

Katherine Mansfield's Symbolic Technique in *Bliss*

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Introduction

The reader sometimes finds colourful descriptions in the work of Katherine Mansfield (1888 – 1923), such as *At the Bay* (1921) and *Bank Holiday* (1920). Because of this, her works have sometimes been compared to paintings and called the literary equivalent of Impressionist paintings. However, in contrast, the colours used in some works are limited and a monochromatic world is created in works such as *The Child-Who-Was-Tired* (1910) and *The Voyage* (1921). The colours which appear there are mainly black, grey and white.

While reading, paying attention to the colours used, the reader will naturally notice that they reflect, for example, the atmosphere, the characters' personalities, the state of their minds, or the ending of the stories. Therefore it can be said that the intentional use of colour, including the traditional symbolic meaning is one of Katherine Mansfield's main techniques. There is a particular work, *Bliss* (1918), which has elements of both the colourful world and the monochromatic world.

In January in 1918, during the First World War, Mansfield left for Bandol in the south of France to recuperate from pulmonary tuberculosis. Her husband, John Middleton Murry could not come with her, so she had to spend a lonely time there and her condition took a turn for the worse. However, in spite of these hardships, she completed *Bliss* on February 28th. She wrote to him just after having finished it:

It's three o'clock; I've just finished this new story *Bliss* and am sending it to you. But though my God! I have enjoyed writing it. I am an absolute rag for the rest of the day and you must forgive no letter at all. I will write at length tomorrow.¹

We can gather from this letter that Mansfield devoted herself to this story and dashed it off in a burst of enthusiasm. In this essay, picking out certain colours which Mansfield adopts into this story, I will observe how she fits them into the scene, referring to their symbolism, and will take up the characteristics of this work.

I

The heroine Bertha Young is thirty, the mother of a baby, and spends a prosperous life with her husband, Harry Young. She is sometimes almost overpowered by an extreme sense of happiness. Mansfield describes such Bertha using her unique metaphor:

What can you do if you are thirty and, turning the corner of your own street, you are overcome, suddenly, by a feeling of bliss – absolute bliss! – as though you'd suddenly swallowed a bright piece of that late afternoon sun and it burned in your bosom, sending out a little shower of sparks into every particle, into every finger and toe?² (69)

Thus, her extreme sense of happiness which she cannot control is described in an image which strongly appeals to the sense of sight and touch of the readers. However, when the passion is too strong, it could burn out soon. Sunset follows the late afternoon. From that point of view, her feeling at this stage hints that

her blissful life will not last. A piece of sun swallowed into Bertha's body burns down even to her fingers and toes. This metaphor expresses the strength of her bliss rather violently, and the reader can imagine how brimful she is of happiness, but also the metaphor hints that her bliss could be broken into pieces, perhaps with severe agony, pain and despair, and impresses on the reader the transience of bliss, too.

Bertha, who is excited by bliss, enters a dark cool dining room after she returns home. Her body cools down for a moment, but soon gets hot again and she even has a feeling that something wonderful will happen, which suggests she is rather simple-minded, childish and immature. She puts fruit in a blue bowl and on a glass dish in the dark dining room, which gives a flowery atmosphere to the place. She bought grapes only to suit the carpet, which indicates that she has a sense of beauty, but it could be the sense of superficial beauty:

There were tangerines and apples stained with strawberry pink. Some yellow pears, smooth as silk, some white grapes covered with a silver bloom and a big cluster of purple ones. These last she had bought to tone in with the new dining-room carpet. Yes, that did sound rather far-fetched and absurd, but it was really why she had bought them. She had thought in the shop: "I must have some purple ones to bring the carpet up to the table." (70)

Thus, her idea for adorning the room suggests her inclination to see not the substance but only the surface, and it warns us of the fact that she could not read her husband's mind. Ultimately, she discovers his betrayal of their marriage.

