to her previous state rather than enacting change, rendering the epiphany futile.

Part 1: "Bliss" as a Narrative of Psychological Defense

Arvid Frederick Nyholm, *At Her Vanity*, oil on board, 1895

"Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise" (Gray, line 14). This story asks, is it better to know or to live in blissful denial? It is often a welcome relief to turn a blind eye, to escape into fantasy from time to time, to embellish the narrative of our own life and imagine our relationships as better than they really are. But what happens when we are confronted with reality after seeking refuge in fantasy? And as readers, how do we interpret a narrative of denial? Mansfield was highly attuned to this human tendency of denial and sublimation. Her short story "Bliss" foregrounds marriage as a site of tension where fantasy and reality conflict. While Bertha initially perceives herself as a "happy wife, delighting in her marriage" (Pracha 177), the narrative undermines this perception, revealing a profound lack of understanding and connection between Bertha and Harry. Mansfield's stories often feature couples whose relationship seems marked by a refusal of intimacy or a failure to measure up

to expectations; the tension arises because one partner is not a party to the fantasy that the other constructs around the relationship.

"Bliss" presents a complex psychological portrait of Bertha Young, who constructs an image of a perfect life and marriage through self-delusion and fantasy. Bertha is preparing for a dinner party, full of giddy anticipation. Her "bliss" is not diminished by her failures to connect with her baby, with her husband Harry and even with herself, oscillating between near-hysterical excitement and self-admonishing repression. The guests arrive, composed of Mr and Mrs Norman-Knight (or Mug and Face) in their animalistic garb, Eddie Warren with his affected speech and insights about poetry, and the mysterious femme fatale-like Pearl Fulton. Bertha delights in their presence and shares what she interprets as a special moment of connection with Pearl Fulton as they gaze out at the moonlit pear tree, before she catches her husband and Pearl in passionate embrace and promising to meet. As Bertha's psychological defenses come crashing down around her and she sees the reality of her life clearly for the first time, she runs back to look at the pear tree and the story ends on an enigmatic note of irresolution.

Many critics have written about Mansfield's concern with the state of the self and explorations of the fragmented nature of inner life in modernist terms (Casertano 100, Edensor 82), and "Bliss" exemplifies this by focusing on Bertha's internal world and its disconnect from her external environment (Butterworth-McDermott 57). Unreliable narration and free indirect speech give the reader access to Bertha's subjective experience while simultaneously hinting at the "gap between Bertha's perception and the reality that she chooses not to recognise" (Pracha 181). Her seemingly "childlike interpretation of events" and "abiding naïvety" make the reader question the accuracy of her internal state (Pracha 174). This creation of an internal ideal mirrors the way fantasy functions in other Mansfield stories, often clashing with a more mundane or difficult reality (Hankin 466). Her characters

frequently exhibit self-delusion and engage in “self-exploration or self-creation and self-delusion” as they grapple with the complex and often contradictory nature of the self (Edensor 89). This tension reaches its climax in a moment of shattered illusion. Ultimately, “Bliss” depicts a cataclysmic fall when these defenses fail, forcing Bertha to confront not only the true nature of her marriage but also the extent of her self-deception.

I will first engage with previous research on the meaning of “Bliss”, showing that it is more than a story of queer desire and highlighting instead the tension between fantasy and reality. I will conduct a psychological reading of “Bliss” as a narrative of psychological defenses against an unknowable adult world, in which patriarchal repression and Bertha’s need to connect lead to coping mechanisms of fantasy-making, attachment-seeking, embellishment and denial. At the end, the psychological defenses are broken: the marriage as she knows it has ended. The “fall” is rendered cataclysmic due to allusions to Genesis throughout, likening it to the fall of Man: the tree is now inaccessible and Bertha can never return to her prelapsarian innocence.

1.1: Beyond a Queer Reading

There are two main schools of thought about the meaning of the moment of revelation, after Bertha witnesses her husband and Pearl's embrace and understands that they have been having an affair. One school of thought argues that Bertha realises that the special feeling she shares with Pearl was actually simply desire for Harry; the other argues that Bertha loves Miss Fulton and is crushed to see that Miss Fulton acts upon heterosexual desire, which Bertha herself does not feel. By the story's end, it is clear that Pearl Fulton does not share Bertha's "unique bliss" as Bertha believes. A queer reading suggests that Bertha's dismay at the end is that of unrequited love or desire towards Pearl. Two of the early articles on "Bliss" that are still influential and frequently cited today are from Helen Nebeker (1972) who conducts a queer reading and writes about the homosexual implications of the pear tree, and Judith Neaman (1986) who offers answers with an intertextual reading based on *The Bible* and Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Indeed, the early writings on "Bliss" from the 1970s and 1980s engaged mostly in detective work based around decoding the symbolism and intertexts to find hidden meanings, and this short story does lend itself well to such an analysis: as the Bible invites exegesis, "Bliss" invites decoding through associations and allusions.

Helen Nebeker's "The Pear Tree: Sexual Implications in Katherine Mansfield's *Bliss*" (1972) is a foundational article that offered the first in-depth queer reading of this short story. Nebeker examines the overt and covert sexual undertones, and argues in favour of Bertha's bisexuality. Regarding the question whether Bertha is in love with Pearl, Mansfield's narration states that Bertha "had fallen in love with her, as she always did fall in love with beautiful women who had something strange about them" (99). The reader may be inclined to take this expression figuratively, as one can fall in love with a work of art, but Nebeker invites us to treat it literally. Through this lens, Bertha's "bliss" can be interpreted as erotic

anticipation for being in close quarters with the woman she desires, and the shared moment looking at the pear tree is their emotional climax. Nebeker argues that Bertha has had other female infatuations, or "women finds" (103) and that Bertha satisfies her homosexual desire through Harry having an affair with these women. Accordingly, Nebeker sustains that Bertha's despair at the end of the story is out of jealousy, because she wanted Pearl and it was Harry who seduced her.

Judith Neaman draws parallels between "Bliss" and two textual sources: *The Bible* (in particular "Genesis") and Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Neaman's parallel with *Twelfth Night* puts forward that in both stories, "youthful and innocent love is homosexual, as if both authors were chronicling the normal English schoolgirl stage of maturation" (Neaman 249) but the comparison is feeble, as there is very little similarity in plot and characterisation between these narratives. The comparison to *The Bible* is much more interesting. The thematic relevance of "Genesis" is perhaps clearest in the symbolism of the pear tree, which is like the tree of knowledge of good and evil; the fruit it bears is the knowledge of carnal desire. The pear tree can also be read in relation to Saint Augustine, who stole from a pear tree for the sake of stealing rather than from temptation; this sin does not stem from a desire for forbidden fruit or Knowledge of Good and Evil, it stems from a desire for the thrill of sinning. Harry's desire for Pearl could be read as such; while Bertha sees her life as a perfect pear tree, Harry shakes and disrupts it and selfishly takes the fruit (Bertha's innocence) for the very sake of it.

This essay reads that Bertha may indeed be infatuated with Pearl, but that this is not the driving force of her excitement. Butterworth-McDermott argues that in relation to "the complex fissure in Bertha's psyche", the tension is not between heterosexuality and homosexuality, but between her fantasy world and the reality she refuses to see (56). Butterworth-McDermott names the fairytale as the "obvious literary predecessor" for

Bertha's shift from innocence to knowledge, both sexual and psychological (57). Exploring "Bliss" as a modernist fairy tale, she suggests that Bertha is on an identity quest where she tries to make the world "conform to her vision", unwilling to see uncomfortable truths (56). She links the fairytale with this short story in terms of plot structure, characterisation and psychological resonance, in that Harry, Pearl and the guests all "reflect the adult world which Bertha does not understand" (Butterworth-McDermott 56). Bertha's fantasy world is constructed through self-narration, corrections to maintain the fantasy pure and free of sexual allusion. Her own baby is like a doll she wants to play with; She is playing house and sees her dinner party like a play by Chekhov in which the guests are actors playing roles. When she sees Harry and Pearl together, they are essentially breaking the script of Bertha's fantasy.

The story can also be read as a social satire. Bertha describes the guests as "people keen on social questions – just the kinds of friends they wanted" (100) but ironically they are all so detached from reality that their only social question is "Why is the middle class so stodgy – so utterly without a sense of humour!" (101). Mug and Face are thrilled that the "stodgy" middle class does not understand their tastes because it sets them apart from the general population. The adults intrude onto Bertha's fairy tale fantasy so she transposes them into animals (Butterworth-McDermott 61), depicting Mrs Norman Knight as an intelligent monkey: she wears "an orange coat with a procession of black monkeys round the hem" (101) and has a habit of "tucking something into her bodice – as if she kept a tiny, secret hoard of nuts there" (105). The guests' chatter is all about the bizarre and the monstrous: Eddie Warren recounts a "bizarre figure with the flattened head crouching over the lit-tle wheel" (102). Face describes "the weirdest little person. She'd not only cut off her hair, but she seemed to have taken a dreadfully good snip off her legs and arms and her neck" (104), and Eddie brings up "a dreadful poem about a girl who was violated by a beggar without a nose in a lit-tle wood" (107). The guests' chatter is monkey-like in its noisiness and

incoherence, and “threaded through as it is with images of rape, mutilation, and sexual predation, reveals their obsessions” (Butterworth-McDermott 62). Bertha “refuses to acknowledge the horror of these statements, dismissing them as ‘amusing’. Like Little Red, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty, she is too trusting, believing that the disguised witches and wolves are really the good people they claim to be” (Butterworth-McDermott 62).

