

Relationship between
the enigmatic quality
of modernist short
stories and abrupt ...



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Discuss the relationship between the enigmatic quality of modernist short stories and their abrupt endings.

Frank Kermode argues in his book *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* that "...whether you think time will have a stop or that the world is eternal; there is still a need to speak humanly of life's importance in relation to it - a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end.'.[1]With a literary tradition that seeks to provide closure and understanding within this narrative, modernist short stories disrupt this sense of security by ending abruptly.. As a result of constraints on the narrative due to their length, and the complexity of issues addressed within this confined space, both the protagonists within the short stories and the readers themselves do not gain full understanding of events with ease, if at all, which makes the stories themselves enigmatic. Abrupt endings in modernist short stories leave the reader with unanswered questions and removes the readers' sense of security that they gain from viewing their lives as a firm narrative of beginning and end and thus more accurately mirrors the unpredictable nature of life. I will consider Samuel Beckett's *Dante and the Lobster* and Katherine Mansfield's *Bliss* in light of these statements and examine how the enigmatic nature of the complex allusions made within the texts are reinforced by the abrupt ending of the narrative.

Within the confined space of the modernist short story the protagonists cannot experience revelations to the fullest extent and gain complete understanding. Thus it is the role of the reader to decipher the ultimate truth and leaves the reader pondering the multiple plausible endings to the

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narrative. This lack of understanding within the consciousness of the protagonist is presented through their immobility within the narrative. With this full understanding one can assume that the protagonists may gain a new found mobility that is not presented within the narrative of the short story and it abruptly ends before the protagonists' full realisation. Katherine Mansfield's *Bliss* presents a woman who occupies a liminal space between childhood and womanhood. The short story opens with 'Although Bertha Young was thirty she still had moments like this when she wanted to run instead of walk, to take dancing steps..., to bowl a hoop, to throw something up..., or to stand still and laugh at – nothing – nothing, simply.'^[2] This opening phrase presents Bertha's overwhelming energy and feeling of bliss through asyndeton and the use of listing as it quickens the pace of the line and mimics Bertha's overflow of emotion. This feeling of elation is in opposition to the content as the narrator is describing what Bertha wishes to do but what she cannot. Bertha is immediately introduced to the reader as a protagonist without independence or social mobility. Mansfield's name choice associates Bertha with her productive capabilities and within the narrative she is repeatedly presented within her home and thus she is inextricably linked with domestic life. Despite this she appears unable to fulfil her role as wife and mother. Despite being Little B's mother the Nanny is presented as adopting a more involved role in the raising of the child, to the point of not wanting Bertha to interfere with her upbringing. Even upon the discovery of her husband's affair Bertha does not react initially and continues her unexciting conversation about a mundanely named poem 'Why Must it Always be Tomato Soup?'.^[3] Bertha's lack of independence and the restrictive nature of her role of wife and mother prohibits her from

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expressing discontent. Had Mansfield not ended the short story abruptly but continued to a narration to the point of resolution and happiness for her protagonist, the negative presentation of the immobility of her protagonist may have lost its effectiveness.

Similarly, *Dante and the Lobster* opens with the idea of stasis. Belacqua is described as being 'stuck' and 'so bogged that he could move neither backward nor forward.'^[4] Beckett's protagonist is named after a character in Dante's *The Divine Comedy* who is representative of indolence, this use of intertextuality contributes to the enigmatic nature of the short story as it is the role of the reader to infer the higher meaning that the limited textual space does not allow for. Dante's Belacqua does not attempt to climb up Mount Purgatory and reach heaven, nor does he travel down towards hell. Sam Slothe argues 'Dante's Belacqua is stuck in a lethargy that delays his spiritual progress. On the other hand Beckett's Belacqua is stuck on a loftier clime.'^[5] The 'loftier clime' represents Belacqua's repeated inability to gain full understand of either the literature he studies or the situations he encounters within the narrative. This lack of understanding demonstrates the stagnancy of his situation. Belacqua's lack of development is demonstrated by his willingness to abandon his studies 'when he heard the midday strike. At once he switched his mind off its task.' despite the earlier statement that 'he pored over the enigma, he would not concede himself conquered...'.^[6] Frank Kermode looked at the long literary tradition of fictions that portrayed the end of human existence. He argues that 'Such models of the world make tolerable one's moment between beginning or end, or at any rate they keep up drowsy emperors awake.'^[7] This implies the security

humankind gain from believing they are part of a narrative controlled by some higher power, can lead them to become less proactive in improving or changing their situation as they believe, to an extent, that theirs and the world's fate are predestined. Both Dante's and Beckett's *Belacqua* are presented as intellectually and spiritually 'stuck' yet unmotivated to improve their situations. Beckett was concerned with the meaninglessness and futility of life and the abrupt ending of the story reinforces the enigmatic nature of human existence by removing the false sense of security provided by the idea of a predestined end. This in turn presents as convoluted form of encouragement to adopt a mindset of self-determination opposed to lethargic complacency.

