

# Mansfield's Bliss and Lawrence's Anguish: Modernist Experiments in Verbalising Uncontrollable Feelings

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## Abstract

Katherine Mansfield and D. H. Lawrence were both marginalised by mainstream modernist culture, although they belonged to the age of British modernism, and both pursued an interest in engaging with the non-normative. In their writings they showcased various conflicts which occur between human beings' instinctive life energies and social norms, and between their freed sexuality and the institution of marriage. However, one can find modernist techniques in Mansfield's and Lawrence's experimental use of literary form. This article compares Mansfield's 'Bliss' (1918) and Lawrence's 'The White Stocking' (1914), which have many points in common. In doing so, it clarifies the ways in which they verbalise uncontrollable feelings — bliss and anguish — by resisting and reconceptualising traditional emotional expressions. In both short stories, the specific feelings powerfully manifest the limits of communication and sympathy, the irony involved in articulating those feelings, and the existential confusion of the characters which clashes with the conventions of domestic life and gender expectations. This article throws new light on the close relationship between Mansfield and Lawrence in terms of their linguistic ambition and the ways in which their languages of bodily feeling relate to the thematic concerns of their stories.

## Introduction

Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923) and D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930) belonged to the age of modernism, but were marginalised by the British cultural elite, in terms of her colonial background for Mansfield and class for Lawrence (Snyder 156). The two writers were brought together by a little avant-garde magazine of art and literature, *Rhythm*, established in 1911. According to the 'Aims and Ideals' of *Rhythm*, the source of the artistic power promoted by the magazine was different from 'the scientific and technological discourse of energy [which] pervades the manifestos and self-explanations broadcast[ed]' by T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, or the group of progressive modernist intellectuals at the time

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(Trotter 22). The founder of *Rhythm*, John Middleton Murry (of course known as Mansfield's husband) writes that the meaning of the word 'Rhythm' is 'To leave protest for progress', and that 'Our intention is to provide art, . . . which shall have its roots below the surface, and be the rhythmical echo of the life with which it is in touch' ('Aims and Ideals' 36). The literary kinship between Mansfield and Lawrence is explained here. In their fiction, they share an interest in depicting the intensity of human beings' bodily energy, which is wildly and even amorally expressed by their characters. David Trotter suggests that the purpose of art for the two writers was to delve into instinctual life, in order to recapture the rhythm and release the energy which civilisation has made one unable to see or hear (24). In this respect, Lawrence's and Mansfield's elemental views were different from the mainstream of modernism. Through their engagement with the non-normative and their keen sense of expressing the humanity of life energies, they sought to criticise and revitalise the sophisticatedly modernised people.

Mansfield's best-known short story, 'Bliss' (1918), and Lawrence's 'The White Stocking' (1914) have many points in common, but they have not yet been discussed together. Both stories focus on a young married couple of the middle class, and they similarly centre on a scene in which the wife experiences an erotic awakening of her intuitive bodily sensation, provoked by a third character.<sup>1</sup> The outburst of the heroines' bodily energy conflicts with the conventions of their social class and with the norms of gender in their domestic lives. The heroines wish to convey to their husbands the extraordinary joy of liberating themselves, though the biggest difference between the stories concerns whether the attempts they make result in success or failure in creating a change in their husband's view and their relationship. In this article, I will compare and analyse the two stories through the lens of the bodily expressions employed by the writers and the ways in which they lead both heroines to break off from a conventional married life, or else confine her within the realm of social or gender expectations.

Another point of affinity between Lawrence and Mansfield is the experimentalism of the literary forms they deploy, and the writers are modernist in this respect. The ver-

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1 In fact, the social class of the couple in 'The White Stocking' is hard to classify. From the statement that the couple were privileged enough to be invited to a party hosted by their employer at a lace factory, Marina Ragachewskaya defines them as middle class, and Keith Cushman asserts that they are 'among the urban middle-class' (51) and this article follows their views. Yet, the husband character frequently speaks in a rough provincial accent, which reminds us of Lawrence's other male characters from working class and miners.

balisation of the uncontrollable bodily feelings shows the innovative forms of expression which the two writers' were respectively seeking. It goes without saying that the feeling of "bliss" in Mansfield's 'Bliss' is actually not a state of simple pleasure but instead an ironic, ambivalent symbol for the heroine Bertha's predicaments. Similarly, the feeling of "anguish" which the Whistons experience in Lawrence's 'The White Stocking' is not used in a general sense either. The characters' anguish involves more than distressing suffering or pain and has a special connotation related to existentialism. In this way, both bliss and anguish go beyond ordinary emotional expressions which can be seen in traditional realist novels and they also affect the final views and relationships of the characters. This article proposes that Mansfield and Lawrence show modernist experimentalism by refusing to use these words in an ordinary way, and shows how their language of bodily feelings relates to the thematic concern of their stories.

