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**“I must laugh or die:” the Satirical Feminism of Katherine Mansfield’s “Bliss” and Other
Stories**

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Senior Thesis

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Acknowledgements

During my year in Oxford, I was very fortunate to find the name Katherine Mansfield on one of my reading lists. I devoted a spring afternoon in the English Faculty Library to several of her stories, including “The Garden Party,” “Miss Brill,” and “Bliss,” the story that inspired this thesis. Mansfield was an unfamiliar name to me, and I thank my tutor, Pelagia Goulimari, for providing my introduction to her.

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Introduction

In 1918, Katherine Mansfield published “Bliss,” a short story where a woman named Bertha Young gives a dinner party, and has a sexual awakening. During the party, Bertha waits for one of her guests, Pearl Fulton, to “give a sign,” something to suggest a mutual attraction, a recognition of the intimate feelings Bertha holds for her – though “what she meant by that she did not know, and what would happen after that she could not imagine” (*Katherine Mansfield’s Selected Stories (KMSS)* 152). Bertha, naive to the possible significance of this desire to receive a ‘sign’ from Pearl, and equally unsure what to do if that ‘sign’ comes, reverts to her role as hostess, talking and laughing with her other guests. “I must laugh” she thinks, “or die” (*KMSS* 152). In one weighted line, Mansfield has suddenly expanded the scope of Bertha’s consciousness to a point of near self-actualization. To Bertha, there is some sense that if she ceases to obey the structures of social niceties and convention, her life will be over. Also plausible is the notion that she has suddenly come to see, if only for a brief moment, the reality of her subjective position in life: amidst the absurd inanity of the dinner party, and the realization that she literally “could not imagine,” or articulate her own desire, she must either laugh at her life, or die from the suffocating reality of it. To complicate matters further, lurking in the background of this moment is the discourse of hysteria, which threads through the whole of “Bliss.” Excess laughter was often seen as a symptom of hysteria, and so the act of laughing, especially for women, thus becomes both socially dictated and socially dangerous.

Mansfield’s fiction is so effective in part because of her ability to precisely insert moments of devastating honesty into the quotidian, the banal, and the absurd. Her stories are carefully written, deeply realistic, and intensely personal, both in the writing and in the scenarios that she depicts. In “Risking the Personal; Academic Friendship, Feminist Role Models and

Katherine Mansfield” Louise Mayhew and Helen Rydstrand describe how in imbuing her “fictions with her own memories, Mansfield’s vision of the writer’s life intertwines with the personal” (283). This is not to claim that her stories are autobiographical, but rather to assert the validity of Mansfield drawing on her own memories in order to write fiction. For Mansfield, writing was clearly the serious occupation of her life. In a letter to Richard Murry, her brother-in-law, she described writing “Miss Brill:” “after I’d written it I read it aloud – numbers of times – just as one would play over a musical composition – trying to get it nearer and nearer to the expression of Miss Brill – until it fitted her” (*The Letters and Journals of Katherine Mansfield* (LJKM) 213). Mansfield was a perfectionist about her stories, in part because they were so personal to her. In a letter to the Honorable Dorothy Brett in 1921, Mansfield described her latest story, “At the Bay.” She writes, “It is as good as I can do, and all my heart and soul is in it...every single bit. Oh God, I hope it gives pleasure to someone...It is so strange to bring the dead to life again” (LJKM 232). In feeling as though she is “bringing the dead to life,” she uses her own experience and memory to create stories that, though often pessimistic and lacking a happy ending, are intensely realistic and challenge the patriarchal status quo.

Mansfield’s fiction is often satirical: it involves the realistic depiction of girls’ and women’s lives and pairs pessimism with mockery. It is not satire in the sense of parody, though Mansfield had quite an extensive understanding of that style, but is more in the style of strict satire, that which attacks societal flaws and corruptions of its time (Wynne-Davies “Satire”). Mansfield’s interest is not in comedy so much as witty and biting criticism; she uses authorial irony to criticize the patriarchal systems under which her characters suffer, including sexual naivete, pressures on the ‘ideal mother,’ and the threat of a hysterical diagnosis. John T. Gilmore describes satire as portraying “real men and women, often in lurid colors, but always with

unforgettable clarity;” this is an apt definition in consideration of Mansfield’s fiction, the striking events of which include murder, extramarital affairs, sexual assault, and marital and maternal dissatisfaction, and are indeed difficult to forget (3). In the introduction to *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor and Satire*, Gloria Kaufman describes how feminist satire, like other satire, “is didactic and often overtly so. No matter how pessimistic it sounds, it seeks to improve us by demonstrating – through devices of irony, of exaggeration, of sarcasm, and of wit – our human folly” (14). Feminist satire accordingly “exposes realities not merely out of a love for truth but also out of desire for reform;” its objective is the societal reform of patriarchal systems that keep women unequal, uneducated, and oppressed (Kaufman 14). Mansfield uses this style of satire to draw attention not only to ridiculous and gendered social expectations, such as the dinner party Bertha throws for her guests in “Bliss,” but stereotyped and ridiculous characters, like the Frau in “The Child-Who-Was-Tired.” This analysis of Mansfield’s feminist satire is anchored in “Bliss,” but also focuses on the events of “The Little Governess,” “At ‘Lehmann’s,” and “The Child-Who-Was-Tired,” and “The Woman at the Store.”

In her short stories, Mansfield tilts between sharp satire and deadly seriousness, disrupting through the many voices of her characters the notion that there exists any singular “female experience.” Mansfield does not write feminist characters in the sense that she produces female characters who overcome barriers to their liberation and achieve self-actualization. Instead, she satirically creates female characters who do not or cannot resist the gendered patriarchal norms in which they are oppressed. These characters both perform and defy their gendered roles, often ultimately succumbing to the patriarchal subjugation to which they have been repressed, without conscious recognition that there is any way to break away from the oppressive system in which they have been embedded. Thus, her stories are not feminist in the

sense that they are about promoting formal political activism, like women's suffrage. Instead, they are about unmasking women's suffering. Mansfield recognizes this aspect of the covertly political within the personal of her own memories and experiences. To fully comprehend the depth of her feminist satire, it is therefore necessary to understand her biography, and the critical conversation surrounding it. The repression of her sexuality by her family, the sexual naivete that may have led in part to her inability to have children, and her multiple debilitating illnesses resonate in the often tragic situations of her fiction. Mansfield locates her feminist satire in the intersections of feminine-gendered issues: sexuality and sexual naivete, female illnesses like hysteria, and motherhood. Her satire is frequently demonstrated through the use both irony, and aposiopesis, a rhetorical trope in which the narrative or speech "breaks off as if unable to continue," often because of "overcharged emotion" which can manifest as lacuna, the "gap" that "exists between what the text attempts to say and what it is forced to mean," (Wheeler "Literary Terms"). These gaps ironically give voice to silenced female characters, presenting the reader, if not the character, with a clear and conscious understanding of the oppressed realities these women experience.

Feminist Satire and Feminist Biography: Acknowledging Both "The Woman" and "The Writer"

As a female and feminist satirist, Katherine Mansfield takes on a dominantly male tradition. Well-known practitioners of satire include Juvenal, Alexander Pope, Charles Dickens, and William Thackeray. As Gilmore observes, the genre is not just domineered by male figures, but has also historically been supportive of patriarchal and misogynistic norms. He writes that

“women are presented as valued by male writers (and, by implication, male readers) predominantly or exclusively in terms of their sexuality. They are treated as sources of sexual pleasure for men, but women’s own sexuality is seen as something to be feared and kept under control” (131). Ironically, Mansfield’s style of satire also recognizes that women’s sexuality is “feared” and controlled, but her purpose, unlike the male satirists, is to reject that notion of patriarchal dominance over women’s sexuality. Mansfield, who in a letter to her cousin Sylvia Payne at the age of seventeen wrote, “I am so keen upon all women having a *definite* future – are not you? The idea of sitting still and waiting for a husband is absolutely revolting,” perhaps delighted in challenging the patriarchal control of the genre, and indeed, crafting a style of satire of her own (*The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield (CLKM)* 18). Critically, she distinguishes herself from the satirically patriarchal literary tradition not just as a woman writing satire, but as a satirical feminist.

Mansfield developed her talent for satire during her years as a contributing writer for an influential London magazine called *The New Age*. Carey Snyder, in “Katherine Mansfield and the *New Age* School of Satire,” writes that Mansfield took as mentors both A. R. Orage, the founder of the magazine, and Beatrice Hastings, a contributing writer and uncredited editor, who “not only encouraged Mansfield to cultivate a sparse and sardonic style, but also taught her the power of parody and satire to create a place for herself in a sometimes hostile literary world” (125). While at the magazine, Hastings and Mansfield together wrote a popular series of parodies that mocked both the writing and personage of several of its “most heavyweight contributors,” including H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett (Snyder 126-7). This collaboration gave Mansfield the tools to distinguish herself in a competitive and patriarchal literary field and was successful for some time, however, it was not to last.