1.2: Repression, Sublimity and Desire

One layer of Bertha's fantasy defenses may be explained by a need to repress her sensuality to conform to societal expectations. She experiences shame around sexuality and is caught between wanting to express herself and needing to repress it. As a solution to this tension, she sublimates her surroundings to elevate them above the realm of base desire. In an attempt to reconcile her feelings of sexual desire with her role as housewife, she pours her sensuality into her dinner party preparations.

1.2.1. Sexual Shame: "How Idiotic Civilization Is"

Bertha's repression of sexual feeling can be read in light of post-Victorian gender norms. In the Victorian era female sexual desire was often medicalised, pathologised and moralised, seen as dangerous or a source of shame. Indeed, the way Harry speaks about his daughter ("I never see her. I shan't have the slightest interest in her until she has a lover" (106)) may reflect how Bertha had been brought up by her own father and the patriarchal expectations imposed upon her. Butterworth-McDermott claims that "Mansfield deliberately manipulates Bertha's quest for happily-ever-after to call attention to how a Victorian childhood and patriarchal expectations might repress the sexuality of the modern woman" (57). Indeed, Bertha is shown to have a fear of sensual and sexual expression: the repetition of the verb "wanted" in "she wanted to run instead of walk" (95), "she only wanted to get in touch" (98) and "she wanted to cry" (102) (amongst many more) shows the urges and desires upon which she does not act, while the repetition in "she hardly dared to breathe" (96) and "she hardly dared to look into the cold mirror" (96) amongst others shows her fear of giving space to her sensuality, of recognising herself as a sexual subject. When she compares her body to a "rare, rare fiddle" which must be kept "shut up in a case", she immediately corrects herself with

"No, that bit about the fiddle is not quite what I mean" (95) because the comparison of a female body to an instrument whose essence is to be played has sexual connotations which she refuses. Nebeker and others have suggested that what Bertha suppresses is homosexual desire, but it may also just be general sexual desire that she suppresses because of shame and her upbringing. When she looks into the mirror and sees "a woman, radiant, with smiling, trembling lips, with big, dark eyes" (96) the apprehension is of her own state of excitement; she struggles to face her sexual self.

Bertha is charmed by the guests' eccentricity because they embody a pseudo-rebellion against patriarchal civilisation upheld by the "stodgy" middle class, which is a sentiment Bertha identifies with but is too repressed to act upon. However, the guests' rebellion is without any real risk: they play at being exceptions and breaking taboos, but they are still very much normal middle-class people who just like to appear avant-garde. Like actors in a play, it is cathartic to Bertha: she can enjoy the idea from a safe distance. She seems to realise that she is suppressed, exclaiming "How idiotic civilization is!" (95) but she cannot quite free herself from it. She wants to be "modern" as opposed to Victorian, but the irony is she still has figurative shackles from her Victorian childhood. This psychological split is underlined by her perception of sexuality as savage and civilisation as sexless: this dichotomy is embodied by the "grey cat, dragging its belly" and the "black one, its shadow" which give Bertha "a curious shiver" and make her stammer that they are "creepy things" (100). Bertha cannot conciliate being both civilised and sexual.

1.2.2. Desire and Domesticity

The story pays close attention to the interiority of the self, body, and home as "sites of secrecy" (Dickson 11). This is a marriage intruded upon through adultery by a third party, Pearl Fulton; however, the intrusion into Bertha's perceived marital bliss is caused by Bertha

herself, since she is the one who brings Pearl into her home and marriage. The narrative uses symbolic foreshadowing, such as the leitmotif of the cats wherein the black cat follows the grey one and Bertha observes, "stammering, unsure and unable to articulate the implications of what she witnesses" (Pracha 179). This inability to articulate her feelings is a recurring trait, positioning her as a "cipher in a grown-up world" where she lacks agency and is solely reactive (Pracha 179).

The domestic aspect of the story lends itself to a feminist reading. Mansfield's stories are often read as feminist critique because they deal with unsatisfactory marriages and the role of the housewife. In a letter to her cousin, Mansfield writes "I am so keen upon all women having a definite future – are not you? The idea of sitting and waiting for a husband is absolutely revolting" (Hansen 114). In a letter to her then lover John Middleton Murry, Mansfield writes "I want things. Shall I ever have them?... – all this life drying up, like milk, in an old breast" (Hansen 115). Here we see Mansfield's preoccupation with finding the words to express desire, so as to physically express it out of her body before she grows old; the expression of her desires takes the form of breast milk, as a life-giving substance. Bertha can be read as the embodiment of Mansfield's fears: she has no future outside of the home, and does indeed wait at home for her husband; she also does not express her desires, and though she is both physically and by name "Young", her desires seem to live and die in her bosom, unable to be expressed.

Bertha tries to reassure herself constantly that she does feel the marital bliss promised to her, that her marriage, house, baby and fashionable friends are enough for happiness. She must repress anything that would go against this conventional view of happiness, such as homosexuality as some would argue, or dissatisfaction. Bertha is able to transmute her excitement about seeing Pearl into joy at fulfilling her housewifely duties. She can connect with Pearl while reassuring herself that she has "modern, thrilling friends, writers and

painters and poets or people keen on social questions – just the kinds of friends they wanted" (100). She reassures herself that her aesthetic is right and that she would fit right in with normal trendy society: "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" (104). In this way, she has created a fantasy that allows her to both express and suppress herself in order to safely exist within the "civilization" she calls idiotic.

1.3: Fantasy as a Psychological Defense

We first take Bertha's exclamation of "How idiotic civilization is!" at face value, but it soon becomes apparent that it is not only societal expectations shaping Bertha's suppression but also Harry's repressive presence. I will argue that a deeper layer of Bertha's fantasy defenses has to do with psychological distress due to Harry being abusive: fantasy would be a coping mechanism to endure such distress, and Bertha seeks attachment with Pearl to relieve the loneliness of her situation.

1.3.1. An Abusive Husband?

Bertha's relationship with her husband is clearly lacking in intimacy and far from perfect, despite her assurance that they were "as much in love as ever, and they got on together splendidly and were really good pals" (100). If anything, this anticlimactic tricolon decreasing in conviction conveys Bertha's faltering attempt to convince herself of the strength of their relationship. Bertha is disconnected from Harry both emotionally and sexually. The emotional disconnection is immediately made evident by the telephone call, when he gives orders for dinner and she tries to share her heightened emotional state only to be "rapped out" at (98) when she "only wanted to get in touch with him for a moment" (98). Here we see another instance of self-censorship: "She couldn't absurdly cry: 'Hasn't it been a divine day!'" (98), so she suppresses the urge, and then when she thinks to herself "how more than idiotic civilization was" (98) it seems that "civilization" here stands in for "Harry". Harry has informed her behaviour to the point of self-censorship.

Harry does not see Bertha as she is: we learn that "it had worried her dreadfully at first to find that she was so cold" (108) (implying that it is Harry who finds Bertha cold) but I would argue that Bertha is actually not cold at all, and that her description of herself as frigid

shows her conditioning. Indeed, there is too much evidence of sensuality in Bertha's behaviour and feelings to be frigid: she "experiences bliss, she resents the restrictions of a society that demands she "cage" her body, she enjoys her child's flesh and resents the woman who withdraws it from her" (Neaman 250). This conviction that she is frigid comes from outside of herself, not only from the "idiotic civilization" that demands that she suppress her feelings, that would call her "drunk and disorderly" (95) or "hysterical" (96) if she were to express her bodily pleasure and sensuality, but also from Harry. It seems that Harry deems a woman's frigidity on the basis of her sexual desire for him, rather than her own sensual bodily experience; indeed, he has no such judgement of Pearl, who outwardly seems far more cold than Bertha. Harry does not want to know about Bertha's sensuality if it does not serve his own sexual gratification.

Perhaps the biggest clue that Harry is abusive lies in how he has permeated her opinions and thoughts. Returning to Bertha's sentence that "it had worried her dreadfully at first to find that she was so cold, but after a time it had not seemed to matter" (108), the way she "finds out" is not through her own deductions but rather because Harry would have told her that she is "cold"; innocent and naive as she is, Bertha would not have called herself cold. She cannot explain to herself that she actually has a distaste for sex with Harry himself. She adopts his opinions as her own in a sort of Stockholm Syndrome-like survival strategy. The same goes for her repressed feelings when she starts to laugh and suppresses it with "'No, no. I'm getting hysterical'" (96), as hysteria is typically an oppressive patriarchal view of women's emotional expression. As such, when Bertha blames "civilization" for not being able to run and jump with joy or enjoy her own child, we may wonder whether it is really civilisation or actually Harry who sets these rules and has a controlling role in her life. It would make sense that she blames civilisation instead of Harry if previous experience taught

her that blaming Harry would exacerbate his abuse; the equivalency of civilisation with Harry stems from learned experience and danger avoidance.

