

**Ego, Id, Queerness, and Identity:  
An Assessment of Converging Theoretical Frameworks  
in Katherine Mansfield's *Bliss***

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Katherine Mansfield was a prominent modernist short story writer of the twentieth century, a contemporary of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and D.H. Lawrence. Mansfield's *Bliss* (1918), arguably her most successful work, has achieved particular salience in literary and theoretical studies, greatly discussed by critics within the frameworks of early twentieth century psychology and queer phenomenology. Previous critics, notably Robert Heilman and Edward Shanks, have identified *Bliss* as a precise study of mood and sensation within a traditional love-triangle plot, the story's final climax revelling in Bertha's shattered feeling of matrimonial bliss.<sup>1</sup> Mansfield's fiction is riddled with sexual nuances: the central dilemma of Bertha's 'epiphany' is predicated on her realisation that her beloved Pearl Fulton indulges in her own feeling of bliss, diverging from the same point as Bertha's own—their shared affection for Harry. Many, including Heilman and Shanks, have overlooked the complex intricacies of Bertha's feeling of 'absolute bliss' and her subsequent marital disillusionment, focusing

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Anderson, 'The Hidden Love Triangle in Mansfield's *Bliss*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 28 (1982), 397–404 (p. 397).

primarily on her latent homosexual desire for Pearl rather than Bertha's fragmented psyche that attempts to negotiate with her idealised 'bliss' against the normalised backdrop of heteronormativity.<sup>2</sup> Thus, taking *Bliss* as an exemplary text, this essay endeavours to explore the short story through the lens of psychoanalysis and queer theory in order to better understand how both critical approaches coincide to provide a deeper understanding of the function of female sexual identity, particularly its repression.

*Bliss* explores the central consciousness of our female protagonist Bertha Young, a middle-class housewife and mother, as she prepares to host a dinner party for a group of eccentric guests, among them her new 'find', Pearl Fulton (Mansfield, p. 95). Mansfield's short story proves paradigmatic to the discussion of repressed desire and female sexual identity, a narrative which traces a burgeoning desire that it simultaneously deems impossible, becoming a prominent psychological study into the female subconscious. Sigmund Freud's 1926 book, *The Question of Lay Analysis* provides a structural theory of the mind through which to examine Mansfield's *Bliss*, offering an insight into instinctual desires, repression, and the functions of childhood sexuality in the construction of a healthy 'mental apparatus'.<sup>3</sup> Freud alludes to the existence of a mental region primarily concerned with 'unification' and 'synthesis', known as the ego (Freud, p. 18). The ego assumes a 'frontage' of the more obscure id, owing its characteristics to the 'modifying influences of the external medium on which they abut (Freud, p. 17). However, Freud highlights that the functions of the id remain unconscious, composed entirely of different urges which pursue their own purposes. Freud conceptualises a model in which the ego seeks to mediate between the instinctual desires of the id, seeking immediate gratification, and the expectations of the external world. The discipline of psychology emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a foundational beginning for

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<sup>2</sup> Katherine Mansfield, *Bliss*, in *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield* (London: Penguin, 1981), pp. 91–106 (p. 91). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Lay Analysis', in *The Question of Lay Analysis*, trans. by James Strachey, in *The Essentials of Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Anna Freud (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), pp. 9–46 (p. 21). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

the intellectual context of psychoanalysis. As many critics, Perry Meisel among them, have astutely recognised, Freud's work exists as a collection of imaginative texts rooted in literature, the unconscious itself considered a literary trope rather than a scientific device. The inter-implicatory nature of psychoanalysis and literature, particularly that of modernist literature, is such that Stephen Frosh argues that 'psychoanalysis, at least in its pre-World War II form, is an emblematic modernist discipline; conversely, modernist perceptions of subjectivity, individuality, memory and sociality are all deeply entwined with a psychoanalytical sensitivity'.<sup>4</sup> Mansfield was no stranger to the main tenets of Freud's work, as Clare Hanson points out in her 'Introduction' to *Katherine Mansfield and Psychology*. Hanson, much like critic Shoshana Felman in her seminal work 'To Open the Question' in *Literature and Psychoanalysis, The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, states that 'just as Freud illustrates his case studies with reference to literary texts, so the process of writing is conceptualised as a flowering of subconscious knowledge'.<sup>5</sup> Thus, we begin our discussion of *Bliss*, another of Mansfield's excursions into the interrelations of the body and the mind.