When Mansfield left *The New Age* to begin publishing stories in her husband, John Middleton Murry's competing literary magazine *Rhythm*, Hastings turned her talent at parody on Mansfield, who suddenly "found herself the target of malicious satires penned by her former mentors" (Snyder 127). In a review of Mansfield's 1912 story "The Woman at the Store," Hastings derided Mansfield's writing, calling it "willfully defiant of the rules of art, for it ploughs the realistic sand, with no single relief of wisdom or wit," (qtd. in Snyder 146). As Snyder observes, she "placed Mansfield among the very retrograde realists and sentimental versifiers she had taught her to mock" (146). Hastings' work in *The New Age* was often based in satire as parody; Mansfield's own writing branched away from that style, taking on and shaping for herself a strain of satire that focuses on realism, critical bite, and the use of irony. While the critique that "Woman at the Store" "ploughs the realistic sand with no single relief of wisdom or wit," is something of a subjective argument of value, the notion of it being "defiant of the rules of art" may be taken on more critically. In *Satire*, Gilmore argues that "in the work of the finest satirists there is the minimum of convention, the maximum of reality" (3). Mansfield, in the very act of writing feminist satire, is already breaking convention, and reshaping it to suit herself. One of the objectives of feminist satire is reform of patriarchal structures and norms; this could arguably include not only the content of the satire, but its structure as well.

As Mayhew and Rydstrand observe in "Risking the Personal," Mansfield built her fiction on somewhat daring foundations. She entangles her personal and creative identities, drawing on her own memories for her fictions (283). She does not write autobiographies, but recognizes the resonance of her experience with other women's experiences of suffering, what Sydney Janet Kaplan in *Katherine Mansfield and the Origins of Modernist Fiction* thinks of as linking her suffering to human suffering. "It is no accident," writes Kaplan, "that most of the victims in her

stories are members of an underclass, whether in terms of economics or in terms of their relative positions within the family structure” (17). Mansfield is writing neither grand and formal political satire, nor a comedic mockery of the working classes, but rather focusing on sexuality, intimacy, pain, and the private lives and thoughts of women of different classes and positions, from a young governess in “The Little Governess,” to an upper-middle class housewife in “Bliss.” What is being ultimately satirized is not her naive or violent female protagonists, but the patriarchal structures that force them into those subjective positions. Mayhew and Rydstrand argue that Mansfield takes risks that distinguish her from her male modernist contemporaries, like an “insistence on the ‘sentimental’ (rather than affective) and feminine as valid impetus for creative and intellectual work” (288). She validates and legitimizes expressions of women’s emotions and memories while at the same time satirizing the patriarchal systems that try to oppress them; for example in “Bliss,” Bertha’s emotions of ecstasy and bliss are legitimate; it is the shadow and threat of “hysteria” that hangs over her throughout the story that must be questioned and critiqued. If Mansfield’s feminist satire disrupts patriarchal dominance and feminist stereotypes by at least in part drawing on her own life and memory, then it is important to register the significance of her biography and the critical conversation that surrounds it.

Katherine Mansfield is a writer for whom it is particularly tempting to seek out “answers” in her biography. As many biographers and critics of Mansfield have already observed, her life seems to resonate in her work; the challenge is how and whether to distinguish woman from writer, and writer from writing. Part of this quandary is in the deeply fascinating nature of her life, which is full of sexual escapades with various partners of varying gender, her multiple illnesses, her connections not only to the group whom she called the “Blooms Berries, but to the literary circles of D. H. Lawrence and the magazine publication *The New Age*, what Lee Garver

in “The Political Katherine Mansfield” calls “the birthplace of an important strain of individualist feminism...and a key birthplace of British modernism” (227). Her life offers an enticing study in contrasts, which are tempting to link directly to her work. Mayhew and Rydstrand observe that Mansfield is commonly approached through her biography. They suggest that this is a pervasive feature of the study of women’s writing, as there is “a lingering sense that women who exceed the private domain are exceptional (and thus their biographies are important to their professional achievements in ways that men’s are not)” (284). Rydstrand, in a personal comment, writes that “this dilemma may be unresolvable, and the flip side of my qualms is the fact that I have found it personally necessary to study women’s writing, and I am always ‘compelled’ by their embodied experiences as women” (284). Excellent writing, like Mansfield’s, is worthy of examination regardless of the presence of a sensational biography, and yet feminist biographical practice offers the notion that “the woman” and “the writer” are not distinct, but two identities that come together to form the whole self of the female writer.

Judith P. Zinsser, in her article “Feminist Biography: A Contradiction in Terms?” engages with the issues that Mayhew and Rydstrand are observing. She writes that there is a tension between feminism and biography that revolves around the feminist desire to “go beyond the “exception” and to chronicle the lives of all women,” and the definition and purpose of biography, which is “to use the historian’s evidentiary authority to validate the life, thoughts, and accomplishments of a particular woman” (44). What emerges as a potential compromise between the two, is the creation of a “recovery history,” in which biographers chose to study “women prominent in another time,” who “have not been well known in the present” (Zinsser 45). What may help expand on this notion of “recovery history” in relation to Mansfield, is to think about it not just as a means of bringing to light the life and work of a woman who has been “forgotten”

by history, but also as the rectification of false or misleading biographical information which sways the reception of the literary material.

One of the first commentators on Mansfield's life and work was her husband, John Middleton Murry, who release early editions of her journals, letters, and stories. Saralyn Daly, in her biography, *Katherine Mansfield*, describes how near to her death, Mansfield instructed Murry to destroy her unfinished work, and her personal correspondence and papers. "That he did not," writes Daly, "is a service to the literary critic, but the fragmentary manner in which he released her "remains" served only to create a confused image of the developing artist" (8). Indeed, Murry's first edition of Mansfield's journal in 1927 includes in the Introduction its own "biographical sketch" of Mansfield, which leaves out some of the major relationships and happenings of her life, including her discussions of women's rights, her sexual relationships with several women, and the fact that she was unable to have children due to a surgery to treat venereal disease. "It is difficult for me to attempt a critical valuation of Katherine Mansfield's work," writes Murry, yet he does not acknowledge the possibility of a similar problem in relation to her biography (*Journal of Katherine Mansfield (JKM)* xiii). Hermione Lee, in *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, describes some of the rules legitimate biography must follow. Rule three is that "nothing should be omitted or concealed," and rule six is that "the biographer should be objective." While it is possible that Murry was looking to protect Mansfield's reputation and literary legacy, his "biographical" work cannot be called objective; yet it both set the trend on perceptions of Mansfield, and shaped her literary reception through much of the twentieth century.

The issue at hand with Mansfield's biography is the question of what has been left out either as a result of preconceived notions of Mansfield's character and writing, or on the basis of

gendered stereotypes. Two of Mansfield's biographers, Sarlyn Daly and Claire Tomalin, gesture to these problems in the prefaces to their studies. There is a "male notion," writes Daly, "that Mansfield's style is all too frequently the same for all her characters, a style which reflects her own "feminine voice" which leads early biographers, predominantly male, to disregard or fail to observe much of the value of her work (117). One of these critics is H. E. Bates, in his survey on *The Modern Short Story*, published originally in 1941, and subsequently reprinted in 1972¹. Although he has previously been debated both Kaplan and Daly, his review of Mansfield will be discussed for the purposes of laying out the particularly gender-coded biographical battleground surrounding her work. Rather than focusing his critique on the writing itself, Bates criticizes Mansfield's writing as an effect of her gender. He describes the "intensely personal" nature of her writing, which he calls "essentially feminine...fluttering, gossipy, breathless with question and answer" (129).

According to Bates, the main problems with Mansfield's stories are the result of "the woman emotionally shaping the writer," so that there is a danger that the narrator will become confused with the voice of Mansfield herself, "and one feels in certain of Katherine Mansfield's stories that this has happened, and the girlish, chattering voice is the voice of the writer thinly disguised" (130). Indeed, as Daly would agree, there is a failure here to objectively evaluate Mansfield's entire body of work, and to distinguish between writer and writing. Bates is relying on gendered stereotypes of femininity, and essentializing women to one stereotyped character: hyper-feminine and vapid. He describes how this method of conflating narration is repeated

¹ It should be noted that while Bates' survey is the most overt example of gendered biography surrounding Mansfield, Tomalin observes that two of the major biographies of Mansfield's work, those by Jeffrey Meyers, and Antony Alpers, "seem to me to have underestimated the importance of certain aspects of her life," including her forays into understanding her own sexuality, her medical history, and her relationship to and impression on "two of the greatest of her contemporaries," D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf (*A Secret Life* 1-2). Daly comments on the "distortions" of these later biographies, arguing that they "reflect, for the most part, the male-defined interests her writing often described and denounced" (1-2).

throughout her stories, so that “it tends to give even very different characters a touch of sameness, until they are all chattering over-grown schoolgirls busy asking and answering breathless facile questions about love and life and happiness” (130). In this short “survey” of Mansfield, Bates, despite his own observation of the phenomenon, conflates writer with narrator to the effect of invalidating her identity as a female writer, and ignoring the very different female voices expressed in her work. Kaplan argues in turn that indeed the “presence of certain features in her writing which might be coded “feminine” is not evidence of an underlying, essential female nature, but the result of a writing practice that is conscious, deliberate, and artificial,” (“Sex, Danger, and Freedom” 158-9). When Mansfield does employ the voice of a “chattering, over-grown schoolgirl,” or indeed any voice that fulfills the female stereotypes Bates lays out, it is for satirical purpose, to expose the issues of insecurity and ignorance fostered in women by the patriarchal gender roles inherent to the society in which they live, where they have no control over their own intellectual or emotional development. What is truly being accomplished in her short stories is directly antithetical to Bates’ reading.