## **1. The Imbalance of the Marital Relationship in the Two Stories**

As I have noted, both 'Bliss' and 'The White Stocking' depict a resistance to the married life based on social position and class consciousness, though the eventual outcome of the marital relationships differs greatly between the two stories. The main couple in 'The White Stocking' have a gap in their relationship: Elsie Whiston has the beauty of physical liveliness and she is described as moving with delightful flexibility. In contrast, her husband Ted is fettered by reason and has a heavy and stiff quality about him. Elsie's lively intuitiveness is too dazzling for Ted: not only is he traumatically jealous about being unable to make himself as free as her, but Ted's sexual immaturity is also suggested as he suffers from the sight of the exposed soft flesh of her naked arm (*PO* 144). Although he painfully loves his wife, Ted bears a sense of inferiority or impotence in his relationship with her. The more Ted demands from his unruly wife a commitment to a conventional married life, the more Elsie's unmanageable, resistant body is emphasised and shows his inability to get hold of her indeterminacy. From Elsie's point of view, however, Ted 'had not made himself real to her. He was only a heavy place in her consciousness' (*PO* 155). Elsie was frustrated by her husband's inflexible nature, and therefore agitates him in an attempt to make him share the same vision as her. By making him mad with jealousy until he becomes unable to control his emotion, Elsie seeks to remove his suppressed feeling of impotence.

In 'Bliss', the protagonist Bertha Young is apparently more analytical about her extraordinary physical blitheness than Elsie is. Her bodily energy keeps her moving around jauntily as if she is dancing alone, and she names this feeling as bliss, so that she can give it a verbal representation. Bertha is also aware that her explosive energy clashes with obstacles in her social environment. Chantal D'Arcy writes that the way Bertha mentions that her inner self is 'shut up like a rare, rare fiddle' shows that she is 'marginalized or alienated from a culture (and language) which cannot accommodate such feelings' (252). It is her age, witty middle-class conversations, and the civilisation, that give her no way to express her 'drunk and disorderly' condition (SS 174). D'Arcy also writes that 'the reference to being "drunk and disorderly" presents an implicit and inherent criticism and judgement of a certain class-behaviorism', especially when rowdiness was viewed as one of the alarming (and repelling) characteristics of the uneducated lower classes (251). It prevents Bertha from conveying her sensation to people around her and she merely consumes her excessive delight in a self-satisfying manner. Thus, her feeling is not recognised by her baby's nurse, her husband, or anyone who surrounds her. In addition, there is a gap in the relationship between Bertha and her husband Harry, in a different way from that between Elsie and Ted in 'The White Stocking'. Bertha has a little child, though she admits that she has never had a sexual passion toward Harry. However, it is doubtful whether she really is a sexually immature woman, since every kind of personal feeling is concealed in Bertha's narrative when she refers to the casual relationship, like that of pals, between herself and Harry. It is implied that her homosexual interest was much stronger than her heterosexual one throughout her life, though she had no will to tell this to anybody, and also that her feeling of bliss has been a self-contained passion which she secretly enjoys.

## **2. The Language of Bodily Feelings and Existential Confusion**

### **2-1. Dance, Revelation, and Anguish**

The language of bodily feelings is effectively highlighted at a pivotal moment where the two wives undergo a big transformation in their cognitive experience. Looking at 'The White Stocking', the awakening of Elsie's energy can be traced back to the Christmas party, two years earlier, in which she danced together with her employer, Sam Adams. Through the dance, led by Adams, Elsie experiences the impersonality of her body,

unruled by her mind and freed in a sensual rapture. Mark Kinkead-Weekes claims that the exquisite and erotic experience is 'caricatured by suggesting that the Whiston marriage must have been sexually defective' (62). Moreover, 'From being an occasion for the revelation of the "deeper self" of his characters, dance [in Lawrence's writings] eventually acquires the status of a form of religion': it provides an epiphanic experience to the dancer (Ragachewskaya, pages unnumbered). Ted finally forces Elsie to leave, though still being in a trance: "I don't want to go home," she suddenly cried in distress and anguish. "I don't want to go home" (PO 157). Ted worriedly draws her close to him, though she clings to him tightly 'as if for fear and anguish' (PO 157). The reference to her feeling of anguish is repeated here twice to describe her tremendous wonder at and fear of casting off her socially constructed self and ordinary consciousness. Elsie half-realises that the dance with Adams has changed something inside her, and freed her sexuality, but she is too confused and loses her composure and ability to describe what is happening to her. Elsie is not eloquent as Bertha is: she cannot clearly state nor recognise the feeling inside her and just yields herself to the sensation. This suggests that Elsie reacts more instinctively than Bertha to the phenomenon, in a physical way rather than with her mind. Ted is completely at a loss, and at this stage, Elsie's experience is not transmitted to him. The communication fails between the couple, and the experience remains inside herself.

