

Anguish



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Sometimes, people have a tendency to disguise their anguish with elements of happiness and constantly tell themselves that they are happy when they truly are not. Bertha Young from Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss" believed that she was truly happy in her life because she seemed to have everything she needed. However, she comes to the horrible realization that her own blissful relationships are aligned against her happiness, even her own husband, Harry, who has an affair with her mysterious friend, Pearl. Bertha's feelings of bliss and perfect contentment in her life are in conflict with the harsh reality of the less than favorable incidents within her relationships with Harry, Pearl and even herself - in terms of her symbolic pear tree - and her perceptions of these relationships.

In the beginning of the story, Bertha's feelings of 'bliss' are in conflict with Harry's actions towards her because she feels a notable distance from him. When Bertha was called to answer the phone, "down she flew" (492) from her feelings of Bliss, no longer as blissful as she was before she got the call from Harry. Bertha was completely content until she got the phone call, and now that she must speak to him, she feels some distance toward him. She wanted to tell him what a great day it was, but she knew he wouldn't understand: "she'd nothing to say. She only wanted to get in touch with him for a moment" (492). This portrays how she was not in touch with Harry in a blissful way, and she felt a distance from him in this way, holding back her blissful thoughts from him. When hanging up the phone she was "thinking how more than idiotic civilization was" (492) after speaking to Harry because she knew Harry didn't understand what true bliss was, nor did he share her mutual feelings for it, portraying even more of an emotional distance

between them. Another factor in opposition to her bliss is how Bertha “knew how [Harry] loved doing things at high pressure” (495) but she did not know how intense and dangerous Harry liked things until the stories end. His high pressure lifestyle was completely opposite to Bertha, who liked things to be calm, collected and happy. Bertha struggled to connect with Harry emotionally, but she continued to try and stay blissful, regardless of her husband being unable to understand it.

In the middle of the story, Bertha’s connection to Pearl and how she views Pearl negatively affect Bertha’s bliss; Pearl shows signs of a false friendship, cues that Bertha convinced herself were genuine. There were numerous opportunities for Bertha to see deeper into Pearl’s personality, and some were foreshadowed in the story through interactions with other characters. When Harry was noting things he disliked about Pearl, “Bertha wouldn’t agree with him; not yet at any rate” (493). Bertha wanted Harry to like Pearl which would add to Bertha’s bliss, but this disagreement with him foreshadows how Bertha would soon know the truth about Pearl even though she had the ability to see the truth right at that moment when speaking to Harry. Harry had no reason to dislike Pearl, and Bertha could have questioned this further and found out the truth about his true feelings for Pearl. Another opportunity Bertha had to see the truth is when “Miss Fulton did not look at [Bertha]” (495) after she entered Bertha’s home for the dinner party. Avoiding eye contact is seen in many people who have secrets to hide, and this shows how Pearl felt guilty for the things she was doing, for pretending to befriend a woman she was lying to. Pearl didn’t look at Bertha, but Bertha believed this was something Pearl always did, and Bertha

convinced herself that there was a reason to hide this evidence of Pearl lying, convinced she should remain blissful regardless of the signs. Lastly, Bertha and Pearl displayed an attachment to each other with little information passed between them, and they gained a deeper connection of who they are to each other: they “ stood side by side looking at the slender, flowering tree [and they were] understanding each other perfectly” (497). For Bertha, that tree was a “ symbol of her own life” (493), so to have Pearl view that symbol and understand its deeper meaning is to truly connect with Bertha and her feelings. However, Bertha did not ask Pearl how she felt and assumed Pearl’s feelings. Asking Pearl about her connection at this point could have revealed the information Bertha needed to see the truth of the affair. Bertha used this moment of connection to Pearl as a way to remain blissful and oblivious to the affair and convince herself that there was nothing wrong between the two women in their friendship.

At the end of the story, the pear tree is not only a symbol for blissful Bertha’s life, but it is also a symbol for her true self because Bertha’s static lifestyle discourages any feelings other than bliss. Throughout the story, the image of the “ tall, slender pear tree” (493) was often used as a symbol for Bertha’s life: a slim, rigid, stagnant lifestyle that did not show evidence of climaxing at any point. Bertha’s relationship with this pear tree showed her an inevitable truth about herself: her life was invariable and because of this, she could do nothing about the drastic changes in her relationships except remain oblivious and blissful. Upon finding out about the affair, instead of getting emotional about learning the truth, Bertha seeks to find meaning within her symbolic tree: ““ Oh, what is going to happen now?’ she cried. But

the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still" (499). Instead of thinking about what she should do about the affair, she looks to her symbolic tree for answers and inadvertently looks into herself to find the truth. The final line of the story proves that Bertha is incapable of change. She sees that the tree has not changed, and since the tree is a symbol for her being, Bertha is unchanging as well. This means that Bertha is incapable of accepting the truth and is unsure of how to handle it, so she constantly ignores the signs and chooses to be blissful.

Bertha, in Mansfield's narrative, searched for answers in her own way to try to understand the opposing forces to her bliss and the betrayal from Harry, Pearl and within herself through precious tree. Bertha's bliss was truly anguish in disguise: she was ignoring all the signs of her husband's betrayals and telling herself to stay blissful despite the evidence she found, even with the bond she and Pearl felt. Bertha's bliss was a constant cover up, and with each mention of ' bliss' in the story came an event that was less than favorable to her happiness. Bertha was truly concealing herself from the truth and letting herself subconsciously believe that all was right in her world; she even trusted in her pear tree to tell her the answers at times. However, trusting in herself and her tree for the answers led to her realizing that she is incapable of change. Sometimes, the blissful world has to be ruined for a person to see the final truths within their lives.