As for Bertha's lack of interest in sex with Harry not seeming to "matter", I offer two interpretations. The first is that Harry does not care that Bertha does not enjoy sex because her pleasure does not factor in for him: she fulfils her marital duty anyway and he gets his husbandly needs met, possibly by means of marital rape, which indeed was not criminalised until 1991 in England. This may explain how they have a child together despite her having never experienced sexual desire for him. The second, less horrific and more plausible interpretation is that Harry does not mind Bertha's lack of sexual interest because he is getting his needs met elsewhere, implying having an affair, if not several. Following this interpretation, the rest of the paragraph would suggest that Bertha is aware of these affairs: "They were so frank with each other – such good pals. That was the best of being modern" (108). They have a "modern" marriage in which Harry can sleep with other women and be "frank" about it with Bertha. In this scenario, Bertha's shock at the end of the story would not be the discovery that Harry is having an affair with a woman, but rather that the intimacy Bertha experienced with Pearl has been sullied and that her perception of the sublimated moment was an illusion.

Further questioning about Harry's abusive behaviour stems from his misogynistic reactions: as a father he has no interest in his daughter, saying "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" (106). This shows that he does not see a woman in her personhood, only defining her by the man with whom she has sexual relations or the husband who gives her a social status.. Even his own child is of no consequence to him due to her gender, nor does he take any pleasure in parenting. Furthermore, his way of pretending that he has no interest in Pearl Fulton takes the shape of insulting generalisations, calling her "dullish, and 'cold like all

blonde women'" (99). There has not been much critical attention drawn to what Harry says about his daughter. Yet Bertha is almost childlike around him and needs his validation: she almost cries when he compliments her souffle. The parallel between mother and daughter is intriguing: perhaps Bertha, like her daughter, would become more interesting in Harry's eyes if she had a lover.

Additionally, Harry picks fights because of his ego: his "passion for fighting – for seeking in everything that came up against him another test of his power and of his courage" (103) can be read as a tendency for verbal abuse. He is impatient, "shaking the silver box and saying abruptly: 'Egyptian? Turkish? Virginian?'" (107). He has a narcissistic sense of self-importance: "he would make a great point of coming into the drawing-room, extravagantly cool and collected" and "would pretend to himself" that his short absence "mattered beyond measure" (102). Bertha claims that they get along well, but she is also an unreliable narrator; she is trying to convince herself as much as the reader that her marriage is as perfect as she imagines her life to be.

1.3.2. Trauma Theory and Fantasy

Bertha actively engages in fantasy-making, sublimation, denial and idealisation as ways to cope with the adult world. This self-delusion is portrayed not only as naive optimism but as a fundamental strategy for navigating her reality, particularly her emotional and marital landscape. Following the previous analysis of Harry as abusive, the following analysis explores Bertha's psychological drives that led her to absorb his opinions into her own and create a fantasy world for herself.

First, a review of the foundational ideas behind fantasy as a psychological defense: Sigmund Freud laid the groundwork by discussing fantasy as a way the mind manages

internal conflict and unfulfilled desires. In his essay “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” (1908), Freud described fantasy as a way of wish fulfillment and as a defense against reality, especially when reality is traumatic or disappointing. Building on these ideas, Melanie Klein further emphasised in *Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms* (1946) that fantasy can both structure inner life and serve to ward off anxiety, especially in relation to good and bad internal objects. The pear tree and also Pearl could be understood as good objects, idealised and clung to. Bertha’s intense emotional state, her sense of “bliss” and her tendency to interpret the world through a dreamlike, symbolic lens indicate a defensive use of fantasy, especially as a response to internal conflict and emotional deprivation. Bertha’s repeated insistence that her life is “perfect”, despite mounting evidence to the contrary, suggests a dissociative split between her internal idealised world and her actual lived experience. This aligns with Freudian and later Kleinian understandings of fantasy as a protective structure that fends off distressing reality.

Bertha’s “bliss” feels infantile and excessive, a kind of euphoric manic defense to ward off depression or psychic collapse. It functions like a buoy keeping her afloat in her possibly abusive marriage and unmet emotional needs . Her relationship to reality is fragile: she interprets others’ behaviours to match the tone of her fantasy world, showing what Donald Winnicott calls a “False Self adaptation” in *Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self* (1960). She has constructed a version of her life that seems delightful and safe but is disconnected from emotional authenticity. Winnicott argued that in emotionally constraining environments, individuals may form a False Self to meet external expectations, thus masking their True Self which remains unspeakable or unacceptable. Bertha’s overidentification with “bliss”, an unrealistically sustained emotional high, can be seen as a defense against a lack of attuned mirroring, especially from Harry. Her inability to fully

express this excitement for fear of social or marital consequences mirrors Winnicott's idea of the True Self being suppressed to maintain social acceptability.

In modern trauma psychology, Bessel van der Kolk discusses dissociation and fantasy as coping mechanisms for overwhelming trauma in *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014). Though not focused exclusively on fantasy in the psychoanalytic sense, he addresses how trauma survivors may retreat into inner worlds for psychological survival. In light of this recent work on trauma theory and attachment, we can read Bertha's heightened state of excitement as a nervous system response to chronic trauma in which the parasympathetic nervous system is in a chronic state of activation. Indeed, Bertha's state of heightened excitement, the "shower of sparks" in her belly (96) and the urge to "run instead of walk" (95), correspond to the physical effects of nervous activation. The state of "fight or flight" causes increased adrenaline and dopamine, a faster heartbeat, increased blood flow to the extremities, frantic energy and the urge to move, so that the body is ready to fight or flee the potential danger.

Another symptom of trauma is the difficulty for self-narration due to the fragmentation of the self. The recurring use of ellipses and interruptions in Bertha's narration, such as "But then –" interrupted by the guests' conversation (108), can be read as omissions which highlight Bertha's inability to articulate her urges or suspicions about her marriage and Pearl. Bertha also has a tendency to repeat certain words, sometimes for emphasis such as "ardently! Ardently! (108) and "they were dears – dears –" (104); sometimes stammeringly as though looking for the right words for how Pearl's cool touch can "fan – fan – start blazing – blazing – the fire of bliss" (103), which shows her difficulty to articulate her sensation. Bertha craves connection but can rarely have it with herself and her body, because she cannot allow herself to feel fully; she rarely has it with her baby because Nanny has usurped her role as mother; she lacks it with her husband, because she cannot share with him what she's

feeling; finally she imagines she has it with Pearl Fulton, whom she idealises until the moment of revelation.

1.3.3. Idealisation: “Creatures of Another World”

Bertha’s view of Pearl is not based on reality, but on idealisation, a core defense mechanism in object relations theory. In *A Revised Psychopathology of the Psychoses and Psychoneuroses* (1941) Ronald Fairbairn describes idealisation as a way to defend against abandonment and rejection: the psyche creates an ideal object to feel secure. By elevating Pearl above base animal urges, and then imagining herself and Pearl as unique “creatures of another world” (106) in her fantasy space, Bertha thus elevates herself above the reality that includes trauma and alienation. In *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (1975) Otto Kernberg explores idealisation and devaluation as part of primitive defense mechanisms in borderline structures; though not implying pathology in Bertha, she does psychologically split pure and impure, which in Pearl takes the shape of idealising her and then devaluing her. Pearl is constructed in Bertha’s mind as mysterious and almost sacred, stripping her of agency and sexuality. This idealisation reflects Bertha’s own dissociation from her sexual self: Pearl becomes a kind of psychic double, embodying everything Bertha yearns to express but cannot integrate. Pearl is like her reflection, a way to know herself. They are a pair: Neaman suggests that “the pear tree of “Bliss” may be Mansfield’s conscious or unconscious pun on pair . . . for the story is itself full of pairs and even possibly alter egos” (248).

Bertha indeed seems to view Pearl Fulton as a mirror to herself. Bertha does not let herself know herself; she feels old and young at the same time: “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” (96). Pearl can be seen as a “cold mirror” to Bertha, a way to see herself beyond the veil of fantasy. She sees in Pearl a kindred

spirit, even describing her in similar terms to her own reflection: “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” (103).

However, the connection that Bertha imagines between them is indeed only in her imagination: the repetition of “as if” suggests assumption, at odds with the next sentence: “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 . . . was feeling just what she was feeling” (104). Perhaps Bertha hopes that if someone external to her feels it too, she can understand what to do with it and they can express it to each other. When Bertha asks herself “And the others?” (104), wondering whether the guests share this connection, the following snippets of conversation are so vapid and absurd that Bertha deduces “No, they didn’t share it” (104). It is in her silence that Pearl is mysterious, and this mystery creates a possibility of connection, a space in which Bertha might express her thoughts. Bertha’s view of Pearl Fulton as ethereal, sexless, and sacred is an act of idealisation, a defensive splitting that denies Pearl’s sexual agency and complexity. Nebeker argues that Bertha is drawn to Pearl because their connection has “none of the ugly sexual overtones” (549) that men experience in their animalistic lust, as exemplified by the cats. Pearl represents purity, the sacred, a feminine spiritual connection. Bertha wants to draw Harry into her world of sublime fairytale purity, to “assimilate the ‘Other’ that is Harry” (Butterworth-McDermott 66) because she cannot unite both of those aspects within herself.