To fully understand Mansfield’s feminist satire, the history of early twentieth century feminism, and her relationship to it, must be examined. Mansfield was born in Wellington, New Zealand, on October 14th, 1888, five years before women in New Zealand successfully won the vote on September 8th, 1983 (“Women and the Vote”). Growing up in this culture, she seems to have a sense of burgeoning independence, a desire to be free of the economic and social constraints which traditionally disempowered women. In 1908, at age 19, she writes in her journal,

I feel that I do now realise, dimly, what women in the future will be capable of. They truly as yet have never had their chance. Talk of our enlightened days and our emancipated country – pure nonsense! We are firmly held with the self-fashioned chains of slavery. Yes, now I see that they are self-fashioned, and must be removed...Here then

is a little summary of what I need – power, wealth and freedom. It is the hopelessly insipid doctrine that love is the only thing in the world, taught, hammered into women, from generation to generation, which hampers us so cruelly. We must get rid of that bogey – and then, then comes the opportunity of happiness and freedom (*LJKM* 36).

While the end of this passage feels like it could be the precursor to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, the meaning of the beginning is slightly more obscure. She realizes only “dimly” what women in the future will be capable of, and writes that women are firmly held “with the self-fashioned chains of slavery.” “Dimly,” may refer, as is represented in her stories, to the understanding that women are so deeply entrenched in the patriarchal system that it is difficult to imagine what an equal and liberated life might look like; Mansfield has been awakened to feminism, but even so can only “dimly” imagine the future ahead. Women need “power, wealth, and freedom,” from the restraints of “love,” the gendered expectations of heteronormative relations like marriage, so that a greater vision of the future might materialize. More problematic is her notion that women are firmly held with the “self-fashioned chains of slavery,” implying some level of blame on women for being oppressed, which sits in tension with the later part of her thinking, that there are “hopelessly insipid doctrines,” like love, that are “taught, hammered into women, from generation to generation,” implying a complete lack of control by women over their own oppression.

Mansfield was clearly still working through her opinion on the women's movement, and indeed her while her stories on the whole satirize oppressive patriarchal systems as the overarching problem her female characters face, sometimes do find a grim sort of comedy in the thoughts and behaviors of her female characters. Mansfield's relationship to the dominant feminism of the early twentieth century is similarly complicated; in September of 1908 she writes a letter to her lover, Garnet Trowell where she describes attending a “Suffrage Meeting” in London. She portrays the women there as “very badly upholstered chairs...all strange, looking

in deadly earnest” (*CLKM* 60). Afterwards, she leaves the meeting, runs to buy a sandwich, and decides “I could not be a suffragette – the world was too full of laughter...But I must needs look at life differently to others – wonderful and life giving miracle – you are alive – nothing else matters” (*CLKM* 60). The reader of this letter must interpret its contents with some caution, as it is possible that she was playing a certain part for the benefit of the recipient, as this voice differs somewhat from her journalistic one. At the same time, Mansfield doesn’t seem interested in the suffrage movement. Tomalin, in “Dreams and Danger,” posits that Mansfield “ran laughing from the intensities of the only meeting she attended in London, not because she was out of sympathy with its general aims, but because she could not confine her vision of life to those terms” (376). Suffrage was not the key to her activism.

Marlene LeGates, in *In Their Time: A History of Feminism in Western Society*, observes that “if not all suffragists were feminists, not all feminists agreed with the emphasis on the vote” (244). As Mansfield matures, she expresses her feminism in a more individualized manner, not necessarily based around the success of suffrage, but around simultaneously revealing and resisting the constraints placed upon women on the basis of gender. In a journal entry from October 14, 1922, Mansfield records the following thought:

I want to work. At what? I want so to live that I work with my hands and my feeling and my brain. I want a garden, a small house, grass, animals, books, pictures, music. And out of this, the expression of this, I want to be writing...to be rooted in life – to learn, to desire to know, to feel, to think, to act. That is what I want. And nothing less. That is what I must try for (*LJKM* 279).

Mansfield’s feminism is clearer here; women’s liberation and happiness come from a combination of financial security and intellectual freedom and control. Her vision of happiness combines the domestic with the professional: her garden, house, animals, and music provide the

inspiration for her writing. Significantly, Mansfield seems equally value both her “feeling” and her brain; emotion and feeling are as important to her writing as her intellectual freedom.

Feminist Satire and Sexuality, Illness and Motherhood in Mansfield’s Short Stories

Sexuality and Illness in “Bliss”

Katherine Mansfield’s sexuality was for some time biographically constrained, as (especially) male biographers struggled with how to categorize and characterize her attraction to, and sexual affairs with both women and men. It has in recent decades been further extricated, by biographers like Claire Tomalin and Saralyn Daly. From a young age Mansfield was very close to several female friends, and as a young adult had a love affair with a young artist named Edith Bendall, while living in New Zealand (“Murry, Kathleen” 2). Tomalin writes that it was this affair which may have convinced her parents to allow her to sail for England (“Murry, Kathleen” 2). While this move seems to have liberated her sexually, as Mary Burgan observes in *Illness, Gender, and Writing: The Case of Katherine Mansfield*, Mansfield was also seriously, and permanently impacted by her sexual relationships (42). In 1908 Mansfield becomes pregnant by Garnet Trowell, marries another man to save her reputation only to abandon him immediately after the wedding, and is sent to a German Spa by her mother, where in 1909 she has a stillborn child (Garver 226). After this, and due to complications of a surgery to treat gonorrhoea, Mansfield is unable to have children, a reality which according to Tomalin, burdens her psyche for the rest of her life (*A Secret Life* 164). For Mansfield, both heterosexual and homosexual relationships are connected to trauma.

Homosexuality, especially in the wake of the Oscar Wilde Trials of the late 19th century, had been brought to the forefront of social gossip. Mansfield, who had sexual and intimate relationships with both men and women over the course of her life, was deeply affected by the social outcome of the trial that condemned Wilde for his sexuality². Mansfield was highly aware of, and indeed influenced by, Oscar Wilde. Sarah Ailwood and Melinda Harvey describe how she would copy his words into her notebooks while she was studying at Queen's College, in London (2). She was both deeply fascinated and apparently terrified by his sexuality, and society's reaction to it. In a letter that she wrote but never sent in 1909, Mansfield describes how "in New Zealand Wilde acted so strongly and terribly upon me that I was constantly subject to exactly the same fits of madness as those which caused his ruin and his mental decay" (*CLKM* 89-90). After the Wilde trials, homosexuality was considered at the least immoral, if not completely illicit, a societal understanding that may have been traumatizing to Mansfield, who was discovering her own sexual attraction to girls at a young age (*Origins of Modernist Fiction* 37).

During her time in London, Mansfield became friends with Ida Baker, who would become her deepest and most loyal friend, and with whom she shared a complex, if not sexual relationship. She also found herself in love with Arnold Trowell, but upon his rejection, turned her affections to his brother Garnet, by whom she became pregnant. Burgan writes that this attempt at unwed domesticity was "less a matter of heterosexual eroticism than an obsessive rejection of her own mother," who would later come to London to take Mansfield away to

² On February 28, 1895, Oscar Wilde received a card at his club from John Sholto Douglas, the ninth marquess of Queensberry, accusing him of sodomy. Wilde responded by taking out a warrant against Douglas from criminal libel, to which Douglas entered a plea of justification that accused Wilde of committing sexual acts with male persons at specific times and places (Edwards "Wilde, Oscar"). Ultimately, Wilde was found to have committed acts of "gross indecency," and himself arrested, a sentence which exploded into social consciousness, and which ended with his ultimate social and writing ruin (Edwards, "Wilde, Oscar").

Germany, and subsequently disinherit her (41). Mansfield was also sick for almost the entirety of her adult life, in 1917 contracting the tuberculosis that would lead to her eventual death in 1923 (“Murry, Kathleen”). Burgan observes that although Mansfield continued to participate in deeply erotic friendships, and sexual affairs with women throughout her life, she had “internalized conventional attitudes that caused her to view her love for women as diseased...and her lust for men as corrupt” (46). “If her bisexuality was not in itself pathological,” Bergan states, “its acting out profoundly endangered her health” (42). In her unsent letter, in which she describes how “Wilde acted so strongly and terribly upon me” Mansfield indeed appears to connect homosexual desire to disease and madness.