William Warde looks at how "new criticism" was used to understand the complex structure of short stories and it 'concerns itself with the work of art as object and emphasizes image and symbol, especially as used thematically and mythically so that a large significance...can be revealed in a seemingly trivial or insignificant incident.' [8] This is evident in *Bliss* with the symbolism of the pear tree. The tree is first introduced through the description 'At the far end, against the wall, there was a tall slender pear tree in fullest richest bloom; it stood perfect...' [9] Mansfield consistently represents a distance between Bertha and the pear tree which represents her inability to gain full understanding of its meaning. The metaphorical meaning of the pear tree is not explicit within the text, yet the protagonist's initially blissful state causes her to assume it is 'a symbol of her own life.' [10] Yet when admiring the pear tree with Pearl, a woman who Bertha's feelings towards are ambiguous, Mansfield describes the tree in terms of fire and heat imagery. Mansfield

uses the simile ' like the flame of a candle, to stretch up...to grow taller and taller as they gazed – almost to touch the rim of the round, silver moon.'

[11]The presentation of a growing fire and the presentation of the women physically ' side by side', connected through plural pronouns such as ' they' and ' their', it appears that Mansfield is suggesting a shared and growing passion between the two women. In light of this, the positioning of the pear tree at the furthest part of the garden from her suggests Bertha's inability to express or engage in these repressed homosexual feelings.

In Mansfield's *Bliss* there is ambiguity surrounding the nature of Bertha's fascination with Pearl which the narrative length and abrupt ending do not allow to come to pass fully. The narrator informs the reader that ' Bertha had fallen in love with her, as always did fall in love with beautiful women who had something strange about them.'.[12]The notion of love when framed against the claim that Pearl is ' strange' could imply her strangeness is derived from awareness of her homosexual tendencies, tendencies which would have been considered taboo for much of Mansfield's contemporary audience. However, this strangeness may also allude to a mild jealousy Bertha has for this more interesting and exotic women. Bertha associates Pearl with symbols of modernity, for example she makes the statement that Pearl ' lives in taxis.'.[13]By aligning Pearl with modern life she is demonstrating an independence the ' strange' woman enjoys that middle-class family life would not allow. Despite Bertha's claim of happiness she describes how she and Harry ' had this absolutely satisfactory house and garden.'.[14]The use of the unemotive adjective ' satisfactory' implies a lack of excitement in her life, something that is furthered through the short story

as it follows the mundane social gathering. This notion of mediocrity of Bertha's life is reinforced by her husband's unimpassioned compliment that her soufflé was 'very admirable'.^[15] This notion of jealousy is supported by the discovery of Pearl's affair with Harry as Bertha had previously claimed that her and her husband 'were as much in love as ever...'.^[16] Nonetheless, after the discovery of the affair Bertha remains calm and continues to engage in menial conversation with Eddie. It is only when Pearl initiates physical contact and holds 'her hand a moment longer...' that Bertha is overwhelmed with emotion and runs to the window to see her beloved pear tree.^[17] It appears that the reader, the narrator and Bertha do not have full understanding at the end of the short story. Warde argues 'these stories also contain tremendously complex internal structures, growing out of and reflecting the growing problems of the twentieth-century experience.'^[18] These unresolved ambiguities make *Bliss* enigmatic in itself and Mansfield, by ending the short stories before understanding is complete, leaves the ending not confined to one concrete finish but multiple possible endings.