Bertha does not seem to know Pearl well: “What Miss Fulton did, Bertha didn’t know” (99). We know that Bertha has a type that she is drawn to: “she always did fall in love with beautiful women who had something strange about them” (99). One possible reason for Bertha finding Pearl “strange” is that Pearl would understandably act reservedly around her lover’s wife in their own home, probably anxious to avoid detection, acting aloof and not

very talkative. This may in fact be the driving reason behind Pearl asking to see the garden, because she wants to escape the pressure of being in the room with them; then as they are standing there looking at the tree, Pearl may be experiencing moral distress, or discomfort being around Bertha, while Bertha gets near-sexual gratification from being in close contact with Pearl (106). Another reason may be that Pearl only has "something strange" in Bertha's eyes because Bertha puts her on a pedestal as a mysterious object. In this sense Bertha resembles the typical film noir male protagonist who becomes obsessed with the femme fatale; like Kim Novak's character, Judy, in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), Pearl is not quite human in Bertha's eyes until she is revealed at the end. Bertha imagines a connection, but really she objectifies Pearl just as a man would who "must find out what that something is" (99), like a painter wanting to capture his muse's mystery on a canvas. Here, projection is also evident: Bertha projects her own repressed sexuality and desire for intimacy onto Pearl by making her the epitome of purity and mysticism. This dynamic is also a form of eroticised sublimation: Bertha channels her desire into aesthetic and spiritual terms because to express female sexual desire directly would cause her intense internalised shame.

The text suggests that Bertha has a cycle of idealisation and devaluation of her "women finds". She is excited "while her women finds were new and mysterious" (103) but becomes disillusioned when the woman does not live up to this idealisation. In Pearl's case, Bertha devalues her when she discovers Pearl has had carnal knowledge (of Harry), Pearl is debased, sullied, fallen from Madonna to whore. No longer special and shiny and silver, she is seen as animalistic like the grey cat, close to the ground rather than floating above it like the moon. In this way, Bertha is just as bad as Harry: she does not see Pearl as her own person but as a mystery to solve, an oyster to crack open and acquire the rare pearl inside, something divine that will join her in the loneliness of her fantasy world. Just as Harry does

not see Bertha as she really is (thinking her cold), Bertha does not see Pearl (thinking her divine). As for Pearl, she remains unknowable to the reader, who only receives Bertha's unreliable narration and Harry's misogynistic description.

Bertha's fantasy climaxes in wishfully thinking that Pearl feels what she herself feels and has given a "sign" (106), that in their shared moment they are "understanding each other perfectly, creatures of another world" (106). The description of this moment of rare connection through Bertha's focalisation is heavily laden with allusion to sexual climax with the terms "quivering" and "dripping" (106). For Bertha, sexual gratification lies in spiritual connection, beyond physical union. Their moment by the pear tree is Bertha's attempt to create a shared, transcendent intimacy, but one that is safe from the corrupting influence of the sexual act.

1.4: The Moment of Revelation

The moment of revelation is inscribed in instances of foreshadowing throughout the text, which prime the reader to suspect that something will be revealed. The image of the two cats slinking through the garden foreshadows the lustful embrace that Bertha will witness between Harry and Pearl, as her "curious shiver" and "stammered" response hints at something more monumental than a pair of cats to elicit such a physical reaction (100). Additionally, Bertha's reflection in the mirror seems to be "waiting for something… divine to happen… that she knew must happen… infallibly" (96); the vagueness of this statement full of ellipses leaves space for the reader to speculate as to what might happen, though Bertha seems blissfully unaware that the revelation may be to her detriment.

1.4.1. The Collapse of Defenses

The moment Bertha witnesses Harry and Pearl in an embrace marks the collapse of her psychological defenses, and with them, the fantasy world that has structured her emotional life. Bertha can no longer idealise Pearl and project her sexual shame on her, as she is faced with evidence of Pearl as a sexual being. Bertha's reaction of stunned silence and fixation on the pear tree suggests a moment of psychic trauma, an encounter with reality that cannot be metabolised emotionally or symbolically. Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) explains that such a collapse of symbolic structure can render the subject temporarily speechless, fragmented, or dissociated. The last of several ellipses in the story, "and she saw . . . Harry with Miss Fulton's coat" (109), occurs just before the description of Harry and Pearl together and marks a moment of speechlessness and psychological fragmentation. Bertha is momentarily unable to narrate what she sees. Her shock is broken by Eddie and then the guests saying goodbye, during which Bertha is passive and the narration lacks any reaction to what she has witnessed, which suggests dissociation.

She finally breaks out of this dissociation after Pearl's murmured comment "Your lovely pear tree!" (109) which seems to hit Bertha like a cruel mockery. Pearl's words echo "Your lovely pear tree – pear tree – pear tree!" (109) as though reverberate through Bertha like a physical shock, bringing her back to reality after dissociating. What seemed to be precious, the shared moment with Pearl, has been subverted into a terrible lie.

In "Fortifications of Desire", Armine Kotin Mortimer reads what she coins as the "second story" in Bliss, namely, the underlying narrative or "truth" that is revealed at the end and makes the reader need to re-read it with a new understanding. Mortimer first applies this term to several short stories by Guy de Maupassant, a 19th-century French author and pioneer of short stories, explaining that "the second story is necessary to the intelligibility of the first" (276). In "Bliss", the first story is given by the narrative focalised through Bertha: she believes that she shares her bliss with Pearl, she believes she knows her husband well and that her husband dislikes Pearl, and she sees the pear tree as a representation of her perfect life. Then this first story collapses when she sees her husband embracing Pearl, and the second story emerges. The second story, which has been taking place in parallel with the first, is that there has been a serpent in her Garden of Eden; her husband has been having an affair with Pearl, the shared moment with Pearl was an illusion, and the pear tree is a cruel representation of her naive ignorance.

The revelation confirms that Bertha is an unreliable narrator. Throughout the story, Bertha questions her own narration ("'No, that bit about the fiddle is not quite what I mean', she thought" (95)); she also acknowledges that there is no evidence of the connection she imagines between Pearl and herself ("she never doubted for a moment that she was right, and yet what had she to go on? Less than nothing" (105)). The revelation however collapses all remaining reliability: she was clearly wrong about many things of which she seemed so certain, which a second reading would reveal. For example, when she sees Harry offering

Pearl cigarettes, Bertha "realized that [Pearl] not only bored him; he really disliked her" and that Pearl "felt it, too, and was hurt" (107). Of course, Bertha's interpretation is completely incorrect, and Harry and Pearl's gruffness has more to do with concealing their affair than actual dislike. This distance between Bertha's interpretations (the first story) and the truth (the second story) makes the reader doubt all that has been said through Bertha's focalisation, and need to go through the story again to understand it fully.

1.4.2. The Pear Tree

The story ends on the pear tree "as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still" (110). Bertha initially saw her life as perfect as the pear tree because "she had everything" (100), but a key property of a tree in bloom is that it does not last; its beauty and perfection are transient, as ephemeral as her "bliss". So the pear tree in bloom did not actually represent her life but rather how she felt about her life when in denial and self-delusion. The irony is that her bliss is even more short-lived than the blossoms. In this final moment as Bertha theatrically rushes to the window, the pear tree has not changed but her perception of her life has, so the tree is solid evidence that her perception was wrong.

The setting of the garden is not insignificant; although the action takes place inside the house, the garden and its pear tree carry a presence in the story. The moment of revelation takes place against the backdrop of a garden in many of Mansfield's stories (Ascari 40). Ascari argues that the gardens stand on the one hand as a "site of revelation" for the epiphany to happen, and on the other as a metaphor for the psyche, where "the formal section of the gardens – where everything has been tamed and labelled – is our conscious psyche, while the bush, lying in the shadow, stands for the unconscious" (42). The garden also represents the possibility of "another world" (106): Harry and the guests belong to one world "where personality and status are mediated through possessions", and while Bertha "trades in its

currency" by hosting the dinner party, she longs for a world of "authentic relationships and unmediated intimacy" (Hunter 83).

The garden is a space both literally and figuratively outside of the home. It can be linked to what Hansen calls "the enchanted, unnameable, utopic space that exists for women exterior to the patriarchal home" (Hansen 116). Indeed, it is only Bertha and Pearl who look out into the garden together, "creatures of another world" in which Harry has no place (160). Harry's presence can be read as potentially disrupting a female heterotopia: "the displacing quality of the queer sublime has the potential for the creation of a heterotopic safe space, if only fleetingly" (Watson 87). The notion of heterotopia applies when taking into consideration Bertha's idealisation of Pearl as pure and sacred: Foucault writes in "Heterotopias" ["Des Espaces Autres"] of spaces "still nurtured by the hidden presence of the sacred" ["animées encore par une sourde sacralisation"] (Foucault 2), citing the garden as the oldest example of heterotopia "with a space still more sacred . . . like an umbilicus, the navel of the world at its center" ["avec un espace plus sacré encore que les autres qui était comme l'ombilic, le nombril du monde en son milieu'] (Foucault 6). In Bertha's garden, the pear tree stands as the umbilicus, drawing Bertha's attention. The role of the "heterotopia of compensation" is to "create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect . . . as ours is messy" ["créant un autre espace, un autre espace réel, aussi parfait, aussi méticuleux, aussi bien arrangé que le nôtre est désordonné"] (Foucault 8); in this view it can be argued that Bertha takes solace in the perfection of her pear tree within her emotionally unsatisfactory marriage.

1.4.3. "'Oh, What is Going to Happen Now?'" (110)

The answer to Bertha's question, if there is an answer at all, is a matter of interpretation. Neaman reads the moment of revelation as the Fall of Man, following the trail of biblical

allusion throughout the story: like Eve, Bertha has “lived in a fool’s paradise which is destroyed by knowledge” and now Bertha “will desire only her husband and he will dominate her life” (243). They were supposed to be in Eden for eternity but “Lust entered the world as a result of the Fall”: they are doomed to lust, reproduction and suffering for eternity. However, one element of the story contradicts this interpretation: Bertha and Harry already have a child together, so Bertha already has carnal knowledge, she has known the trauma of childbirth and has had a maturation from maiden to mother. It does however fit Bertha’s name choice: Bertha sounds like “birther”, and Bertha Young like “birth her young”, suggesting that Harry sees her only as a birther. The “fall” means she can never return to her state of prelapsarian innocence.