The intersection of sexuality and illness was an ever present feature of Mansfield’s adult life, and indeed, there are striking resonances in her stories. Much of her fiction does not concern itself, however, with physical disease, but rather the mental anxieties and illnesses that women develop as a result of trauma, often related to their gendered roles as mothers, governesses, and housewives. In particular, Mansfield satirically engages with the seemingly universal diagnosis of “hysteria” in several of her stories, the most prominent of which is “Bliss.” Below, hysteria will be historically contextualized to Mansfield’s contemporary moment, in order to understand not only the context from which her satire is based, but why hysteria in particular is being dealt with by Mansfield.

“I do not think I am exaggerating,” writes Josef Breuer, neurophysiologist and mentor to Sigmund Freud, “when I assert that *the great majority of severe neuroses in women have their origin in the marriage bed*” (*Studies in Hysteria* 246, emphasis in the original). In their joint work, *Studies in Hysteria*, Freud and Breuer connect manifestations of hysteria in the female body to female sexuality. When describing the hysteria of Frau Emmy Von N., Sigmund Freud

declared her “handicapped by her conscientiousness, her tendency to tormenting herself and often, too, by the natural helplessness of a woman” (102). The “natural helplessness” to which he refers is no great psychological leap, but indeed grounded in a long history of associating women with hysteria. Elaine Showalter recounts this history in *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture*, beginning with the classical healers who believed that the uterus traveled around the body, producing symptoms like crying, fainting, seizures, and sexual longings. When later anatomists determined that the uterus did not move, but rather that the source of hysteria was in the nervous system, women began to be described as the “nervous sex,” prone both to fits of fainting, and to being eroticized as nymphomaniacs (Showalter 15). Showalter remarks that hysteria became the designation for a vast set of behaviors, from limps and seizures, to headaches, depression, insomnia, and exhaustion (14). It does not follow the path of a biological contagion but is rather spread in reaction to moments of cultural change and upheaval: it “is a mimetic disorder; it mimics culturally permissible expressions of distress” (Showalter 15). In doing so, it threatens any expression of emotion that women might feel, but cannot therefore show, like laughter, tears, and fatigue.

Dorland’s Illustrated Medical Dictionary, published in 1914, offers this definition of hysteria:

A disease, mainly of young women, characterized by lack of control over acts and emotions, by morbid self-consciousness, by exaggeration of the effect of sensory impressions, and by simulation of various disorders. Symptoms of the disease are hyperesthesia; pain and tenderness in the region of the ovaries, spine, and head; anesthesia and other sensory disturbances; choking sensations; dimness of vision; paralysis; tonic spasms; convulsions; retention of urine; vasomotor disturbances; fever, hallucinations, and catalepsy (451).

The full definition is included to demonstrate the wide variety of ailments that women might have been diagnosed as “hysterical” for. This is not to demean the very real and traumatizing

experiences of illness that women have, but rather to offer the suggestion that cloaking that many symptoms under one disease may have prevented women being diagnosed properly. Especially important is the first characterization of hysteria, a “lack of control over acts and emotions;” this is so broad a category as to be threatening to any woman who has any outburst of emotion that differs in type or volume from the norm. The message is clear: the threat of the sanatorium awaits any woman who steps out of line. This context puts into perspective Bertha’s attempt to try to control her outbursts of laughter at her dinner party in “Bliss,” where she thinks, “I must laugh or die.” (*KMSS* 152).

Significant to this reading of “Bliss” is the overlap of hysteria with the definition of bliss: a “mental, ethereal, spiritual, perfect joy or felicity, supreme delight; blessedness” (“bliss, n.2b” *OED*). It is a feeling of joy and pleasure so strong that it is equated to the heavenly, sharing an etymology with “bless” (“bliss” *OED*). Synonyms to “bliss” reflect this connection and include words like paradise; near relations to bliss are not only nirvana and Valhalla, but “afterlife” (“bliss” *Merriam Webster Dictionary*). So “bliss” may be thought of as a joy so supreme that it is linked to life after death, to an almost “morbid excitement.” Bliss and hysteria are thus intertwined, an entanglement that is satirically examined by Katherine Mansfield in “Bliss,” where Bertha falls into the double-bind of “feminine emotion;” caught between the societal requirement that she be emotional enough to justify her membership as one of the “gentler sex,” and yet not be so emotional that she dissolves into hysterics.

“Bliss” begins *in medias res*, with new mother and housewife Bertha Young returning home to get ready for the dinner party she is hosting. It begins: “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, to bowl a hoop, to throw something up in the air and catch it

again, or to stand still and laugh at—nothing—at nothing, simply” (KMSS 145). Immediately from these opening lines, a sense of Bertha’s character and context begin to become apparent: she is a woman well into adulthood who wishes to be able to play the child again, to be free from constraints of time and social respectability. Her clear inability to do so, taken from the wistful tone of the passage, indicates that there are some constraints not only on her person, but particularly on her body, which she cannot move in the way she wishes. Laughter is emphasized also, for there is a fragmentation, a break in thought, where she wishes to “laugh at—nothing—at nothing, simply” (KMSS 145). As Allan Pero observes in “‘Jigging Away into Nothingness’: Knowledge, Language and Feminine Jouissance in ‘Bliss’ and ‘Psychology,’” excessive, or purposeless laughter is one of the symptoms of hysteria, allowed in little girls, but certainly not grown women (105). Bertha, however, cannot help herself, for:

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...? (KMSS 145).

Bertha’s feeling of bliss is inevitable and spontaneous, and she is helpless to resist it, though propriety tells her she should. Curiously, her feeling of bliss, of supreme joy, is described as “a bright piece of that late afternoon sun” burning in her chest, “sending out a little shower of sparks,” into all her extremities. Bertha appears to be unconsciously in a state of hysteria that manifests itself consciously as ecstasy: it is no gentle sunlight that she swallows, but a piece of the sun itself, burning as it goes down, sending shocks through her body. This effect is one which Pero describes as *jouissance*, which refers “not to mere pleasure, but to a kind of suffering that attends the experience of bliss,” a sublime accompaniment to the joyous, morbid feeling of burning within her (102). It is “physical or intellectual ecstasy...considered extreme or overwhelming,” first theorized by Lacan and then by Roland Barthes as “the bliss of having

cultural expectations challenged or overturned” (“jouissance, n.” *OED*). Bertha experiences this overwhelming pleasure/pain when viewing the Pear Tree in her backyard with Pearl Fulton, where all at once her sexual desire is aroused by Pearl and the blooming tree, and at the same time she waits in breathless anticipation for some kind of “sign” from Pearl that would challenge the heteronormative society, and heterosexual marriage to which she is constrained.

Bertha thinks of her ecstatic emotion as a feeling akin to being “drunk and disorderly,” and declares, “how idiotic civilization is! Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?” (*KMSS* 145). This moment of ironic clarity amidst a ‘hysteric episode’ from Bertha reads as a satirical interjection of societal critique on the restrictions of women’s bodies and physical, perhaps even sexual freedoms. Pero writes that the feeling of bliss is positioned as the opposite to “idiotic civilization” itself, “as if the symbolic order, the seat of law, were in contradiction to the body’s freedom to enjoy itself,” which one might argue, for women, it is (102). Constraints on the agency and bodily autonomy of women were coded into the patriarchal social system, a restraint that Bertha, despite her privilege, and in fact because of it as a member of the upper-middle class, feels sharply. Thinking on this, Bertha wishes to change her simile: ““No, that about the fiddle is not quite what I mean,” she thought, running up the steps and feeling in her bag for the key – she’s forgotten it, as usual – and rattling the letterbox. “It’s not what I mean because —Thank you, Mary” – she went into the hall. “Is nurse back?”” (*Mansfield* 145). These extended emdashes act as both physical and mental silencers for Bertha; the manifestations of the aposiopesis in which both her thoughts, and her ecstatic emotions are cut off. She ceases talking to herself, and never reaches the epiphany of her thought on the “idiotcy of civilization” and the treatment of women’s bodies because she has entered the domestic sphere and must address the domestic staff and act the role of the “lady of the house.”

Her potentially feminist and certainly satirical revelation is fragmented and forgotten, like her house-key, as her entrance back into the domestic sphere ironically fulfills her desire to be young again: she is treated like a child herself, who must be let back into her own home by the maid, and sent off to the nurse.

As the narrative continues, the question of Bertha's intellectual and sexual maturity comes further to the fore. Setara Pracha, in "Apples and Pears: Symbolism and Influence in Daphne Du Maurier's 'The Apple Tree' and Katherine Mansfield's 'Bliss'" observes that "the abiding naivety of Bertha Young's immature worldview makes the reader question her childlike interpretation of events as she totters on the verge of womanhood without finally making the crossover" (174). Yet, as the reader comes to discover, she does have a husband, a child, a home, and a social life, seemingly the markers of womanhood in the domestic sphere of the upper-class. She goes to the dining-room to arrange the fruit she has just bought, the grapes which bring "the carpet up to the table," still feeling a "bright glowing place" in her chest that is,

almost unbearable. She hardly dared to breathe for fear of fanning it higher, and yet she breathed deeply, deeply. 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, waiting for something...divine to happen...that she knew must happen...infallibly (Mansfield 145).