From the outset, the narrative draws emphasis upon Bertha's overwhelming feeling of 'bliss', bursting with youthful energy reminiscent of a child in play, presenting Mansfield's protagonist as distinctly infantile: 'Although Bertha Young was thirty she still had moments like this when she wanted to run instead of walk, to take dancing steps on and off the pavement' (Mansfield, p. 91). Mansfield associates Bertha's euphoria with childhood freedoms, which are skilfully juxtaposed with her maturity of age. Bertha's seemingly regressive child-like behaviour masquerading behind her maturation perpetuates the nature of her performativity, which is necessitated by the rigidity of the societal institutions in which she is forced to function: 'Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?'

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Frosh, 'Psychoanalysis in Britain: "The Rituals of Destructions"', in *A Concise Companion to Modernism*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 116–37 (p.116).

<sup>5</sup> Clare Hanson, 'Introduction', in *Katherine Mansfield and Psychology*, ed. by Clare Hanson, Gerri Kimber, Todd Martin and Louise Edensor (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 1–8 (p. 3).

(Mansfield, p. 91). The disjuncture of Bertha's self-fashioned composed exterior becomes apparent here, creating a conflict between her socially sanctioned domestic role and the harsh implications of her 'drunk and disorderly' behaviour (Mansfield, p. 91). Bertha's infantile disposition explodes in vehemence, questioning the nature of the social constructs that are responsible for imposing such 'idiotic' restrictions and creating these instances of bodily incarceration (Mansfield, p. 92). However, Bertha's developing independent thought becomes subject to fragmentation, with conflicts arising between the ego and the id as Bertha attempts to navigate her own instinctual sexual desires and the expectations of the social world. As explored by Veronika Mikulová in 'Narrative Presentation and Conceptions of Creative Individuality', Bertha retracts her formulations on the sexually charged fiddle on the pretence that she had been mistaken:

But at the critical moment when Bertha actually starts considering the question and formulating her own opinion, her indirect speech becomes scattered, full of hesitations and dashes: [...] and ends up disrupted by a banal task of opening the front door.<sup>6</sup>

Mansfield creates a 'façade' for her female protagonist, indicating that 'really—really— [Bertha] had everything,' while instituting a repression of her innocent proclivities, which would, in any case, be deemed 'absurd' (Mansfield, p. 97). Freud's notion of the duplicitous ego gains strength throughout *Bliss* with the contrast between Bertha's outward frigidity, reflected in the external environment, and her internalised bliss, radiating like 'a little shower of sparks' (Mansfield, p. 91). The description of the bleak room, offset against her internal passional warmth, creates a sense of abjection for Bertha, proving a disturbance in her seemingly stable sexual identity by expounding on the 'cold air' that, in fact, fans the 'bright glowing place' in

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<sup>6</sup> Veronika Mikulová, 'Narrative Presentation and Conceptions of Creative Individuality in Katherine Mansfield's *Bliss* Stories' (bachelor's diploma thesis, Masaryk University, 2015), p. 38.

her bosom (Mansfield, p. 92). Mansfield's description here creates a moment of psychological conviction for Bertha, 'waiting for something [...] divine to happen [...] that she knew must happen [...] infallibly' (Mansfield, p. 92). Helen Nebeker, in her work on the sexual significations of the pear tree, carefully notes that Bertha's cold exterior both conceals and protects her inner sexual desires: 'In contradiction [to Bertha's bliss], her frigidity is revealed in the images of the cold—the room which is chilly, the cold air on her arms, the cold mirror which reflects the seemingly vibrant woman.'<sup>7</sup> Mansfield's protagonist faces a sense of alienation with the blissful fire that glows within her and her subsequent bodily functions, resorting to projecting her repressed emotions outwards. This, as Freud intimates, is the cause of neurosis: the ego attempts to suppress portions of the id in an unprecedented manner, creating discord between the ego and id as the former wishes to 'retain its adaptability in relation to the external world' (Freud, p. 24).