Finishing dishing up the fruits on the glass dish and in the blue bowl like

two pyramids, she looks at them from a certain distance, like an artist does in the process of a work's completion. The sight is described thus: the dark table seemed to melt into the dusky light and the glass dish and the blue bowl to float in the air. (70) The pyramid-like array of fruit reminds us of a beautiful still-life painting against a dark background painted by a Dutch artist in the 17th century such as Cornelis de Heem, but in this case, the sight could have a negative implication: the fruits are dished up beautifully with good balance, but they look as if they are floating in the air, so if they lose their balance even a little, the pyramids will tumble and their artificial beauty will disappear instantly. The fragility overlaps with Bertha's case: at the beginning, she feels great happiness, but in the end, the happiness is easily and instantly broken into pieces. Associated with the transience of beauty and happiness, the cluster of fruit also possibly hints that while Bertha and Harry are apparently an ideal couple, actually their relationship is fragile and unstable. From these opening scenes, the reader meeting the work of Katherine Mansfield for the first time learns that she is a writer with a powerful command of symbolic imagery.

II

In the garden which Bertha looks out over, still excited by a thrill of happiness, there are some symbolical objects. First, a pear tree "in fullest, richest bloom" (72) correlates to the extreme of her bliss, but in the description that the tree stands "perfect, as though becalmed against the jade-green sky" (72), a negative meaning can be inferred: the ship cannot go forward without the wind and cannot help staying at the same spot, which overlaps the images of dependence and stagnation. Therefore the pear tree could hint that although Bertha will find out about Harry's faithlessness, she will not leave him, depending on him as ever. Thus, while the fertility of the pear tree reflects her

bliss, the tree standing like a ship becalmed corresponds to the unhappy situation where she has to reconcile herself to the sterility of the relationship between her husband and herself. Thus we see that the pear tree has rather contrary images.

In contrast to the timid Bertha, Mansfield sketched a character who is conceited and hypocritical: Rosemary in *A Cup of Tea* (1922). Outside the antique shop, a poor girl begs her for money for a cup of tea, and Rosemary almost forcibly invites the girl to her place:

Hungry people are easily led. The footman held the door of the car open, and a moment later they were skimming through the dusk.

“There!” said Rosemary. She had a feeling of triumph as she slipped her hand through the velvet strap. She could have said, “Now I’ve got you,” as she gazed at the little captive she had netted. (335)

The poor girl is a “little captive” for Rosemary. Her kindness is not pure and she is only intoxicated by her good deed. However, her husband’s comment about the girl: “she is so astonishingly pretty” is so unexpected and surprising for Rosemary. As soon as she hears it, she gives the girl some money secretly and gets her to leave to keep her away from him, which demonstrates her hypocrisy.

Bertha meets a lady called Pearl at a club, who is Harry’s mistress, and she is infatuated by her. Mansfield describes how Bertha feels about certain women: she always did fall in love with beautiful women who had something strange about them. (72) Pearl is a “find” for Bertha, but when Bertha finds herself betrayed, she cannot take action at once like Rosemary. Thus, their reaction to an unexpected incident is contrary: Rosemary is active and quickly gets rid of an encumbrance, while Bertha is passive and cannot immediately

break with the obstacle. However, they have a common point in the relationship with their husbands. They look like an ideal couple, but in fact, they are not bonded sincerely. Besides these stories, Mansfield deals with the discord between wife and husband in her other works too, such as *The Stranger* (1921), *The Escape* (1920) and also in *The Man without a Temperament* (1920) which reflects the relationship between Mansfield and her husband.

Going back to the garden, besides the pear tree, red and yellow tulips are in bloom: "red and yellow tulips, heavy with flowers, seemed to lean upon the dusk." (72) The symbolic traditions of red and yellow tulips are both related to love, but in the language of flowers they are rather contrary. The red tulip means 'a declaration of love,' 'true love,' or 'eternal love,' while the yellow has a negative meaning such as 'hopeless love,' or 'unrequited love.' They exactly fit to Bertha's love for Harry; she loves and believes in him, but in fact she is betrayed. It is interesting that Mansfield has chosen these colours which can express Bertha's love symbolically.

Not only the colours of the tulips but also their heavy flowers could hint at something ominous: they reflect Bertha's excessive love for Harry and her extreme sense of happiness, and also their looks reflect the burden of her distress when chance reveals his love-affair. We sometimes hang our heads when we are shocked by or very disappointed with bad things, which emulates the heavy tulip flowers leaning upon the dusk. There is further symbolic imagery in the tulips. When the flowers are finishing, their petals open wide and they start to hang down on bent stems. The process can suggest that Bertha's love has passed the peak without being rewarded and is descending to the end.