This is a paragraph, and indeed a character, full of contradictions. The "glowing place," is "almost unbearable," though she fears to breathe, she inhales with deep pleasure, she does not wish to look into the mirror, but does so anyway and sees a woman, despite both her own worldview and the way that others treat her, she fears her own ecstatic emotion and yet trembles as if encountering the divine. "We are invited," observes Pero, "to view Bertha as a hysteric...certainly, she exhibits symptoms of hysteria, but that would mean that we utterly dismiss Bertha's enjoyment or bliss as pathological, as simply another hysterical symptom"

(105). In so obviously provoking the reader to consider Bertha “hysterical,” Mansfield lays the satirical trap; it is easy to fall into the uncomplicated assumption that Bertha is indeed hysterical, but does that then necessitate that her narrative be dismissed in its entirety? Many critics of the story agree that Bertha is an unreliable narrator; yet that unreliability is based on the notion that as she spends the whole of the story experiencing these ecstatic emotions, this ‘hysteria,’ she cannot be trusted to tell her own story. Her bliss cannot be read by Bertha as legitimate expression of emotion, but is instead made an indicator of Bertha’s ‘hysterical state.’

When she is finished arranging the grapes, Bertha steps back to capture the effect, and finds that the “dark table seemed to melt into the dusky light and the glass dish and the blue bowl to float in the air. This, of course, in her present mood, was so incredibly beautiful...She began to laugh. “No, no. I’m getting hysterical” (KMSS 146). Ellipses are used to express the “gap” or lacuna in this instance, where Bertha’s honest experience of this moment is shut down by some learned sense of right and wrong. Her laughing expression that “No, no. I’m getting hysterical” is filled with authorial irony; unlike Bertha, the reader is already given to understand that she is at that moment already in a state of ‘hysterical’ emotion. Satirically, it is played off as both a joke and a threat; Bertha seems to understand that hysteria is something of stereotype, a joke at the expense of women’s legitimate emotions. Yet it is also threatening to her, for she quickly leaves the room and runs upstairs to her child, distancing herself both mentally and physically from that moment of hallucinatory happiness. Instead of examining the feelings she terms “hysteria,” Bertha cuts herself off, and completes no more revelations of the self, anxious for the moment to deceive herself content with her life.

Sexuality and Naivete in “Bliss,” “At ‘Lehmann’s’” and “The Little Governess”

For Katherine Mansfield, sexuality was simultaneously liberating and dangerous. After discovering her bisexual desires in her youth, she conducted affairs with both men and women, participating in intimate and erotic friendships with female friends and transferring her affections freely. Mary Bergan observes that “having run through a variety of loves in her early London years, Mansfield seems to have experienced some version of homosexual panic which centered her fears not only on her unworthiness to experience sexual bliss but also on having forfeited the capacity to have children” (58). Challenges to both heterosexuality and maternal desire or lack thereof feature in multiple of Mansfield’s stories. In “Bliss,” in conjunction with the blossoming pear tree in her garden, and against her marriage with Harry, Bertha’s sexuality is queered not only through her attraction to Pearl Fulton, but to her “strange and almost terrifying,” attraction to her husband, Harry (*KMSS* 154). Almost paradoxically, Bertha’s attraction to Harry is queer despite their heterosexual marriage, because it is during this dinner party, after her moment of sexual awakening through her desire for Pearl, that Bertha experiences sexual attraction to Harry for the first time, and it is “strange and almost terrifying” to her.

Bertha Young’s sexual desire for Pearl Fulton, a “new find” from her club, is never fully verbalized aloud; Bertha relies on weighty silences to speak for her, and in turn reads connections into silent responses. Over the course of the story, Bertha’s emotions dash between contemplating the ‘domestic bliss’ she shares with her husband Harry, and her rising feelings of ecstatic and sexual desire in relation to Pearl. Pearl Fulton is one of several guests at Bertha’s dinner party. She is Bertha’s special “find,” who Bertha in fact knows very little of, for “up to a certain point Miss Fulton was rarely, wonderfully frank, but the certain point was there, and beyond that she would not go” (*KMSS* 147). It is this mystery which seems to attract Bertha, and indeed, possibly the sense that Pearl does not care to share more of herself with Bertha

immediately, that builds the attraction. Bertha recalls that they had met, and Bertha had “fallen in love with her, as she always did fall in love with beautiful women who had something strange about them” (*KMSS* 147). This casual admittance to “falling in love” seems slightly out of place in a character as repressed and self-silencing as Bertha, leaving the reader to wonder if she uses the term “love” casually, or performatively, or if this is the most honest part of the story: Bertha is truly in love with Pearl.

Pearl Fulton is a woman richly decorated by Bertha’s narration, so fair and yet so deep, that she seems impossible to fully comprehend. She is illuminated constantly in the text, gilded with descriptions of silver and other light colors. She comes into the room late, “all in silver, with a silver fillet binding her pale blond hair...smiling, her head a little on one side.” She is “cool” to Bertha’s touch, and “seldom did she look at people directly. Her heavy eyelids lay upon her eyes and the strange half smile came and went on her lips” (*KMSS* 151). This is a woman who displays a seemingly-effortless femininity, whose every aspect is sensuous, but who is paradoxically dressed in silver and white, appearing almost angelic, and pure beyond the reach of a mortal like Bertha. Her name implies a pure treasure, a pearl which glows like the moon. However, as Burgan notes, in “erotic discourse,” pearls can symbolize the clitoris (59). This lends a particularly-marked feminine sexuality to Pearl, who, described repeatedly as “cool,” paradoxically makes Bertha “blaze,” a feeling of ecstatic pain/pleasure, of *jouissance*. “What was there in the touch of that cool arm,” wonders Bertha, “that could fan – fan – start blazing – blazing – the fire of bliss that Bertha did not know what to do with?” (*KMSS* 151). Pero describes another term, *savoir* as “symbolic knowledge; it is the unconscious knowledge the subject does not know that she knows, but may come to know...it is the truth of one’s unconscious desire...and a form of *jouissance*” (101). Bertha’s desire to know what “was there

in the touch of that cool arm,” to be able to articulate in words the desire that she can feel, leads her back to a feeling of bliss and ecstasy, connected to Pearl.

In contrast to Pearl, Bertha is constantly associated with fire, and burning. Although she clearly employs domestic servants, Bertha herself lights the fire in the drawing room, feeling a “fire in her bosom” which cannot be put out by rationality. The drawing room has a balcony, which looks out over Bertha’s garden, and most vitally, on the tree within it, “a tall, slender pear tree in fullest, richest bloom” (*KMSS* 148). The description of the tree, so vital to Bertha’s narrative, deserves quotation in full:

It stood perfect, as though becalmed against the jade-green sky. Bertha couldn’t help feeling, even from this distance, that it had not a single bud or a faded petal. Down below, in the garden beds, the red and yellow tulips, heavy with flowers, seemed to lean upon the dusk. A grey cat, dragging its belly, crept across the lawn, and a black one, its shadow, trailed after. The sight of them, so intent and so quick, gave Bertha a curious shiver. “What creepy things cats are!” she stammered, and she turned away from the window and began walking up and down... (*KMSS* 148).

Bertha’s garden seems to be brimming with sensuality, from the “perfect” pear tree, with not a single faded petal, in the vibrancy of its life, to the “heavy” tulips, “leaning upon the dusk,” to the “grey cat dragging its belly,” across the lawn, closely followed by its shadow, the black cat. Bertha reacts in a complicated manner: she experiences a “curious shiver,” and although she turns away from the window, she paces, unable to stand still under this feeling she has experienced through the sexuality of nature. Her “blissful” mood trembles under the onslaught of this sensuous view, arousal and uncertainty causing her to pace frantically. Pamela Dunbar, in *Radical Mansfield: Double Discourse in Katherine Mansfield’s Short Stories*, writes that Bertha’s relationship to “bliss,” her ecstatic/hysterical feeling, is complex: “she both fears it and endeavors to precipitate an increase in its power” (21). Dunbar argues that at this point Bertha is still “sexually unawakened,” despite her marriage and motherhood (20). Bertha moves

uncomfortably away from visibly heterosexual desire, calling the cats “creepy,” but is clearly simultaneously aroused by sexuality in and of itself, pacing first, then flinging herself onto a couch, “as though overcome.” “I’m too happy – too happy!” she murmurs, and seems to “see on her eyelids the lovely pear tree with its wide open blossoms as a symbol of her own life” (*KMSS* 148). Bertha’s naivete regarding sexuality and desire makes it impossible for her to articulate her true feelings of sexual arousal, which seems forbidden to her: everything about this scene implies a sort of secrecy, from the slinking cats to the heavy tulips, and it is a secret she is at least consciously, not in on. Considering this, the only way she can describe herself is using the socially acceptable term of “happiness,” which is even “too much” – too overwhelming to Bertha.