Freud outlines the conditions under which repressive behaviour occurs, implicating a weak ego-organisation in the early stages of childhood as the prime instigator of such repression: 'the ego treats the instinctual danger as if it was an external one; it makes an attempt at flight, [...] withholding from it all the contributions which it usually makes to instinctual impulses' (Freud, p. 23). While this portion of the id remains isolated, the instinctual impulses are denied normal satisfaction, producing 'psychical derivatives' which typically manifest as physical symptoms (Freud, p. 24). When applied to Bertha and young Little B, Mansfield's irony is not unmissed with her use of the telling name, Bertha Young, directly implying juvenility, and her peculiar relationship with her namesake daughter. What remains striking about these ironical instances is the notion that Bertha's repressive behaviours ultimately find expression through her daughter: 'She loved Little B so much – her neck as she bent forward, her exquisite toes as they shone transparent in the firelight – that all her feeling of bliss came

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<sup>7</sup> Helen E. Nebeker, 'The Pear Tree: Sexual Implications in Katherine Mansfield's Bliss', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 18 (1972-73), 545–51 (p. 545). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

back again' (Mansfield, p. 94). Returning to Bertha's former 'bliss', she inadvertently associates this emotion with youthful gaiety and her daughter, concealing her immature fancies behind her motherly duties. Bertha's closeness to Little B transcends the traditional mother-daughter bond, mirroring that of a child's intimate play with a beloved toy or plaything. This gives weight to the idea that Little B functions as a physical manifestation of Bertha's desire for uninhibited gaiety under the many repressive conditions of social institutions, namely the role of mother and wife. Yet, Bertha's threatened response to the nanny holds magnitude as she invokes the imagery of the fiddle once again to express resentment at her inability to fulfil her motherly duties: 'Why have a baby if it is to be kept – not in a case like a rare, rare fiddle – but in another woman's arms?' (Mansfield, p. 94). Mansfield references the 'rare, rare fiddle' to convey Bertha's sense of entrapment, both by emphasising that her societal function is jeopardised by her failure to perform along with her inability to give voice to her suppressed emotions. This is further augmented through Mansfield's attribution of symptoms commonly associated with hysteria to her female protagonist: 'she wanted [...] to stand still and laugh at – nothing – at nothing, simply' (Mansfield, p. 91). Hysteria, or conversion disorder as it is more commonly understood, is classified as one of the psychoneuroses. The condition was typically associated with women, with hysteria derived from the Greek *hysteria*, translated to 'uterus'.<sup>8</sup> Freud has highlighted that neuroses in women are typically of a sexually orientated nature, explicating that '[women] feel prevented by [...] unknown obstruction from meeting the demands of sexual life; or [...] cheated out of the enjoyment which nature has provided as a reward for such compliance' (Freud, p. 10).

Furthermore, *Bliss* affords possible queer readings which, coupled with the aforementioned discussion of Freud's ego and id complex, lends importance to the notion of Bertha's own gender performativity; the repression of her own sexual desires is intrinsic to the

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<sup>8</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Conversion Disorder: Psychology', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* <<https://www.britannica.com/science/conversion-disorder>> [accessed 17 August 2020].

dominant regime of heteronormativity in which she functions. A key influencer in the critical field of queer studies, Eve Sedgwick, a poet, literary critic, and teacher, was interested in deconstructing the popularised conception of sexuality and sexual identity as stable and cohesive structures. In her 1993 essay, 'Queer and Now', Sedgwick expounds on the importance of literature and literary studies in understanding the queer experience, suggesting that the reading practice 'had necessarily to run against the grain of the most patent available formulae [...] against the most accessible voices even in texts themselves'.<sup>9</sup> Sedgwick invites the reader to be 'perverse' in their perception of texts, encouraging readers to adopt a minoritarian approach in deconstructing dominant constructions. The key to reading perversely, according to Sedgwick, is to consider the significance of what resides on the periphery, situating reading practices within the wider context of desire and passionate attachments to cultural objects. This formulation of reading indicates the position of a text as simultaneously a 'resistant power' and 'numinous', capturing the essence of the nonidentical (Sedgwick, p. 3). Sedgwick questions the notion of what 'queerness' entails, illuminating that queerness is interested in presenting differences which are usually not perceived in stable structures:

That's one of the things that 'queer' can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically.