Beckett utilises the narrative restrictions of short story to leave the reader with a complex amalgamation of allusions and intense descriptions of Belacqua's meal preparation and consumption without explanation of how they link until the abrupt ending. Beckett presents Belacqua struggling with the translation of the Italian 'pietà', unfortunately he discovers that there is no direct translation into English, it can only be translated as either pity or piety. This encompasses Belacqua's struggle between understanding the text in a poetic way or in a religious way. This concept of pity is something

that is alluded to elsewhere in the text and subconsciously concerns Belacqua despite having allegedly ‘switched his mind off its task’.[19] During the description of Belacqua’s various gastronomical exploits the narrative is interrupted with allusions to the imminent execution of a murderer named McCabe. There is an inherent violence in the description of Belacqua’s toast making process, the narrative describes how ‘he would very quickly that fat white look off its face...’ and how the bread needed to be ‘done to a dead end...’.[20] Beyond this violence, Belacqua attributes life-like attributes to his food. Belacqua makes reference to the bread’s ‘face’ and describing how the gorgonzola was ‘sweating’ and ‘alive’, these life-like attributes are framed as what he finds appealing in his food. Beckett’s presentation of Belacqua’s unusually violent approach to his food and his preoccupation with the translation of ‘pietà’ is only understood as the short story ends. Up until this point comments on McCabe have been subtly filtered through the narrative, yet now he considers ‘poor McCabe’ whilst ‘gripping his parcel’ containing the lobster and pondering the question ‘Why not piety and pity both, even down below?’.[21] In light of the imminent death of McCabe following his petition for mercy being rejected, and the painful death of the lobster, the inability to translate ‘pietà’ is given meaning. Slote argues Belacqua ‘would be unstuck if there would be a word that would mean both pity and piety...But, as it is, there is not, as is evinced in the lobster’s slow death.’.[22]

The abrupt departure from the short story mirrors the reader’s abrupt entrance into the protagonist’s day. The complex narrative technique Beckett employs in *Dante and the Lobster* contributes to its enigmatic

quality. The narrator's voice and the protagonist's voice are often conflated and it difficult to determine whose thoughts are being presented.

Occasionally Belacqua's thoughts are expressed explicitly ' So, he thought, having regulated the flow of the grill...', yet at other points the narration is focalised through Belacqua and the other characters, and less frequently the narrator's own voice is presented ' I need scarcely say...'. Notably it is the narrator's voice that interrupts the narrative which causes the short story to abruptly end. As Belacqua fails to understand the passages of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, he also fails to comprehend the method by which lobsters are cooked. Despite realising the painful way in which the lobster will come to its end, for Belacqua the revelation is not fully complete as he naively thinks it will be a ' quick death', something that the narrator interrupts the story to aggressively rebuke. The narrator informs the reader that Belacqua's wishful thinking is wholly incorrect with the monosyllabic ' It is not.'. It is only with the interruption of the narrative through the narrator's voice that offers absolute understanding of the cruelty of the cooking process.

Abrupt endings allow the modernist writer to make a comment through structure and form that the length of narration does not allow. Full understanding of events would attribute a completeness that may not necessarily be desired. Part of the enigmatic quality of modernist short stories arises from the author's inability to fully express controversial thought and practices within the narrative because of the time period in which they were writing. William Warde writes of how writers such as Mansfield have adopted the Chekhovian " slice-of-life" style of short story '

which reflect the confusing and complex formlessness of life itself; yet in their unique view of reality these stories imply a conscious plotting that is not antithetical to the view of plots with beginnings, middles and ends.'[23]The enigmatic quality of short stories attributes it a sense of realism, and the abrupt end solidifies the presentation of the unpredictable and complex nature of human existence.

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[2]Mansfield, K. ' Bliss' in *Katherine Mansfield's Selected Stories*, ed. O'Sullivan, V. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006) p145

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[4]Beckett, S. ' Dante and the Lobster' in *Evergreen Review* , vo. 1, No. 1(1957)

[5]Slote, S. (2010) ' Stuck in Translation: Beckett and Borges on Dante', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1, p15

[6]Beckett, op. cit.,

[7]Kermode, op. cit., p4

[8]Warde, W. B. (1976) ' The Short Story: Structure of a New Genre', *The South Central Bulletin* , p156

[9]Mansfield, op. cit., p148

[10]Ibid., p148

[11]Mansfield, op. cit., p153

[12]Ibid., p147

[13]Ibid., p150

[14]Mansfield, op. cit., p148

[15]Ibid., p152

[16]Ibid., p148

[17]Ibid., p155

[18]Warde, op. cit., p156

[19]Beckett, op. cit.,

[20]Ibid.,

[21]Ibid.,

[22]Slote op. cit., p22

[23]Warde, op. cit., p156