This scene, wherein Bertha cannot articulate herself despite the truthfully heavy-handed symbolism surrounding her, is satirized by Mansfield. It seems almost ridiculous to the reader that Bertha cannot understand how her surroundings are affecting her. Yet one cannot blame her, for she is so clearly overwhelmed and underprepared to act on or even comprehend her feelings. This is a female character who has never before experienced sexual freedom or autonomy; she has been shut out because of her gender, and is now suffering the consequences. At the same time she proclaims that she does not understand why she feels so overwhelmed and fatigued because, “really – really – she had everything,” it is clear that she in fact has nothing satisfactory – she is unable to articulate her own general unhappiness, and so easily overwhelmed by any feeling of bliss or heightened emotion. To add to the complexity of the moment, the pear tree which Bertha admires “in perfect bloom,” is not necessarily a perfectly functioning tree. Helen Nebeker observes that pear trees are “bi-sexual,” containing both male and female organs of propagation. She describes how sometimes, “wherein the anther (male organ) ripens before the stigma matures enough to receive the pollen...self-fertilization cannot occur. Furthermore, such

flowers often cannot even be cross-pollinated; hence no fertilization is possible” (546). Dunbar adds, that although the blooms seem to suggest “a kind of bridal, or nubile, openness,” Bertha only has the one tree in her garden, suggesting instead sterility (25). One could argue, however, that sterility does not necessarily inhibit sexual attraction, and that indeed, Bertha and Pearl connect most deeply while both are gazing out at the pear tree: their queer relationship does not rely on the potential for reproduction as the spark of sexual desire. Indeed, Mansfield seems to reject the heteronormative notion that sexuality is ultimately for the purpose of procreation; this is Bertha’s sexual awakening, and it is under the aegis of her homosexual desire.

The pear tree suggests alternative sexualities to the heteronormative not just in its own ability to self-pollinate, but in its symbolic presence: as a tree, it takes on a phallic shape, but as a pear tree in particular, it takes on the feminine aspect of the curves of the pears. Complicating this analysis, however, is the understanding that this tree cannot physically bear fruit, making it productionally, if not aesthetically, useless, akin to the oppressive and patriarchal gender roles that situate women in the domestic sphere as the producers of children, and deem them worthless if they are unable to do so. Perhaps this is part of the attraction for Bertha: this is a tree that is beautiful, and sexual, and incapable of producing offspring, which would likewise be the result of a sexual relationship with Pearl. “Have you a garden?” asks Pearl, and Bertha, unable to verbalize her desire at this question, pulls back the curtain to show her the pear tree. “It was so still it seemed, like the flame of a candle, to stretch up, to a 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” (*KMSS* 153). Bertha sees herself as the (phallic) tree, the “flame” a repeated connection to her own “bliss,” moving to intercept the round, feminine moon that is Pearl. She deconstructs the traditional gendering of objects and female sexuality in this way, reconstructing it as more fluid.

Thus far, Bertha's sexual awakening and narrative growth have had little to nothing to do with her husband, Harry. When she thinks about him, as she searches for all the reasons that her marriage with him as made her happy in life, she must, even if subconsciously, search for the minute and almost absurd to confirm that indeed, she "has everything" with Harry. As if to convince herself of the truth of this, she begins to list all the aspects of her life that make her "too happy:"

Really – really – she had everything. She was young. Harry and she were as much in love as ever, and they got on together splendidly and were really good pals. She had an adorable baby. They didn't have to worry about money. They had this absolutely satisfactory house and garden. And friends – modern, thrilling friends, writers and painters and poets or people keen on social questions – just the kinds of friends they wanted. And then there were books, and there was music, and she had found a wonderful little dress-maker, and they were going abroad in the summer, and their new cook made the most superb omelettes.... "I'm absurd. Absurd!" (*KMSS* 148-9).

While she thinks she is listing all the aspects of her life that make it wonderful, in truth Bertha is discovering every superficiality that keeps her relationship with Harry going. Again, ellipses are used to create a gap, in this case perhaps because she has run out of things that make her 'happy,' right down to the "superb omelettes" the cook makes. All the items on this list fit in with the "feminine narrative" that Bertha is expected to uphold. Kaplan observes that "Mansfield frequently takes the culturally defined characteristics of "feminine" style as the object of satire" ("Sex, Danger, Freedom" 159). Bertha lists her nice things to the point of satirical ridicule; clearly, none of them make her feel fulfilled (*KMSS* 148). Several aspects of this list stand out as peculiar because they have to do with her relationship with Harry, which she describes as being "as in love as ever," already a direct contrast to what the reader has seen of Harry, which is sound of his voice rapping out the words "what is it," when Bertha wishes to try to describe her feelings of bliss to him. "Harry and she were as much in love as ever" seems a very convincing

argument, unless one reads it not as them being deeply in love with each other, but rather as never having been in love with each other.

Harry's "masculine" idiosyncrasies are mostly typical of a traditional husband – controlling the schedule of the house, and of Bertha – but in Bertha's mind they appear laughable, because Harry is satirized specifically as a character one can laugh at:

His passion for fighting – for seeking in everything that came up against him another test of his power and of his courage – that, too, she understood. Even when it made him, just occasionally, to other people, who didn't know him well, a little ridiculous perhaps...For there were moments when he rushed into battle where no battle was (*KMSS* 150).

Harry's attempt at being the "man of the house" is laughed at even by Bertha; his desire to project a machismo-like masculinity is mocked by Mansfield, and yet he still retains control over Bertha and the household. Significantly, after Bertha and Pearl have their moment of communion, where Bertha experiences a sexual awakening through her connection to Pearl and the pear tree, Bertha imagines defending Pearl to Harry, who has previously derided her. She thinks, "I shall try to tell you when we are in bed tonight what has been happening. What she and I have shared" (*KMSS* 154). This thought, of going to bed with Harry, "the house will be quiet – quiet. The lights will be out. And you and he will be alone together in the dark room – in the warm bed..." is "strange and almost terrifying," and yet arousing to her: "for the first time in her life Bertha Young desired her husband" (*KMSS* 154). As Dunbar suggests, in this story desire is positioned quite closely to fear, and whether that fear is fear of sex in general, fear of heterosexual or homosexual desire, or fear of Harry, Mansfield leaves somewhat to the reader's interpretation (24). As Chantal D'Arcy interprets it in "Katherine Mansfield's 'Bliss': 'The Rare Fiddle' as Emblem of the Political and Sexual Alienation of Woman," Bertha "does not realize, or else refuses to acknowledge, the real nature of her bodily impulses...the heroine's repressed homosexual disposition" (266). When the final denouement comes, when Bertha sees Harry turn

Pearl “violently to him,” saying, “I adore you,” as Pearl “laid her moonbeam fingers on his cheeks and smiled her sleepy smile,” she has no capacity to react, either in her own mind, or verbally. Harry is suddenly threatening; not only does he offer competition for Pearl’s affections, which he seems to have won, but his “nostrils quivered; his lips curled back in a hideous grin,” he appears animal-like to Bertha. Then, finally, Bertha is left alone with Harry in the house, in the darkness. The betrayal of Bertha by Harry and Pearl takes the narrative, which has been running on Bertha’s unarticulated dreams and barely acknowledged desires, and turns it suddenly deadly serious. Running to the window, all Bertha can do is remember Pearl’s final words to her, “Your lovely pear tree!” as if on repeat, and cry, “Oh, what is going to happen now!” (*KMSS* 155). The pear tree, “as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still,” once the symbol of an illicit and yet arousing sexual awakening, and her deepest connection to Pearl, now offers her nothing, sterile in its stillness and its solitude, itself a betrayal of her deepest desires.

“Bliss” is so effective in part because it plays on the naivete of Bertha as sexually unawakened to both heterosexual and queer desire. The sexual naivete of the female protagonist is a theme that Mansfield employs repeatedly. Her stories revolve around tensions that are created within one or more of her characters: sexual pleasure and pain and fear, motherhood and youth and free sexuality, and tenderness and delicacy and violence, often which occur in the same story. Mansfield’s “The Little Governess,” is one such story, published in 1915, about a young governess traveling by train to her new post. She is young and traveling alone, and very determined not to be naive about her journey. At every turn of the beginning of the story there is another threat from a male figure: from the porter who tries to take her luggage and then pay him for it, who takes his revenge by tearing the “Dames Seules” sign off of her carriage, to the rowdy group of young men who stare at her through the windows, the “better to see the one little girl in

the corner,” and invite her to join them, laughing at how serious she is (*KMSS* 53). Finally, she is faced with an older man, who joins her in her carriage and, who, perhaps because he does not immediately seem a threat to her, she begins to trust implicitly, and to see as her grandfather. She thinks about “how kindly the old man in the corner watched her bare little hand turning over the big white pages, watched her lips moving as she pronounced the long words to herself” (*KMSS* 55). Mansfield juxtaposes the obvious threat of the other men on the carriage with the infantilization of the “little governess,” with her “bare little hand,” on the “big white pages,” struggling to read in German. “Perhaps,” the little governess thinks, “the flush that licked his cheeks and lips was a flush of rage that anyone so young and tender should have to travel alone unprotected through the night” (*KMSS* 55). Mansfield satirically emphasizes that for women, especially young, vulnerable women alone, threats can come from any direction; the only commonality between them is that they are all men.