Besides the flowers, the cats which appear in the garden have a very clear symbolic meaning. When Bertha is looking at the garden immersed in happiness, black and grey cats are crossing it: A grey cat, dragging its belly, crept across the lawn, and a black one, its shadow, trailed after. (72)

Instinctively feeling loathing for those cats, she shivers and says, 'What creepy things cats are!' (73) This scene in which the black cat is shadowing the grey cat obviously reflects the relationship between Harry and Pearl, and their appearance portends that a sinister future will creep upon Bertha's happy life.

Pearl Fulton is one of the guests who are invited to dinner at Bertha's home and appears "all in silver, with a silver fillet binding her pale blonde hair." (75) It is obvious that Mansfield intentionally gives her a silver image; silver without brilliance turns to grey, which reminds us of the grey cat in the garden, and the colour is positioned between black which hints of Harry and white which hints of Bertha, who identifies herself with a pear tree with full white blossoms as 'a symbol of her own life'; furthermore as she is naïve and immature, so her symbolic colour can be white representing innocence, purity, immaturity, naivety and simplicity.

Harry pretends to be brusque with Pearl not to let Bertha notice his affair with her and even makes an ironical joke about her: "cold like all blonde woman with a touch, perhaps, of anaemia of the brain." (72). Pearl is a mature lady, while Bertha is rather immature, which might be one of the reasons Harry is attracted to Pearl. But at any rate, in addition to the image of a black cat following a grey cat, he is an unfaithful, cunning man, so black is justly the colour for him, with negative attributes such as vice and faithlessness.

Besides the tulips, other plants also hint at unhappiness in Bertha's future. In a warm room, jonquils give off too strong a fragrance and Bertha is intoxicated by the sense of happiness. It is interesting that in the language of flowers for jonquil, there is "a wish for love to return," which matches her feeling when she discovers that Harry is having an affair. Drooping red and yellow tulips, the flowers of a pear tree in fullest bloom and the too-strong scent of jonquil all have the image of excess in common and they correspond to Bertha's extreme sense of happiness. Furthermore, beyond their beauty, they

are so overpowering that the reader may feel uneasy and also feel an omen that something sinister might happen. We sometimes become anxious when we are too happy: we are afraid that the happiness will not last and something bad might happen after great luck and happiness.

III

It is perfectly clear that Mansfield has intentionally chosen the colour of their clothes to reflect the personalities of Bertha and Pearl. As we have seen before, Pearl was all in silver, which is a completely contrary colour to red like a spark which symbolizes Bertha's extreme happiness as described at the beginning of this story. The colour silver connotes calmness and a cool sense of touch, so Pearl apparently has an image which suppresses Bertha's passion, but in fact, here, touching Pearl has rather contrary effect: it stirs up Bertha's fiery passion instead of restraining it, like the fire stirred up with a poker.

“Come along.” And she (Bertha) took her (Pearl's) arm and they moved into the dining-room.

What was there in the touch of that cool arm that could fan—fan—start blazing—blazing the fire of bliss that Bertha did not know what to do with? (75)

Here we also can see one of Mansfield's techniques: repetition of the same words with long dashes. Repeating “fan” and “blazing” conveys to us rather rhythmically the image that Bertha's bliss is gradually increasing, appealing to our sense of sight, touch and even hearing.

Bertha's clothing is rather unique and her taste in fashion is uncommon. She wears a white dress, a string of jade beads, green shoes and stockings. As

mentioned before, white is Bertha's colour, which hints at innocence, purity and immaturity. Moreover, she regards the pear tree with white flowers 'as a symbol of her own life' (73), which further supports the idea that white is her symbolic colour, while green, which has symbolic values such as nature, peace, hope, healing and recovery is the colour of trees. Besides, the description of the pear tree standing 'against the jade-green sky' (72) can be associated with her jade necklace. Thus the colour scheme of Bertha's attire overlaps the pear tree.

The pear tree in full bloom had been the symbol of happiness for Bertha before she found out about Harry's affair, so it can be guessed that her desire to assimilate with it had subconsciously led her to this kind of fashion for that particular night. Moreover, when she felt that she was too happy, "she seemed to see on her eyelids the lovely pear tree with its wide open blossoms..." (73). Therefore, even though she does not actually see the pear tree, it seems always to exist in her mind and influences Bertha's thoughts and actions subconsciously in some way, so her choice of clothes must be affected by the image of the pear tree, but she is just not aware of it. It is ironical that Bertha in the attire which mirrors the pear tree and happiness, is going to be led to the misfortune of the abrupt and unexpected discovery.