The question of futurity in Bertha’s agonised cry also is hinted at with Pearl’s whispered “Tomorrow” to Harry (109). The notion of the unknown is reinforced through the narration’s blurry sense of temporality, as Bertha has wondered “How long did they stand there? . . . For ever – for a moment?” (106). This question of eternity is rendered absurd by Eddie’s take on the tomato soup poem, “Tomato soup is so dreadfully eternal” (109). This sense of permanence is solidified by the final sentence, “But the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as lovely and as still” (110) which conveys a sense of an unchanging future juxtaposed with Bertha’s suddenly changed knowledge. This underscores the irreversibility of the moment; her previous state of self-delusion, however flawed, is now unattainable. The psychological impact of this clash is profound. Bertha’s fantasy defense comes crashing down, exposing the reality of her marital incompatibility and the betrayal she had suppressed or failed to perceive. The story poses the question of whether the characters can handle the sudden, stark confrontation with unwelcome truth. The harsh clash between her idealised vision and the actual world is devastating because her sense of self and happiness was so heavily invested in the fantasy. The story ends not with resolution but with a question mark,

leaving Bertha (and the reader) on the threshold of an uncertain future, stripped of the illusions that had sustained her.

In “Bliss”, Mansfield portrays Bertha in a bourgeois marriage where fantasy and reality coexist in fragile tension, exposing Bertha’s self-deception in a collapse of defenses. The intrusion of others, particularly Pearl, underscores how a relationship is always subject to external forces. These themes of fractured intimacy, fantasy’s collapse, and emotional isolation carry forward into “Marriage à la Mode”, though they manifest differently. Whereas Bertha is shocked into a painful awareness, Isabel in “Marriage à la Mode” is charmed back into a world of pseudo-artistic hedonism and superficial performance. As the focus shifts to Isabel and William’s marriage, the question of emotional authenticity, the influence of external figures, and the role of fantasy culminates in another epiphany, not about adultery this time but about emotional disconnection. The next chapter explores how Mansfield uses intertextuality, satire, and dramatic irony to critique the romanticisation of the bohemian lifestyle and question whether awakening can lead to change, or whether the truth, once glimpsed, is too uncomfortable to accept.

Part 2: Sympathy and Seeing Clearly in "Marriage à la Mode"

Edvard Munch, *Separation*, oil on canvas, 1896.

He loves his wife and children and misses the intimacy they used to have; she loves play-acting the bohemian in his absence with her fashionable new friends. He worries about getting his children toys they will enjoy; she worries that the toys are old-fashioned. He tries to make the marriage work, she laughs "in the new way" at his attempts… It seems that the cruel wife is to blame and we must sympathise with the hapless devoted husband, but is it really that simple, or are both parties lying to themselves? Is blind hope an equal match for fantasy and illusion? In the space of nine and a half pages, Mansfield portrays a whole marriage on the brink of collapse, and the curtains close just as the reader is teetering over the edge. This is Mansfield's story, "Marriage à la Mode".

Over the course of a short weekend, the story follows William, a traditional and somewhat sentimental husband and father who works in London during the week, coming home for the weekend to his wife Isabel who has embraced a pseudo-artistic lifestyle in their countryside home. To William's dismay, Isabel has invited her new fashionable friends who take up Isabel's time, disrespect William and inhabit the house as if it were their own.

Influenced by these friends, Isabel sees William's devotion and sentimentality as old-fashioned and stifling. When William visits her and their two young children, he feels out of place among her pretentious guests and senses that he no longer belongs in her world. Despite his discomfort, he remains affectionate and sends Isabel a heartfelt letter afterward, expressing his longing and love. Isabel shares the letter with her friends and joins in their mockery of William before realising the cruelty of her behaviour: this moment of epiphany seems to promise a turning point for herself and William. Ultimately, however, she pushes aside her newfound self-awareness and returns to her superficial ways.

The title is a direct reference to William Hogarth's series of engravings from 1745, which depict an arranged marriage that collapses due to vice, corruption and adultery, but Mansfield's story hardly replicates this plot; rather it is constructed with and through many other intertexts, such as Anton Chekhov's short story "The Grasshopper" and Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary*. In those stories we find the trope of the morally good but traditional and dull husband trying to please a somewhat superficial and fashion-forward wife who is not content with the simple life. However, Mansfield's story differs from all in a crucial way: where these stories create tensions through, and climax due to, adultery with a third party, Mansfield creates tension due to a different kind of third party with whom there is no adultery, namely a group of pseudo-artistic freeloading friends. What is the effect of using the bohemian group as the 'third' to catalyse the crisis in this marriage? Why create intertexts with previous iterations of the trope but leave the ending undecided? The role of the guests is not only to be the disruptive force that catalyses the marital crisis, but also to embody this fictional fantasy world which flighty Isabel enjoys inhabiting and that William cannot quite permeate. William ruins the fantasy for the group because he is grounded in reality; it is this same quality that allows for contentment, so that he enjoyed the simple life they had together.

This story has been read as a satire of modern English bourgeois life that is "far too facile" (Meyers 248) and as a feminist tale of marital oppression (Kwiatkowska 73), amongst other readings. I argue that these readings are possible but inadequate, and that this is a story constructed around its ending; I propose an examination of an intertextual web creating a sense of crisis and leading to the epiphany in which everything changes, and yet nothing changes. The story critiques the circles that utilise art as entertainment rather than a way of communicating a certain psychological truth. By treating Isabel's life like the subject of a painting or a play, the friends turn her marriage troubles into entertainment too. The story stages a conflict between reality and fantasy, as Isabel is pulled into a world of aesthetic illusion while William remains tethered to reality.

2.1: Readerly Sympathy: Against a Feminist Reading

Mansfield is often read as a feminist writer. Some of her short stories have clear feminist arguments, and critics assign many aspects of feminist theory to them. This is amplified by Mansfield's personal writings: her published letters and journals reveal much of the writer's opinions on the society she inhabits and her thoughts on marriage as a "hopelessly insipid doctrine" (*Letters* 37). Also aligned to the question of Mansfield's feminism is the question of her sexuality; Mansfield famously had relationships with both men and women.

Such a feminist and queer reading could be applied to "Marriage à la Mode"; as Lorna Page notes in her commentary on "Marriage à la Mode" (157) Moira Morrison is "sexually ambiguous" and the trip to Paris can be read as Isabel's exploration of her sexuality with Moira (157). Various critics have encouraged a feminist reading of the story: Kwiatkowska argues that the story "serves as a critique of the institution of marriage, at least when it comes to the bourgeois" (72), and Isabel "has to sacrifice her personal freedom and

focus on fulfilling the socially programmed, centuries-old obligations of a woman, such as looking after the house, and taking care of the children and the well-being of her husband" (73). However, I would argue that this feminist perspective is not altogether supported by the short story itself; for one, the story is focalised through William for the majority of it, and the part focalised through Isabel does not give evidence that Isabel is asked to sacrifice her freedom. Kwiatkoska mentions a patriarchal society's expectations of women as mother and wife in the home, and claims that if Isabel "chooses not to comply with these expectations, she is classified as immoral and silly" (Kwiatkowska 73). I would argue that the story does not frame Isabel as immoral due to her lack of adherence to the patriarchal code, but rather she is shown to be immoral through her superficiality and her selfishness towards William. Indeed, the first time her character is introduced clearly reflects her superficial attitude towards the children's toys: she had "scrapped the old donkeys and engines and so on because they were so 'dreadfully sentimental' and 'so appallingly bad for the babies' sense of form'" (92). The irony of depriving small children of sentimentality in favour of the fashionable makes Isabel immediately unlikeable as a mother, and her later mockery of William's tenderness towards her makes her unlikeable as a wife.

I argue that Isabel's superficiality and cruelty to William makes her unsympathetic to the reader, but critics disagree on the characters' natures and to whom they assign blame. As I have shown above, feminist critics tend to view Isabel as a victim of a patriarchal society, and William as an unwitting (or not) participant to this oppression. These differing critical attitudes towards the main characters may be ascribed to the time period, and thus socio-cultural context, in which they are produced. Kleine (1963) describes William as "a generous, devoted husband" and Isabel "a shallow and affected dilettante" (Kleine 285). In contrast, Kwiatkowska (2022) adopts a more classically feminist view, portraying William unfavourably as a rigid, overbearing presence and Isabel as a victim of a patriarchal society

who is stuck in the conventional role of wife and mother. Kwiatkowska seems to give equal blame to Wiliam as to Isabel for their failing marriage, arguing that William is "preoccupied with his work" (71) and that his weekend visits "resemble an inspection" for which his wife becomes "apprehensive" and changes behaviour (72). I would argue against Kwiatkoska's reading; it seems clear that any semblance to an "inspection" is due to the group's inability, or unwillingness perhaps, to welcome and make space for William in their decadent activities. Some critics are partial to neither character; Jeffrey Meyers writes that "it is difficult to identify with – or even care about – either William or Isabel" (Meyers 248), while Justus takes a balanced stance, arguing that "though modest, a kind of pervasive *bovaryisme* permits sympathy for, as well as disapproval of, the protagonist" (15). "On the surface, the text condemns Isabel's heartlessness . . . but her ultimate suppression of this awareness, and the allusions throughout the story to daydreams and fantasy, suggest that this is a modern *Midsummer Night's Dream* in which both husband and wife are spellbound by delusion" (Malcolm and Malcolm 208). William was delusional about how lonely and unhappy Isabel was in the old house in London.