(Sedgwick, p. 4)

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<sup>9</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Queer and Now', in *Tendencies* (Routledge: London, 1994), pp. 1–20 (p. 3). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

Sedgwick distinguishes that while ‘queer’ denotes same-sexual object choice, it also extends beyond gender and sexuality to other ‘identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses,’ elucidating that queerness has universal applicability (Sedgwick, p. 9). This has particular resonance with the possible queer readings that Mansfield’s *Bliss* offers, as the short story contains many literal gaps and dissonances: ‘She still had moments like this when she wanted [...] to stand still and laugh at – nothing – at nothing, simply. [...] you are overcome, suddenly by a feeling of bliss – absolute bliss!’ (Mansfield, p. 91). Mansfield’s excessive use of hyphenated lines and ellipses accentuates what is actually being omitted and repressed, ‘to make tacit things explicit [...] and, with the relative freedom of adulthood, to challenge queer-eradicating impulses frontally where they are to be so challenged’ (Sedgwick, p. 3). The literal and metaphorical typographical gaps and silences throughout *Bliss* point to the nature of Bertha’s own closeted desires that she is unable to verbalise through rational and constructive thought. Essentially, Bertha undertakes what Sedgwick terms ‘linguistic performativity’, motioning to the invisible possibilities of Bertha’s desires that are transferred to speech acts which omit and are enhanced by silences (Sedgwick, p. 11). Mansfield’s typographical silences elucidate excesses of meaning through what is left unsaid about Bertha’s ‘absolute bliss!’. Keith Gregor, in ‘Blissful Thinking: Katherine Mansfield and the Engendering of Modernist Fiction’, expounds on the instances of silences and gaps that seemingly mark ‘moments of equivocation between the incompatible notions of gender and sexuality. [...] The equivocation suggests the fragility of the association between Bertha’s undefinable feeling and [...] the natural physical yearning for her husband.’<sup>10</sup> These gaps and silences indicate Bertha’s confinement within a construction that stresses the centrality of heterosexuality, rendering the expression of her homoerotic feeling of bliss impossible. Bertha’s inexplicable feeling of ‘bliss’ further coincides with Sedgwick’s formulations on the necessity of attachments to cultural

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<sup>10</sup> Keith Gregor, ‘Blissful Thinking: Katherine Mansfield and the Engendering of Modernist Fiction’, *Cuadernos de Filología Inglesa*, 6 (1997), 59–78 (p. 72).



objects, ‘where the meanings [don’t] line up tidily with each other’, for queer survival (Sedgwick, p. 3). Drawing on Freud’s model of the ego as tending towards the retention of its adaptability to external stimuli coupled with the id’s need for gratification, Bertha’s immature behaviour and affinity to Little B acquires new meaning: paradoxically, Bertha’s attachment to her daughter both reinforces her position within a dominant construction, her fondness for Little B a facet of motherhood, while serving as a site of free expression that affords protection and fulfilment for her repressed sexual desires.