As for another technique, Mansfield gives the symbolic names to her characters in some works. As Clare Hanson and other critics mention, one of the typical names is Bertha's second name "Young", which matches to her personality, that is, immaturity, credulity, and childishness. Another symbolical name is "Pearl." A pearl jewel gives off a modest silver-white brilliancy and has an elegant, cool, calm and mysterious beauty, in contrast with the dazzling and gorgeous gold or diamonds, therefore "pearl" can be a suitable name for Pearl who is sophisticated, calmly beautiful, and mysterious. People can hardly guess what is in her mind, which magnifies her mysterious nature and fascinates them all the more.

IV

When Harry praises Bertha's soufflé at the dinner with the guests, she is so pleased: she almost could have wept with child-like pleasure. (76) Thus, we can see her childishness in her reaction to Harry's admiration. Furthermore, Mansfield describes how happy Bertha is:

Oh, why did she feel so tender towards the whole world tonight? Everything was good — was right. All that happened seemed to fill again her brimming cup of bliss. (76)

And then she imagines the silver pear tree standing under the moon in her mind:

And still, in the back of her mind, there was the pear tree. It would be silver now, in the light of poor dear Eddie's moon, silver as Miss Fulton, who sat there turning a tangerine in her slender fingers that were so pale a light seemed to come from them. (76)

Bertha once identified herself with the pear tree, but here she combines it with Pearl whose symbolic colour is silver, and they share the image of the pear tree, but it might be expected that the happiness symbolized by the pear tree will be transferred to Pearl in the end. In addition to the image of the pear tree, Pearl has another image. The metaphor that a light seems to come from her pale fingers suggests that she symbolically unifies with the moon which gives off silver light. Moreover, when Harry says to Pearl "I adore you," she lays her "moonbeam" fingers on his cheeks... (80) Here, Mansfield uses the word

“moonbeam” for her fingers, which lets us associate Pearl with the image of the moon, too. Thus, it can be inferred that Pearl is related to the pear tree and also to the moon.

Bertha is being manipulated by Pearl all the more as if she was spellbound. Pearl asks her, “ ‘Have you a garden?’ said the cool, sleepy voice. This was so exquisite on her part that all Bertha could do was to obey.” (77) Bertha’s reaction hints that Pearl will continue to dominate her. To show the garden to Pearl, Bertha “crossed the room, pulled the curtains apart, and opened those long windows.” (77) This scene lets us imagine that the curtain is drawn aside on the stage and the garden is shown as a tableau framed by the window.

When Pearl and Bertha stand side by side looking at the slender, flowering tree, Bertha has an illusion:

Although it was so still it seemed, like the flame of a candle, to stretch up, to point, to quiver in the bright air, to grow taller and taller as they gazed – almost to touch the rim of the round, silver moon.

How long did they stand there? Both, as it were, caught in that circle of unearthly light, understanding each other perfectly, creatures of another world, and wondering what they were to do in this one with all this blissful treasure that burned in their bosoms and dropped, in silver flowers, from their hair and hands? (77)

The pear tree which Bertha and Pearl symbolically share now stretches upward and is about to reach the silver moon which symbolizes Pearl. This scene impresses us that Pearl’s power gets stronger and stronger, and we can picture her power fantastically, for example: if the sharp point of the pear tree touches the moon, it will explode like a pricked balloon and at the same time fine silver sparkling dust spout from it and veil the world all around, which is Pearl’s world.

Besides suggesting that Pearl becomes powerful, this scene seems to have another potential meaning. Harry's symbolic colour is black, but later Mansfield relates him to silver, too: his cigarette box is that colour. It is quite sure that Mansfield intentionally chose silver for his belongings to associate with Pearl who is also his. Thus Harry's symbolic colour also can be silver, therefore the pear tree with white flowers approaching the moon could be not only the symbol of Pearl but also a part of Harry. So the scene where the pear tree, which refers to Harry now, grows taller and almost touches the moon (that is, Pearl) corresponds to the scene where the black cat (Harry) is following the grey cat (Pearl) in the garden. Both scenes have possible sexual connotations; it might be surmised that the moon and the pear tree, and the black cat and the grey cat will eventually unify. Mansfield describes the image of their relationship vertically in the former scene and horizontally in the latter.