The way in which Lawrence reconceptualises the feeling of anguish thus represents his modernist experimentation with language. It does not simply refer to the general feeling of suffering, which only suggests tragic, bitter unpleasantness. It is an interior cognitive experience that is felt in the process of sacred revelation and transformation of the self, when reaching out to the deeper reality. Lawrence connects the feeling of anguish with dance in his other works as well, and one of the examples is in *The Rainbow* (1915), written in the same period as 'The White Stocking'. In the novel, there is a glamorous dancing scene involving a couple, Ursula and Skrebensky, and their fusion through dance creates one movement. The couple are enveloped in a heaving tension of space, and Lawrence describes 'the heart sweeping along each time, and tightening with anguish as the limit was reached, and the movement, at crisis, turned and swept back' (*The Rainbow* 295-296). Kinkead-Weekes notes the extraordinary usage of the word 'anguish' here, and argues that 'The "anguish" is fear, of losing control, of losing one's self at the hands of the other; yet they are given over, Skrebensky's consciousness already "melted away"', in a way which bears a close resemblance to 'The White Stocking' (66).

Anguish was used as an English translation for the German word 'angst', when studies of modern Western philosophy were introduced to Britain in the nineteenth century, and the term came to be widely used to describe 'an intense feeling of apprehension, anxiety, or inner turmoil' (Ormeny 11). Søren Kierkegaard's exploration of the idea of anguish in *The Concept of Anxiety* is a classic among traditional philosophical studies, and he describes how anguish is experienced in achieving insight and reaching truth, and characterises it as a dizziness one feels in the face of freedom.<sup>2</sup> Jacques Maritain sums up the existentialism of Kierkegaard as 'an essentially religious irruption and reclamation, an agony of faith, the cry of subjectivity towards its God, and at the same time the revelation of the person in his anguish of nothingness which is the non-being *in* the existent, the "crack in the existent"' (114). Anguish in modern philosophy therefore has to do with ontological and epistemological themes relating to modern people's experience of a crisis of faith. It is echoed in Lawrence's representation of anguish, which involves an existential confusion when facing a new reality, a great conversion of one's consciousness, and also his depiction of dancing as a religious event.

## 2-2. The Contradictory Nature of Bliss

In 'Bliss', Bertha's portrayal as both a passive and an active woman creates a contradictory characterisation of her. Her intuitive blitheness is often followed by the shadow of her rationality, which teaches her that she is getting too absurd or hysterical. Whereas bliss is apparently a feeling which represents Bertha's unconventional, instinctive feeling, it is in reality a glass ceiling which keeps her from going beyond the norm and forcefully puts her in her place. Ironically, Bertha's act of naming and articulating her feeling involves refusing to exceed the conventional limits. Bertha's passive nature is also expressed when she keeps having 'an air of listening, waiting for something . . . divine to happen . . . that she knew must happen . . . infallibly' (SS 174). The way she expectantly waits for good things to happen represents the weakness of her power to change her situation. For example, Bertha feels bitterness when her identity as a mother is taken away by the baby's nurse: when she finds herself unqualified as a mother, her supreme bliss is interfered with, and an inconvenient truth leaks out for her. However, she does

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2 See, Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*. (Princeton UP, 1980). Apart from Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, Georges Bataille, and Friedrich Nietzsche, have theorised about anguish in their writings, with different definitions and forms of expression.

not argue with the nurse about her way of nursing her baby and stands just 'watching them, her hands by her side, like the poor little girl in front of the rich little girl with the doll', and plays the role of a nonchalant young mother of the middle class (SS 175). Even so, she claims that she is blessed by her current situation in terms of wealth, family, and friendship, and again she hides her spiritual insufficiency by narrating and performing her bliss.<sup>3</sup> Bertha's imaginary, flawless fortune is symbolised by her favourite pear tree in her garden, in its fullest bloom, which repeatedly appears in the story. The way in which she dresses herself like a pear tree expresses her wish to metamorphose into an unmovable, still life, which is undisturbed by anything.

At the climactic scene of the story, an incident occurs between Bertha and a mysterious lady named Miss Pearl Fulton. She is one of the guests at Bertha's dinner party, who eventually shakes the bond between Bertha and Harry, as Sam Adams disturbs that between the Whistons. Miss Fulton evokes a sense of homoeroticism, and when the two ladies are gazing at the pear tree from the balcony window, Bertha is thunderstruck by an epiphanic assurance that she has wordlessly shared a recognition with Miss Fulton. The exquisite moment of intuition provides Bertha with a confidence and a desire to convey her special experience to Harry. Armine Mortimer states that 'it is then that she realises with a shock that the name she must give to her feeling, instead of the euphemistic "bliss," is desire: "For the first time in her life Bertha Young desired her husband" (89)' (42). Bertha's existential instability was going to be resolved at this beautiful moment: she was going to overcome her unsatisfactory middle-class life, and her awareness of her sexual passion was about to confirm the meaning of her bliss. However, the story goes through a shocking anti-climax.