William may curry favour in terms of readerly sympathy, but he is not altogether the stoic hero that is Chekhov's Dymov in his short story, "The Grasshopper", to which many critics have drawn a comparison. William's besotted suffering and one-sided devotion to his wife casts him as a slightly pathetic Mansfieldian archetype, like other husbands and suitors in Mansfield's short stories such as Reggie in "Mr and Mrs Dove" and John Hammond in "The Stranger". His attachment to his children and his sentimentality cast him in a sympathetic light, but although the reader is partial to William, they are also frustrated by his weakness and ineffectual presence. In fact, despite the focalisation through William, he is more absent than present; in the whole first section, he is not an active agent of anything, not even of his thoughts, which meander back in nostalgic reminiscence and forwards in anxious

projection. He lacks assertion in his fatherly role, unable to save the fruits for his children, and struggles to express his feelings in person: meeting Isabel at the train station, “he thought she looked so beautiful that he had to say something” but ends up lamely commenting“‘You look very cool’” (95).

My main argument against a strictly feminist reading of this story is that through a series of oppositions, William’s traditional old-fashioned view of marital happiness is set in contrast not with female freedom and fulfilment, but with disingenuous relationships and performative freedom. William is set in contrast with Isabel and her friends through the tension between “humble affection and vulgar affectation” (Justus 15). While William thinks back to his and Isabel’s past family life together, Isabel calls such nostalgia “dreadfully stuffy and – tragic” (94). Isabel thinks forward to the future, wanting their children to grow up liking “the right things” and disparaging old institutions such as the Royal Academy (92). Even though he upholds the traditional role of breadwinner, William does not quite embody the patriarchal oppressive force. Isabel has her freedom; she has free reign of the house for five out of seven days of the week (and in fact also on weekends, since William’s presence does not affect her much), she has travelled to Paris with her new friends, she does not have to perform housewifely duties, and William does not position himself in his marriage in regard to his money, nor does he resent how Isabel spends it. This is in opposition to Stanley Burnell in “At The Bay” for example, who bemoans “the heartlessness of women! The way they took it for granted it was your job to slave away for them while they didn’t even take the trouble to see that your walking-stick wasn’t lost” (Mansfield 11). Here, free indirect speech shows the character’s resentment towards his mother-in-law, wife and daughters, while also poking fun at this man for fretting over such things as misplacing his walking-stick. William does not think of money, only of spending time with his children and wife and bringing them

happiness; he embodies the moral side of the story by valuing connection and genuine relationships with those who matter.

Another way in which "Marriage à la Mode" is not a stereotypically feminist story is that Isabel does not embody the liberated woman; in fact she ends up being a sort of "mother" to a whole other set of children. The irony of Isabel's search for freedom is that in distancing herself from the role of mother and homemaker to her children and husband, she ends up playing the role of mother and homemaker to grown adults who take advantage of her. She is shackled by her group of influence and cannot be rid of them, even when she is tempted to in her moment of epiphany: they pull her back into their fantasy world. She calls them "my children!" (97), they selfishly help themselves and eat "enormously", they cause a mess in the house and take the children's gifts for themselves. They have usurped the role of her actual children, for whom she doesn't seem to care much. When Isabel meets William at the train station and tells him that "We've all come to meet you" (95), "we all" is assumed to include the children, but it is revealed to indicate the usurping group of friends.

2.2: A Scathing Satire

"Marriage à la Mode" has prompted critics to ask whether Mansfield meant to make a satire about a group of real people, or just bourgeois pseudo-artistic groups in general. Ascari claims that there is "little doubt" about Mansfield's intention, that she meant it as a "scathing satire of a milieu she knew all too well – the group of artists and intellectuals that gathered around Lady Ottoline Morrell" (Ascari 135). This group resembles the Bloomsbury Group, who indeed were often hosted by Morrell. It may be no coincidence that the names Moira Morrison and Morrell are phonetically similar. At first glance, the story is an "obvious" satire of the groups that Mansfield frequented in London (Malcolm and Malcolm 207). These

groups have been attributed to "the bohemian literary circle which frequented Dan Rider's bookshop", that is, the group which Murry introduced to Mansfield in the early 1910s (Berkman 51). Cherry Hankin regards the story as Mansfield's "caricature of the arty set" and concludes that the source of the story is Lady Ottoline's artistic circle in Garsington (Hankin 152). The matter of William's letter being passed around and laughed at hints at the Bloomsbury group: another source writes that "given the Bloomsbury proclivity for gossip and sharing of letters, Mansfield was always aware that any 'private' correspondence would be for more public consumption" (Simpson and Harvey 2). Either way the satire shows that Mansfield "had no affection for the modern metropolitan young woman" (Berkman 180).

While there is ample evidence for Mansfield's feelings towards these groups, I will not delve into a biographical reading of the story's characters to attach them to real people. Rather, I will focus on the effect of such characters in the overall story. Isabel's guests uphold a fragile, superficial fantasy by representing an ideal of artistic life. This ideal comprises a bohemian messiness and feigned passion for painting and poetry, although without any substance or worthwhile creation, and play-acting as various fictional characters from plays. They spend the days eating and lounging and bathing, dressing up, painting on the walls like children, consuming art and literature but never actually producing any. They eat voraciously, sleep languorously and laze about, but these decadent freeloaders do not actually create. They uphold an imagined world of artistic flair and emotional detachment that flatters their egos and sustains their performance of modern freedom. They romanticise the artistic process and emulate artistic curiosity in their conversations: "Moira Morrison began wondering what colour one's legs really were underwater" (98) and outdo each other in an attempt to have the most unique and original insights: "'Do you think there will be Mondays in Heaven?' asked Bobby childishly. And Dennis murmured, 'Heaven will be one long Monday'" (99). But these comments are not further developed, and even when Isabel prompts them to create, "'I

do wish, Bill you'd paint it'" (98), they have excuses "Light's wrong,' he said rudely" (98) and never actually do the work: "But after supper they were all so tired they could do nothing but yawn until it was late enough to go to bed…" (98). The group is caricatured into absurdity. Within this illusion, Isabel finds escape and validation. William, however, cannot enter this constructed world. His presence and sincere nature puncture its delicate facade. in the eyes of Isabel's new circle, it marks him as an outsider who threatens the spell they wish to maintain.

Isabel's life is indeed "à la mode" (in fashion): she is free from convention and her own personal life seems fashionable as she engages with various art forms (if only by proxy). However, it is void of any artistic truth. The irony is that William is closer to having genuine artistic sensitivity than Isabel and her friends: through free indirect speech, his way of interpreting the world marks him as a truer artist. He appreciates having petunias in London, he poetically compares Isabel to a rosebush "petal-soft, sparkling and cool" (94), and he is inspired by scenes of nature like a bird in the sky "like a dark fleck in a jewel" (93). He delights in memories, focussing on details as though painting them: "Isabel wore a jersey and her hair in a plait; she looked about fourteen. Lord! How his nose used to peel!" (95). This paints a picture of youthful love like an idyllic painting – but still Isabel and her friends exclude him because his sensibility is old-fashioned. This dichotomy is also present in "Bliss": Harry thinks Bertha "dreadfully cold" but she is actually far more sensuous and visually attuned than Harry. In this way Bertha is in opposition with Isabel and her guests, who have all the freedom and self-expression that Bertha yearns for, but none of the artistic sensibility.

2.3: The Chekhovian Source: a Distinctive Epiphany

From its title alone, the short story also conjures up intertexts with art and theatre, namely John Dryden's 1673 comedy *Marriage à la Mode* and William Hogarth's 1743 series of engravings of the same name. Mansfield's use of the same title is misleading, and perhaps deliberately so, as I will further examine at a later point. The only common link really between those stories and this one is the idea of a mismatched marriage and the downfall of those involved: William wants simplicity and family life, while Isabel wants worldly excitement and fashion. Kwiatkowska makes a lengthy comparison of "Marriage à la Mode" to Hogarth's engravings, describing in great detail each panel of the engravings, but this is a feeble comparison because the plot, characters, and critical message are entirely different. Indeed, the moral satire and Hogarthian process of social decline cannot but look radically different in Georgian eighteenth-century enlightenment storytelling and in early-twentieth-century post-Victorian modernism.

Rather than focussing on this story's debatable Hogarthian similarities, I would take a closer look at its Chekhovian influence. Indeed, the biggest inspiration for this story, not only in plot and characters but in moral message, was inarguably Anton Chekhov and his short story "The Grasshopper". Mansfield's admiration for the Russian writer is well known and documented, and he was a great influence to the writers of the time. Virginia Woolf writes in "The Russian Point of View" that Chekhov's style evokes "bewilderment" and likens his stories to music, with their inconclusive endings "as if a tune had stopped short without the expected chords to close it" (Woolf 3). Mansfield, like Chekhov, ends her stories abruptly and leaves the reader with more questions; Woolf aptly writes that "there may be no answer to these questions, but at the same time let us never manipulate the evidence so as to produce something fitting, decorous, agreeable to our vanity" (4).