In “Sex, Danger, Freedom,” Kaplan observes that the little governess is the representation of how women are set up as “a *target* for victimization,” with absolutely no control over the situations they are placed in (390). In “The Little Governess,” Mansfield makes explicit the path the plot is going to follow. For once, the reader is fully aware of what is going to happen, at least in some sense, because Mansfield continues to build the one-sided sexual arousal that is so visible to the reader, and ironically invisible, or perhaps naively, hopefully ignored by the female protagonist. The old man buys berries from the side of the train for her, and “they were so big and juicy she had to take two bites to them – the juice ran all down her fingers – and it was while she munched the berries that she first thought of the old man as a grandfather! What a perfect grandfather he would make! Just like one out of a book!” (*KMSS* 57). The little governess, sent by herself to a position with a family in Germany, wishes so desperately for familial affection

and protection that she imagines that ideal onto the figure of the old man, ignoring the threat his attentions signify. “By “giving herself up” to the agency of the old man,” Kaplan writes, “she loses her own” (“Sex, Danger, Freedom” 392). Despite knowing she needs to go to her hotel to begin her position, she allows the old man to take her with him around Munich. Her “grateful baby heart” glows with love for her “fairy grandfather,” and allows her to walk right into his flat, where he begins to sexually assault her. She finds herself “pressed against his hard old body and his twitching knee, and though she shook her head from side to side, distracted, kissed her on the mouth. On the mouth! Where not a soul who wasn’t a near relation had ever kissed her before....” (*KMSS* 61). In a sudden turn, the little governess’ eyes have been opened: this is no “storybook grandfather” anymore, but a sexual threat. When the next line begins, she is running down the street, away from the flat; Mansfield uses aposiopesis again, breaking off the plot and leaving the reader to wonder what gap of time the ellipses conceal. “Once again in Mansfield’s fiction,” writes Kaplan, sexuality is dangerous, and a woman becomes a co-conspirator in her own destruction when she incorporates the ideology of her oppressor into her sense of identity” (“Sex, Danger, Freedom” 392). The feminist satirical message is clear and sobering – women cannot afford to trust anyone; given the chance, that trust will only be used to oppress them further.

One of Mansfield’s earliest stories, “At ‘Lehmann’s’,” was published in 1910 and centers on a young woman named Sabina, a shop girl in Lehmann’s café who also struggles with the problem of naivete, especially in relation to sex and sexuality. Sabina takes on extra work when Herr Lehmann’s wife, the Frau, has “chosen the quiet season to have a baby” (*KMSS* 9). This is one of Mansfield’s earlier stories, published around the time she began to write for *The New Age*, and her satire is slightly more overt than in “Bliss.” The narrator observes that the Frau, “a big

woman at the best of times...had grown so enormous in the process that her husband told her she looked unappetizing and had better remain upstairs and sew” (*KMSS* 9). This concealment of the female body that is pregnant is paired with the language of consumption, that she is “unappetizing,” and the language of fatness, that she is “enormous.” The Frau is hidden throughout the story, and remains nameless, she is only known as “Frau Lehmann,” the wife of her husband. This attempted erasure is ironic, for even though the Frau is constrained to the upstairs to be hidden away from the public, Sabina spends much of her day thinking about her, conversing about her with visitors to the shop, and indeed later, hearing her in labor. Sabina knows nothing about the conception or birth of children. She thinks of birth as “Frau Lehmann’s bad time,” and wonders that she “knew practically nothing except that the Frau had a baby inside her, which had to come out – very painful indeed. One could not have one without a husband – that also she realized. But what had the man got to do with it?” (*KMSS* 9). This satirical question is as pointed as it is comedic: Sabina does not understand the man’s role in his wife’s pregnancy because she has not seen him interacting in any way with it: he goes to his friend’s houses to drink, and the Frau stays upstairs where she “will not be seen,” but will do all the work. This thought process not only reveals a certain sexual and educational naivete in Sabina, but directs the reader to consider from a different perspective, how the burden of childbearing is placed exclusively upon women who are not given any kind of formal sexual education to assist them in dealing with it.

The absences in Sabina’s knowledge about birth conflate with the absences in her knowledge about sex, and it is under the contemplation of this mystery that Sabina sees a “Young Man” visiting the shop, whose “restless gaze wandering over her face and figure gave her a curious deep thrill in her body, half pleasure, half pain” (*KMSS* 10). He calls her over and

shows her the sketch of a naked woman, covering the face of it, and telling her that it “could be her own photograph,” and generally inviting her into a sexually charged conversation, about which she does not know how to answer or feel. Confused and aroused, she runs up the stairs to the Frau, who she describes, “heaving up in her chair,” as “ugly-ugly-ugly” (*KMSS* 11). Later, lying in bed, she hugs her “little body,” and thinks,

‘I wouldn’t be the Frau for one hundred marks – not for a thousand marks. To look like that.’ And half-dreaming, she imagined herself heaving up in her chair with the port wine bottle in her hand as the Young Man entered the café (*KMSS* 11).

Sabina’s confusion about her feelings on sex and motherhood entwine the two together: she thinks of the Frau’s body as “ugly,” but imagines in her “half-dream,” herself “heaving up in her chair,” using the same language as she used to think about the Frau’s pregnant body. Her dream is what begins to conflate the two together, as she envisions herself pregnant, and the Young Man entering the room: clearly a connection has been made between sexual arousal and maternity, although the mechanics of that connection are still a mystery.

In “At ‘Lehmann’s’,” this connection between sexual arousal and maternity is suddenly intertwined with fear and violence. The Young Man comes to the café again while the Frau is in labor, and follows Sabina into the ladies’ cloak-room. She feels at turns like laughing and shrieking, and as they clasp hands “a strange tremor thrilled Sabina” (*KMSS* 13). Yet that tremor turns from arousal to fear as he suddenly asks her “roughly,” “Look here...are you a child, or are you playing at being one?” For Sabina, the mood changes suddenly; she does not know how to respond to either his verbal or physical assault, and is frozen in place until from above they hear a “frightful, tearing shriek,” from the Frau above, and she is able to pull away from him (*KMSS* 13). Whether it is because Sabina, even with her limited knowledge of reproduction, is reminded by the Frau’s labor of the potential consequences of sexual desire, or because sexual arousal was

so suddenly forced into fear, to the naive Sabina, sexual desire has just been traumatically intertwined with fear, violence, and maternity.

Violent Mothers and Maternal Desire in “The Child-Who-Was-Tired,” “The Woman at the Store,” and “Bliss”

Mansfield’s feminist satires rely on intersecting tensions of female identity to “maximize reality:” just as none of her characters share the exact same voice or experiences, so no individual character faces just one oppression. In her fiction, as “At Lehmann’s” demonstrates, motherhood is associated with both sexual violence and fear. Saralyn Daly in her biography of Mansfield observes how “Mansfield’s life taught her to admire the rose, but in her own repeated image, to look for the “snail underneath the leaf”” (10). Sometimes, as in “The Child-Who-Was-Tired,” Mansfield offers the reader very little of the rose. “The Child-Who-Was-Tired” was published in 1910, and is the story of a young Child who lives and works as the nurse, cook, and housemaid for a family. There is one maternal figure in this story, which is to say, one biological mother, and she is violent to the Child and to her own children. The Child is woken up by the Frau, who calls her a “good-for-nothing brat,” and tells her to “get up and light the oven or I’ll shake every bone out of your body” (“The Child” 1). As opposed to the flighty if sometimes affectionate Bertha, the Frau in this story is violent, to her own children and the Child alike. She is also pregnant again, for which the Child thinks, “another baby! Hasn’t she finished having them *yet?*” (“The Child” 2). In one moment of clear satire within the story, the Frau beats all of the children for misbehaving, including the Child who had not misbehaved, and “returned to bed, with a comfortable sense of her maternal duties in good working order for the day” (“The Child” 3). This is a very distinct voice from Mansfield’s other stories, yet offers the same complexity. The Frau, who is pregnant,

complains of feeling ill; “my insides are all twisted up with having children too quickly,” she remarks, breaking the simple morality that story had presented before, with the Child positioned on the side of good, and the Frau and her family on the side of bad (“The Child” 5). Even the Frau, unbeatable in the eyes of the Child, is oppressed under the dual patriarchal systems of male sexual dominance and lacking sexual education for women. She is clearly unable to protest having more children. Morality is then skewed even further: the Child has not only learned violence from the Frau, but also the hardships of motherhood, a role she has taken on with the new babies in practice if not in body. So, when she “has a beautiful marvelous idea,” and smothers the baby in the Frau’s “pink bolster,” it is difficult to decide how to judge her (“The Child” 6). While she has done something terrible, there is a sense that she truly could not have known better.