To deceive Bertha, he pretends to dislike Pearl and curtly asks her if she smokes, holding out the silver box. She answers, "No, thank you, I won't smoke". From the way she speaks, Bertha feels certain that they do not like each other; however, she is actually wrong. She is so easily deceived, which reveals her immaturity, naivety and shallowness, and it is pathetic that she looks clownish for the cunning couple, Harry and Pearl.

V

When people are leaving, Bertha accidentally witnesses the intimacy of Harry and Pearl. Bertha, who was intoxicated with bliss until then, suddenly falls into an abyss of despair. The irony is amplified, just after that, when one of the guests cites a phrase from a poem: "Why must it Always be Tomato Soup?" It's so deeply true, don't you feel? Tomato soup is so *dreadfully* eternal.'(80) This phrase seems to reflect Harry's ennui toward Bertha, and sounds as if it

was acceptable to be unfaithful. Tomato soup can refer to Bertha and '*dreadfully* eternal' hints that she will never change herself in future. There is another reference to the red soup during dinner, in which Pearl is "stirring the beautiful red soup in the grey plate" (75) while Bertha is self-conceitedly feeling unified with Pearl. Seeing that red colour is related to Bertha in bliss and grey is for Pearl, this scene looks like Pearl is playing with Bertha's life. Her action seems to reflect her dominance over Bertha.

When Pearl leaves, she says to Bertha "Good-bye. Thank you so much." And holding her hand a moment longer, she murmurs "Your lovely pear tree!" The pear tree was once the symbol of Bertha's happiness and herself, but not anymore, so Pearl's words seem to imply, "Thank you so much for giving me your Harry and your pear tree, that is happiness. They are all mine, now!" After she leaves, Bertha says:

"Your lovely pear tree — pear tree — pear tree!"

Bertha simply ran over to the long windows.

"Oh, what is going to happen now?" she cried.

But the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still.
(80)

Bertha in a state of shock might be just repeating absent-mindedly what Pearl murmured: "Your lovely pear tree!" and if so, "Your" is Bertha's. However, accepting the point that the pear tree is no longer Bertha's symbol but now Pearl's, "Your" could mean Pearl's. Thus Bertha finally realizes that the pear tree, that is, happiness has completely transferred from her to Pearl, and the repetition of "the pear tree" reflects how deeply she is confused, bewildered and worried about her future.

The description in the above quotation, the last line of this story, looks like a

painting framed by the long window and holds a confined and unchangeable image. Mansfield does not give a clear ending here and leaves it open to the reader, which is a style she sometimes adopts in her works. The pear tree stands still in the tranquillity of the night as if time stopped, which suggests that Bertha's situation cannot be changed; her cry "What is going to happen now?" implies her anxiety about her future, her resignation and her helplessness, and this passive utterance shows that she will have neither the courage to start a new life nor the ability to be independent from Harry. In many stories it is the reader who is left with the question "What is going to happen now?" but in this work the symbolic nuances enable us to make guesses that Bertha, overwhelmed by incomprehensible disaster, cannot.

Conclusion

As seen at the beginning of the story, Bertha displays the fruits like a pyramid in the background of the dusk of the dining room. The display consists of colourful fruits, which mirror her bliss, while the dusk has the effect of increasing their vividness, but also hints that the misfortune will steal up behind her, and actually in the end, she is plunged into the depths of despair; her sadness and uneasiness are fused into the monochromatic world woven by the darkness, the silver moon and the pear tree blooming full of white flowers. Thus Mansfield scatters symbolic objects, colours and scenes here and there in her works in order to reflect the state of the characters' minds and foreshadow what is to happen to them and how the story ends. Each time we re-read them, we encounter new discoveries which we had not observed before and they let us make another or deeper interpretation, or give us different impressions of the entire story itself or its characters. *Bliss* is representative of these elements in Mansfield's work and the readers can enjoy the profundity of her

elaborate schemes.

Notes:

- 1 Vincent O'Sullivan with Margaret Scott (ed.): *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield 2* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.) p.97
- 2 Katherine Mansfield: *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*. (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2006.)

The page number is found after the end of each quotation.

Reference:

- Antony Alpers: *The Life of Katherine Mansfield* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980)
- Mark Greenberg (ed.): *Nature and Its Symbols* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2004)
- C.A. Hankin: *Katherine Mansfield and Her Confessional Stories* (London: Macmillan, 1983)
- Clare Hanson and Andrew Gurr: *Katherine Mansfield* (London: Macmillan, 1981)