I argue that "Marriage à la Mode" is no more of a feminist story than is "The Grasshopper"; rather, Mansfield rewrites "The Grasshopper" by situating it in a milieu with which she is familiar, which allows her to perfect her own aesthetic of writing and attention to the role of fantasy, and to refine the moment of epiphany so prevalent in her short stories. Kleine (1963) accuses Mansfield of "plot plagiarism" due to the similarities with "The Grasshopper", but frames it as a manifestation of Mansfield's admiration towards the Russian writer and defends Mansfield as no more of an "imitator" than her successors (Kleine 284). Mansfield herself claims that Chekhov's story was "absorbed" into her own, and described the writerly process as follows: "We all, as writers, to a certain extent, absorb each other when we love" (*Letters* 154). Kleine notes that while this absorption was common in her earlier works, it is "unique among her mature writings" (Kleine 285).

The plot of Mansfield's story is identifiably similar to Chekhov's. In "The Grasshopper", Olga Ivanovna, a young woman popular in the artistic world, is married to Osip Dymov, a dedicated but unassuming doctor. She is drawn to the glamour and sophistication of artists and intellectuals, whom she collects as friends, though only men who seem to flatter her. Believing her husband to be dull and uninspiring, she pursues a romanticised life among the artistic elite and has a stormy affair with young artist Ryabovsky only to realise too late that Dymov's quiet dedication and love were far more valuable than the shallow admiration of her new circle. His tragic death forces Olga to confront her mistake, leaving her full of remorse by the loss of a love she had taken for granted.
There are key differences in plot between the two stories: Chekhov's takes place over a period of more than a year, whilst Mansfield's takes place over a couple of days. Chekhov traces the marriage from its start on their wedding day, through to its end at Dymov's death, whilst Mansfield begins *in media res* when there are already tensions in the relationship and ends in uncertainty over the fate of the marriage. Chekhov's features an extramarital affair

from beginning to end, while Mansfield's never features any explicit adultery. Chekhov's ends in certainty, with Dymov dead and Olga Ivanova thoroughly sorry, while Mansfield's ends in suspension, with Isabel possibly unchanged and the relationship unclear.

The most interesting similarities are in the characters' psychologies. William resembles Dymov in more ways than one: both are moral and traditional characters but unremarkable and boring in the eyes of their wife and her friends, not fitting in with the fashionable group. However, while Dymov is almost uncriticisable in his characterisation and behaviour, William is more nuanced. As well as being passive and weak, not standing up for his children when Isabel claims the fruit for herself, he is shown in the first part of the story to consider himself superior to ordinary people on the train station platform: a girl running along the train is described "'Hysterical'", and a "greasy, black-faced workman" who grins at the train makes William reflect on the "filthy life" it must be (93). From the inside of the train compartment, William finds solace in his lawyer-like paperwork; it seems that he looks down on those outside of his bubble, at the heat and grime (in further opposition to Isabel who is like a rosebush, fresh with rain). As for the women, Olga is far more Bovaryesque than Isabel: whilst Olga is materialistic and vain, wanting attention and validation, Isabel seems more enraptured by the illusion of a bohemian lifestyle surrounded by the arts, a sort of fictional artistic fantasy.

A key difference in the portrayal of the characters' psychologies lies in the moment of epiphany. Isabel is back in her old self for a moment; she finally sees her behaviour through her friends' cruelty which serves as a reflection of her own cruelty, but it is not so much a valuation of William's qualities as it is a devaluation of her own. Mansfield's writing style shows how Isabel used delusion and fantasy to reinvent herself, and slips back into her new self seamlessly. Olga Ivanova, in contrast, realises her behaviour by realising how valued Dymov was by others. It is only when Korostelev speaks highly of Dymov and sings his

praises that Olga Ivanova sees him in a new light, and it is only by reconsidering him as "an extraordinary, rare, great man" and a "future celebrity" that she realises how she had not properly seen him (Chekhov 64). So for Olga Ivanova, the problem was that she failed to see her husband as he was; for Isabel, it was that she failed to see herself as she was. While Olga Ivanova wants to envision that "life might still be beautiful and happy" now that she has changed (Chekhov 65), Isabel finds her self-awareness so unbearable that she reverts back to false ways rather than having to face her behaviour by replying to William's letter. This key difference reflects Katherine Mansfield's interest in the multiplicity of selves, and human tendency for denial and self-delusion.

2.4: Intertextuality and Fantasy

In "Bliss", fantasy is articulated through Bertha's denial and self-delusion. In "Marriage à la Mode", it is created through the friends' allusions to other fictional worlds. The references and allusions to works of art and drama read like dotted clues to the marriage's downfall: far from being chosen randomly, each one has a plot that can be linked to Isabel and William's situation. They serve as distorted reflections of Isabel's and William's relationship and suggest an impending moment of crisis, though they mislead the reader as to the cause and outcome of the crisis. The group of friends are charmed by the fictional world which they create through references to plays, paintings and poems; real life is no more serious to them than a performance, and the disintegration of their friend's marriage is treated as entertainment. They seem to imagine their own lives as art, and themselves as the subjects of portraits, plays and poems. The friends make many references to existing plays, painters, poems and more. Moira calls Isabel "an exquisite little Titania" (95) referencing the queen of the fairies in Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream", Bobby Kane offers to wear his "Nijinsky dress" (98) in reference to the Russian ballet, and Dennis narrates moments by

imitating titles of paintings such as “A Lady reading a Letter” (99) in imitation of Johannes Vermeer’s titles (Kwiatkoska 81).

The examples above reflect how the group see themselves; but they also make intertextual references about Isabel and William’s marriage. Moira suggests that they all “ought to have a gramophone for the weekends that played ‘The Maid of the Mountains’” (97). The implication of “for the weekends” isWilliam’s presence, and “The Maid of the Mountains” is a 1917 Edwardian operetta the plot of which reflects William and Isabel’s relationship but putting the husband in a negative light. They interpret everything, including each other, through theatrical characters. They don’t even see each other as real people. As such, when William’s letter shows a very real problem in their marriage, they are delighted as though it were a plot twist in a play; treat it as though it is all for their entertainment.

These references give the illusion of worldly connections and continental travel: the Frenchness of the title already signals pretension and intellectualism; the group make references to French writers, Dutch painters, Russian ballet and more; and Isabel and Moira have travelled to places of high culture such as Paris. These are in opposition with William, who is content with old-fashioned British toys and is distrustful of “Russian toys, French toys, Serbian toys – toys from God knows where” (92). But at the same time, the group is cut off from the rest of the world in terms of reality: the post brings only one letter, the one William wrote for Isabel, “not even a paper” (99). In their little cocoon, William is actually their only link to the real world; perhaps that is why they prefer when he’s not there, so they can fully submerge in their fantasy fictional world.

On the one hand, Mansfield mocks the pseudo-artists who make allusions to plays, paintings and poems. On the other hand, she herself has written a richly intertextual story: the title is a reference to Hogarth, the plot follows Chekhov’s story and the protagonists resemble Flaubert’s. Interestingly, “Marriage à la Mode” does not correlate with these three intertexts

in terms of plot, for two reasons: firstly, Isabel does not actually commit adultery. Secondly, Isabel goes unpunished for her cruel behaviour: despite the unclear ending, it seems that regardless of whether Isabel will write back or not, whether their marriage will get better or not, she does not die like Flaubert's Emma Bovary, nor does she lose her husband and suffer remorse like Chekhov's Olga. And yet there is a death, in the sense of the "death of love" (Justus 15), a notion foreshadowed by William's memory of Isabel accusing him of behaving as though she had "killed" their love (94). In the moment of epiphany, there is a theme of suffocation and death as though it is their love that has been snuffed out. Isabel experiences a "stifled feeling" as though she is suffocating, and the epithet "grave" in the description of the "grave bedroom" has a double meaning of both 'serious' and 'tomb' (101): their bedroom is the site of eternal rest for their defunct love.

2.5: Isabel's Fall to Reality

Mansfield explores the possibilities of capturing a single moment that is internally experienced. The text engages with the problematic of capturing the moment of a marriage's downfall in a plotless short story. The hallmark of Mansfield's version of the short story is the "suddenly expanded moment, minutiae magnified, rather than a world contracted" (Caserio 345). Mansfield's moment shows "the clash of the character's consciousness with the exterior world" which creates "the perception of dissonance, contradiction and psychological disruption" (Correia 25).

In "Marriage à la Mode", the moment of epiphany is likened to seeing clearly after a period of blindness, and it is this seeing clearly that is unbearable. What Isabel sees is "How vile, odious, abominable, vulgar" her friends really are (100), and "what a loathsome thing" (100) she did by showing them the letter so they could mock it. The theme of blindness is prevalent throughout the story; William laments his own blindness, cursing himself as an

"imbecile" with "God, what blindness!" (95) at not having seen that Isabel was unhappy in their life together. On the train back to London, he describes an "empty, blind-looking little town" (99); this is an odd description for a town, and could be a projection of William's own blindness towards Isabel and his feeling emotionally empty after the less than fulfilling weekend. However the epithet "empty" alongside "blind" would suggest a description of Isabel's blindness rather than Wiliam's. Indeed, Isabel is emotionally shallow and superficial and has been blind to William's unhappiness, failing to see him as valuable or remarkable in any way. In this reading, her parting words "I hardly seem to have seen you" (99) as they await the taxi that will take William away carry a heavier meaning, as she does not see his worth. In the moment of revelation, she is still unwilling to see, this time to see herself in her cruel behaviour: "She pressed her eyes with her knuckles" (100), she "pressed her face into the pillow" (101). In Chekhov's "The Grasshopper", Olga Ivanova's awakening leads her to try and make amends with her husband, all too late; for Isabel however the seeing is so unbearable that she tries to block it out. This reading would align more closely with the moment of epiphany in Chekhov's story: "the walls, the ceiling, the lamp, and the carpet on the floor, seemed to be winking at her sarcastically, as though they would say, "You were blind! You were blind!" (Chekhov 64).