Sedgwick is largely interested in deconstructing the notions of sexuality and sexual identity as a ‘unitary category’, indicating the gravity of this denaturalisation in the dominant regime of heterosexuality: ‘If one adds only the normative assumption that ‘the biological sex of your preferred partner’ will be the opposite of one’s own. With or without that heterosexist assumption, though, what is striking is the number and differences [...]’ (Sedgwick, pp. 7–8). Following Michel Foucault’s interpretation of modern sexuality, Sedgwick questions whether normative heterosexuality functions as sexuality, underscoring the centrality of the binary of homosexuality and heterosexuality within society. Sedgwick highlights that heterosexuality is instrumental in structuring societies: ‘The making historically visible of heterosexuality is difficult because, under its institutional pseudonyms such as Inheritance, Marriage, Dynasty, Family, Domesticity, and Population, heterosexuality has been permitted to masquerade so fully as History itself [...]’ (Sedgwick, pp. 10–11). The recurrent motif of the ‘rare, rare fiddle’ establishes an opportune means of deconstructing the dominant notion of Bertha’s heterosexuality, despite her existence in a heteronormative relationship. The fiddle has many symbolic associations, both bearing a resemblance to the female body and the pear tree that Bertha views as the ‘symbol of her own life’ (Sedgwick, p. 96). One of the many botanical qualities of the pear tree is that it is viewed as bisexual, meaning that it possesses the ability to reproduce asexually. Interestingly, Bertha mirrors her physical appearance to match the colourful exterior of the pear tree: ‘A white dress, a string of jade beads, green shoes and

stockings' (Mansfield, p. 97). Bertha's own projective attachment to the pear tree accentuates the potential repression of homosexual or bisexual desire under the rigidity of the construct of heterosexuality. Sedgwick recognises the value of attachment to cultural objects whose 'meanings seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us,' which become the 'prime resource for survival' (Sedgwick, p. 3). Mansfield's protagonist ultimately transfers her desires upon the tree, as she once did with her daughter, attracted to the obliqueness of the tree which shares her own sexual duality. Bertha's projective associations with the pear tree demonstrate the nature of repressed desire under the construction of heterosexuality. However, Nebeker demonstrates that, often, pear trees that appear in perfect bloom do not possess the ability to reproduce and self-fertilise. Instead, they are rendered infertile when fertilisation occurs prematurely: 'A condition occurs wherein the anther (male organ) ripens before the stigma matures enough to receive the pollen [...] Even as it symbolises perfection, it is in essence incomplete, beautiful but non-functional' (Nebeker, p. 546). The blooming pear tree and the rarity of the fiddle, which Bertha likens to her own body, indicate that Mansfield's protagonist has not experienced sexual excitement and pleasure. As the fiddle is fraught with sexual implications, it is prudent to recognise that Bertha has not been physically 'played' by or 'played' with anyone, thus lacking the musicality associated with sexual pleasure. Judith Neaman's work on 'Allusion, Image, and Associative Pattern' in Mansfield's short story motions to the idea that references to both music and the pear tree enacts a desire which must be repressed:

The musical refrains [...] are central and the associations between the fruits, passion, and the music becomes increasingly specific. Music is the 'food of love.' Like eating of the fruit, the playing of music, in this tale at least, is forbidden.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Judith S. Neaman, 'Allusion, Image, and Associative Pattern: The Answers in Mansfield's *Bliss*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 32 (1986), 242–52 (p. 247).

To conclude, both psychoanalytical theory and queer theory work to produce possible readings of the functionality of female sexual identity in Katherine Mansfield's short story, shedding further insight into the relational boundary between the mind and the body. Freudian theory and psychoanalysis are largely useful in understanding the nature of Bertha's internal conflict, which affects the way she functions within societal structures and institutions. The conflation of Bertha's internal life and consciousness, the intimacies of her 'absolute bliss', with her receptivity and response to the external world are better understood using Freud's conceptualisation of the mind. By further exploring the functions of the ego and the id, the discrepancies of Bertha's character are brought into greater prominence, conflicted between her desire for expression and the restriction of societal norms. However, the psychoanalytical approach is best viewed through a queered perspective, with the ego's tendencies towards unification serving as a reactionary response to the dominant regime of heterosexuality. Bertha's simultaneous scorn and awareness of 'drunk and disorderly' behaviour, instituting her own repression, underpins Sedgwick's notion that queerness constitutes a site of violence: 'Seemingly, this society wants its children to know nothing; wants its queer children to conform or [...] die' (Sedgwick, p. 3). Through the use of Freudian theory, Bertha's own performativity and composed exterior are better understood as a response to the constricting influences of heteronormativity.

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