The theme of violence and motherhood is continued on in “The Woman At the Store,” published in 1912. In the story, several men riding through the “outback” of New Zealand stop and rest their horses at a store that one of them, Hin, knows of, where there lives a man who will “give yer a bottle of whisky before ‘e shakes hands with yer,” and a woman “who’ll promise you something else before she shakes hands with you” (*KMSS* 28). Already, the characters are staging the scene: this is a working-class setting, where social and sexual expectations are less rigid than for Bertha in “Bliss.” A woman comes out of the store into the hot sun, which “gleamed on the woman’s yellow hair, over her flapping pinafore and the rifle she was carrying. The child hid behind her” (*KMSS* 29). This image presents a distinct contrast to the stereotypically maternal and feminine, where the casual mention of a rifle is inserted into a list that includes gleaming hair, a pinafore dress, and the presence of a child. While she offers to make food and provides ointment for the horses, the men repeatedly ask after her “old man,” her husband, who she says has been gone awhile shearing sheep (*KMSS* 31). When one of the men, asks if the “kid” takes after her

father, the woman shouts, “No, she don’t; she’s the dead spit of me. Any fool could see that. Come on in now, Els, you stop messing in the dirt” (*KMSS* 31). The tone of the story shifts when the kid, Els, shows the men a drawing she made: “Those drawings of hers were extraordinary and repulsively vulgar. The creations of a lunatic with a lunatic’s cleverness. There was no doubt about it, the kid’s mind was diseased. While she showed them to us she worked herself up into a mad excitement, laughing and trembling, shooting out her arms” (*KMSS* 34). She announces aloud that she is going to draw what her mother had “told me I never was to,” to which her mother runs over and smacks her, “bawling.” The vital detail of the story is the kids’ drawings, and naturally the adult men who see them, assume her “mind is diseased,” especially as she breaks into a fit that could be termed ‘hysterical’ when they look at her drawings. She is written off in part because of her age and gender, so it comes as a shock to everyone when later that night she draws the thing she was never supposed to draw, and it is a picture of her mother, “shooting at a man with a rook rifle and then digging a hole to bury him in” (*KMSS* 36). The story takes a swift turn from being charged with emotion and activity, to dead stillness as the men sit that night with the drawing next to them. Both the violence of the woman and the violent defiance of the kid come as a shock to the men, whose own gendered perceptions led them until this point, to dismiss the emotions and clearly troubled homelife of the woman and the kid as unimportant. They, and the reader, are left to wonder if the kid’s mind is really “diseased,” or if all her drawings are representations of her traumas.

In “Bliss,” the narrative of motherhood changes. Bertha is not violent, but neither does she follow the prescribed social rules of devoted maternity, an ironic double-bind considering that she does follow the rules of her social class in employing a nurse for the baby. When Bertha runs up to see her daughter, she immediately comes into conflict with the nurse, a staple fixture

of the upper-class household, and a figure who, due to the mandates of society, takes what responsibility Bertha might have had in raising her daughter away from her; she becomes the parent to the baby, and Bertha is left asking for permission to spend time with her own child. The baby is nicknamed Little B, a satirical suggestion that she is going to grow up to mirror her mother Bertha, frozen in a state of un verbalized dissatisfaction with her life and consigned to presiding over superficial domestic affairs. This reflection, however, works both ways, for Bertha seems to exist in a state of nearly childlike naivete, which keeps her emotionally constrained to a childlike maturity. Women were rewarded for developing their emotional, not their intellectual side, and yet Bertha is punished by the nurse for getting the baby too excited. This is again a representation of the double-bind of her position as an upper-middle class woman: she needs to show enough emotion to be considered properly maternal and feminine, but not so much that she appears lower-class or ‘hysterical.’ When she comes into the nursery, Little B “began to jump,” which makes Nurse – conspicuously unnamed, perhaps because of her position of simultaneous professional authority and personal unimportance – purse her lips, “and that meant Bertha had come into the room at another wrong moment (*KMSS 146*). This is clearly a repeated event, where Bertha becomes the outsider, and the intruder into this scene of calm domesticity, despite being the baby’s mother. Even when she wants to question Nurse, who absurdly “let Little B tug on a big dog’s ear,” she is silenced by this feeling of being an imposter, of being scolded by an authority figure. “She stood watching them,” Mansfield writes, “her hands by her side, like the poor little girl in front of the rich little girl with the doll” (*KMSS 146*). Juxtaposed against this bastion of domesticity, Bertha is displaced from her role as lady of the house, and feels poorer for losing possession of her baby, metaphorically imagined as a “doll:” an object to love and coddle, and forget when it’s out of sight.

The baby indeed charms Bertha so much that she begs Nurse to let her finish feeding Little B. She asks for permission, which is only reluctantly given, because “‘Well, M’m, she oughtn’t to be changed hands while she’s eating’ said Nanny, still whispering. ‘It unsettles her, it’s very likely to upset her,’” (*KMSS* 146). Bertha, in a moment of satirical clarity, thinks on this absurdity. “‘Why have a baby if it has to be kept – not in a case like a rare, rare fiddle – but in another woman’s arms?’” (*KMSS* 146). ‘Why be given a body?’ and ‘Why have a baby?’ are two of the driving questions of this story. The implicit answer to both is that patriarchal society demands it. Indeed, the patriarchal domestic system has ironically left the mother purposeless, and it is in this sense of displacement that Bertha questions the purpose of motherhood, and even womanhood more broadly. ‘What is a woman without a baby,’ is a question that Mansfield herself, unable to have children, might have been questioning. Significantly, when Bertha insists on feeding her baby, Nurse relents with the following warning: “‘Now, don’t excite her after her supper. You know you do M’m! And I have such a time with her after!’” (*KSM* 146). Within the context of the story, “excite” takes on new meanings here: baby girls should not be made emotionally excited, but should rather be kept docile and calm; training for later in life. Nurse’s reluctance to hand Little B to Bertha, who she knows will “excite” her, seems to indicate that Bertha’s ‘hysteria’ is catching.

Mary Burgan observes that “the nurse is the first of a number of threatening parental figures in “Bliss.” Bertha’s husband is another. He is a boor, but his ruthless adulthood is one of the things that attracts Bertha; it can reinforce her feeling that she is essentially a child” (64). Throughout the narrative of “Bliss,” perhaps until her sexual awakening by the pear tree, Bertha indeed takes on qualities normally attributed to a child: getting excited, wanting to dance around the pavement and skip home. She desires to be infantilized because she does not desire

motherhood; to her, Little B is more a doll than a child, and she admires her like a toy, not like a mother. Mansfield satirizes Bertha's absurd interaction with the Nurse and Little B, and the effect is that the reader feels sympathy for Bertha, and to a further extent, sympathy for Little B, who as it stands, is going to grow up, get married, and be consumed by the same patriarchal oppressions her mother faces in "Bliss."

Conclusion

Katherine Mansfield's feminist satires break not only with the substance of contemporary literature of her time, but with the structure of it as well. Defying centuries of satirical tradition, Mansfield uses her skills in satire and irony to suggest that the suffering in women's lives is often caused by the patriarchal systems of oppression in which they live. Women in her stories encounter rigid expectations of motherhood and maternal desire, the seemingly universal diagnosis of hysteria for any 'female ailment,' lack of sexual knowledge, naivete, sexual repression, the threat of sexual assault, and social and sexual marital pressures. The protagonists of her stories are often unable to verbally resist the oppressions which limit them; instead, it is their silences, whether external or self-enacted, that speak for them. Part of Mansfield's satirical style is this creation of meaning through the absence of language. Women have for centuries suffered inequalities and oppressions in silence; in the weighted lacuna of Mansfield's fictions, that silence gives voice to trauma and the experience of oppression.

Despite taking place in different locations, Mansfield's stories share experiences of trauma. The stories that have been selected for analysis take place in different locations: in England, in Germany, in New Zealand, and in transit. Mansfield lived in and understood these

different places, and pulls from her memory, and her emotional experiences of them, to write realistic stories about the women who live there. The devastating emotional impact of her stories on the reader comes from her ability to change the angle at which the reader can view the narrative. Her satire comes into play here, by offering suggestions of potential interpretations which are swiftly made serious by the turn of the story, where clear, honest, sometimes brutal language takes its place. The shadow of perverse desire which hangs over the old man in the carriage with the little governess, is confirmed by the direct language of assault at the moment of the story's climax in his flat, as his "hard body" and "twitching knee" make his intentions unironically clear to both the reader and the little governess. The satirical image of Harry in Bertha's mind as puffed up and ridiculous takes a sudden violent turn, when the fragmented narration that has offered only snippets of plot until now, suddenly becomes sharp and quick: "Harry's nostrils quivered; his lips curled back in a hideous grin while he whispered: 'Tomorrow,' and with her eyelids Miss Fulton said: 'Yes.'" (*KMSS* 155). It is in these moments of sharpening, where the authorial irony disappears and the character is enlightened with the same, tragic knowledge as the reader, that Mansfield sends her strongest message. Women are so constantly under threat and oppression that they themselves may not even be consciously aware that their lives are unfulfilling and unfair, until they are shocked by some event into reality. This is Mansfield's satirical feminism: using the shocking, brutal, and taboo, she likewise shocks her reader into protesting women's inequality, thereby progressing women's liberation.

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Word Count: 14,414

Word Count Including Apparatus: 15,809