Renata Casertano mentions Mansfield's preoccupation with the fragmented nature of the self and with distance, namely "the distance between subject and object, between self and non-self" (Casertano 100). This is applicable to Isabel, who is split between the "new Isabel" who is charmed by her new friends and the "old Isabel" whom we first meet in William's nostalgic flashback and appears again briefly in the epiphanic moment. Casertano mentions "the subject's sense of atomisation. . . as if the character were allowed to cast a glance at herself from above. . . only to discover the faceless nature of her identity" (Casertano 101). Indeed, this is what happens when Isabel runs up to her bedroom after laughing at William's

letter with the friends: “She pressed her eyes with her knuckles, and rocked to and fro. And again she saw them, but not four, more like forty, laughing, sneering, jeering” (100). The friends’ voices multiply tenfold as though their echoing jeers reduplicated their presence. In an attempt to stop seeing herself and hearing the echoing voices, “Isabel pressed her face into the pillow. But she felt that even the grave bedroom knew her for what she was, shallow, tinkling, vain…” (101) as though seeing herself from above. Isabel tries to close the distance between herself as a seeing subject (pressing her eyes) and herself as seen object (seen by her bedroom). Casertano writes that the “shifting distance between subject and object” creates an “illusion of movement”, which she calls “the vertigo perception” (102) after Alfred Hitchcock’s film “Vertigo” (1958) which used the dolly zoom to achieve this dizzying effect.

Very little is revealed about the contents of William’s letter; only the salutation “Darling, precious Isabel” (99) and the thrice repeated line “God forbid, my darling, that I should be a drag on your happiness” (100) are given. The reader is left to speculate on William’s message: it may be a plea for connection, an offer of separation or a demand for divorce, as the latter is suggested by one of the friends’ mention of “those letters in divorce cases” (100). Critics cannot reach a unanimous conclusion: Justus reads the letter as a goodbye, calling it a “parting letter”, and argues that Isabel, “with some pangs of regret, accepts the offer implied” and thus agrees to a separation (Justus 15). In contrast, Martin calls it a “love letter” (159) and “a plea to rekindle the life they had together” (161). Martin argues that the allusion to a Matthew Arnold poem is a clue that Isabel has made her decision and “the parting is forever” (160): indeed, as Isabel is reeling from the epiphany, the friends call out to her “call her once before you go, call once yet!” (100) which is a quote from Matthew Arnold’s poem “The Forsaken Merman” which tragically reflects William and Isabel’s relationship. This poem tells the tale of Margaret, a human woman married to a merman and living in the sea, who leaves her family with a promise of returning but never comes back.

Martin points out that like Margaret in Matthew Arnold's poem, Isabel is "torn between two worlds" (161): the pseudoartistic friends live in a fantasy land, and she likes to play-act with them as though they are all the subjects of these paintings, but by doing so, she is losing the important relationship with responsible, conventional William who is tethered to reality. Isabel "must decide" (100) between joining her friends downstairs or staying and writing back to William; though at first she tells herself that "of course she would stay and write", she almost immediately changes her mind "No, it was too difficult" and decides that she will write "Some other time. Later. Not now" (101). The story ends with Isabel "laughing in the new way" and running downstairs to rejoin the others. The text neither confirms nor denies whether Isabel's final change back into her "new" self is final, whether she will write back to William, or whether the relationship will be saved; the story "resists a unitary interpretation" (Malcolm and Malcolm 208). In true Mansfield fashion, these questions remain unanswered.

Ultimately, the moment of crisis is a psychological observation: the moment is "an agonizing one, in which relations fail, and revelations are useless" and the effect is "enduring suspense; ordinary life is disoriented permanently" (Caserio 345). The reader is left in suspension, alone in the "grave bedroom" with William's ineffectual letter. And yet it is not a wholly pessimistic ending; the end is still open, the truth revealed, the possibilities multiple.

Conclusion

Willow Bader, *There Was a Time*, Encaustic, 2018.

Joining the discussion around Mansfield's depictions of bourgeois marriage, this thesis participates in the ongoing interest in Mansfield's exploration of subjective experience and sense of self, focussing in particular on the role of psychology and of fantasy in her short stories. In "Bliss" and "Marriage à la Mode" Mansfield engages with several social problems central to modernist literature, such as the Marriage Question and the Woman Question. Her two stories also offer a satirical critique of London artistic "Bohemia". They depict "what happens in that moment of suspension", namely the epiphanic moment. Mansfield uses the epiphany to explore subjectivity as revealed in a short period of time, resulting in a revelation about the character's psychology. By resisting traditional narrative arcs and moralistic conclusions, Mansfield's "Bliss" and "Marriage à la Mode" suggest the unknowability of human relationships and subjective experience, and continue to resist monological readings.

"Bliss" asks whether ignorance really is better than knowledge, examining Bertha as caught up in the tension between fantasy and reality. She stands for the young and innocent

against a backdrop of artist friends, a possibly abusive husband and a mysterious woman whom she idealises. Symbols such as the pear tree, the cats and the guests' animality function as reflections of Bertha's internal states, desires, and the dissonance she experiences between her internal world and the external world. The moment of revelation takes place as Pearl and Harry break the script of Bertha's fantasy, causing the collapse of her traumatic defenses as knowledge shatters denial. Nonetheless, the final sentence may indicate that she still decides to view her life as perfect, so that nothing will change; it is not her marriage that is ending, but her innocence.

In "Marriage à la Mode" William is usurped by Isabel's fashionable new friends. Although he is frustratingly ineffectual, readerly sympathy lies with William. Here the bohemian friends are freeloaders and frauds, play-acting artistic hedonism without possessing any real artistic sensibility. The story's use of intertextuality connecting with plays, poems and visual art acts as a commentary on Isabel and William's marriage and exposes the artificiality of the bohemian art scene. As with "Bliss", this story depicts a character whose indulgence in fantasy leads to disappointment in their real life. The moment of revelation shows Isabel her cruel behaviour and for an instant it seems she will take her newfound self-awareness and change. However, unlike her original – Chekhov's Olga Ivanova – she finds the epiphany too unbearable and it seems that she reverts back to her superficial self, laughing "in the new way". Both marriages are in a state of crisis by the end of the story, but in each case the outcome remains undecided. The stories refuse conventional closure and ask questions rather than providing answers, and so they remain open and alive. All we are left with are different interpretations.

The group of fashionable friends intruding in both stories are proof that marriage does not exist in isolation: the friends either change one of the partners and thus destabilise the relationship (in Isabel's case) or they serve to reveal the truth of a spouse (for Bertha and

Harry). And yet, though the marriages cannot exist in isolation, Mansfield's protagonists are emotionally isolated: the Mansfield heroine is "spiritually cut loose from nourishing human ties" (Justus 20). Justus argues that the recurring theme in Mansfield's fiction is loneliness, calling Mansfield's heroines "Woman Alone" (Justus 20). Indeed it can be argued that these two particular narratives assert "the inevitability of further loneliness, deeper estrangement" (Justus 20). Mansfield's fiction about socially connected domestic relationships paradoxically highlights the lack of trusting (and trusted) friends and spouses.

Both stories illustrate Mansfield's interest in portraying the mutability of the self in all its isolation and with its unfulfilled desires, reflecting a broader modernist concern with individual awareness and awakening. Her work consistently underscores the notion that life is not neatly ordered, and true insight often emerges from glimpses of unveiled reality and a recognition of the unknowability of others, rather than definitive answers. In a dizzying moment of suspension, the truth is revealed and change must surely take place, then the story stops just short of an explanation. And yet the lack of resolution is not altogether hopeless.

Early critics pointed out what they perceived as "an apparent lack of sympathy" in Mansfield's narration, claiming that her brilliant insight "cannot outweigh the consistent lack of warmth" even in her best stories (Justus 22). And yet, Mansfield's characters undeniably strike a note of recognition and truth in her readers; for stories about loneliness, these characters make us feel understood. In an increasingly hyperindividualistic society for whom loneliness is a defining feature and all too much hope may be placed on marital bliss and worldly connections, her contributions to our "knowledge of the heart" (Justus 22) are the reminder that the answer may be, quite simply, accepting that there are no answers. As Mansfield wrote to Woolf in 1919, "What the writer does is not so much to solve the question but to put the question. . . There must be the question put" (*Letters* 320). Far from simply

depicting failure, Mansfield's interrogative style, which aims "to put the question" rather than solve it, encourages readers to accept the unknowability of the self and the other.

Sometimes absurd, often touching, and always thought-provoking, Mansfield's short stories are as relevant as ever as people continue to grapple with questions of marriage, self-knowledge and isolation. Beyond being a short story writer, she was in her fiction a philosopher, a psychoanalyst, a poet. The complexities of the human mind and heart were the subject of her study, whereby every story strove to find not an ultimate answer but a human truth in all its irresolute imperfection.

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