### 3. Failure and Success in Communicating Bodily Feelings

The last scene of 'Bliss' reveals Bertha's deep disappointment due to the unfulfillment of her desire. Her expectation of building up a renewed relationship with Harry fragilely collapses before the cruel reality of his promising a clandestine meeting with Miss Fulton, just in front of her. She finds that her connection with Miss Fulton was only a false

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3 Reiko Ishikawa points out that Bertha's ambiguous attitude toward marriage is based on the complicatedness of Mansfield's own dual sexuality and her desire to be protected under the stable comfort of the marriage system (石川 43).

epiphany: 'The personal vision of reality, including private revelation, appears almost impossible to transmit; many scenes are just such failed attempts at communication' (Kokot 71).

Bertha's description of Harry and Miss Fulton is unemotionally objective. Although she must be witnessing the immoral lovers from behind them, her subjective thoughts and feelings are completely absent in the scene. The absence continues until the story ends, and Bertha is unable as always to have any substantial influence on people around her. It is hinted to the readers that she is standing there still, her sexuality being suffocated, and she is without any reasonable emotion or words as if she has been transformed into the pear tree. After the lovers disappear from her view, Miss Fulton's voice strongly rings in Bertha's mind:

'Your lovely pear tree — pear tree — pear tree!'

Bertha simply ran over to the long windows.

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

But the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still. (SS 185)

Bertha's actions and words in this scene represent her whole way of living: all she does is to repeat her attitude of patiently waiting for something new and nice to happen. The pear tree is consequently a symbol of her life itself, fabricated and maintained safely in a peaceful but false, imaginary happiness. Bertha's unchangeableness does not enable her to express her anger (because she ought to be in a state of bliss) or to transgress the norms of domestic life. Rather, as Bertha is 'aligning bliss with a blindness to reality', the stillness which the pear tree symbolises represents her reluctance to change (Martin 92). Since she fails to make a change in her married relationship, one can only predict that Bertha will wait for a new day as if nothing had happened.

Returning to a scene from 'The White Stocking', which takes place two years after the Christmas party, Elsie finds that her passion revives when she opens her Valentine presents from Adams. She wears the white stocking which she finds inside, and shows off to Ted by stripping off her skirt and 'beg[inning] to dance slowly round the room, kicking up her feet half reckless, half jeering, in a ballet-dancer's fashion' (PO 160). Elsie wickedly bullies him to make him more jealous, and inflames his anger so as to recall the memory of the night when she danced with Adams. Ted tries to teach his wife to know better; however, he is made to confront her in an instinctive way by being in a rage, and is led to change from critical to irrational. The way in which he is gradually changed by Elsie



shows an interesting parallel with what she experienced with Adams when she danced that night. The following description represents Ted's change: Elsie's 'jeering scorn made him go white hot, molten. He knew he was incoherent, scarcely responsible for what he might do. Slowly, unseeing, he rose and went out of doors, stifled, moved to kill her' (*PO* 161). The adjectives 'white hot, molten' indicate that the power in Elsie has heated him up and melted his hard, iron-like nature until he is dissolved. This follows Elsie's dancing scene in which she has unconsciously swum away from contact with people around her, and felt her body 'sink molten', and then turn into 'liquid' (*PO* 153). The fluidity expressed in the two parallel situations represents the characters' release from their normal, fixed consciousness. In contrast with Mansfield's figuration of bliss as stillness, Lawrence's range of vocabulary creates a texture of fluidity, evoking the variableness in humanity.

At last, Ted's anger turns into destructiveness, and 'his lust to see her bleed, to break her and destroy her, rose from an old source against her. It carried him' (*PO* 162). This also parallels the way in which Elsie's body was 'just carried in a kind of strong, warm flood' by the collective intoxication of dancing (*PO* 151). As these passages show, Ted's exposure of instinctive behaviour, desire, aggression, and his brutal part, which he hides beneath his ordinary life, echoes the process of Elsie's and Adams' dance. At first glance, the way in which Elsie cruelly offends Ted and makes him suffer suggests that she aims at destroying their married life. However, destroying or escaping from her marriage is far from her purpose. Her real intention was to unsettle the relationship with Ted and to create a new connection by clearing away his sense of inferiority.<sup>4</sup> Elsie is overly delighted to find a pair of pearl ear-rings and an amethyst brooch in the valentine gift from Adams, though the jewellery does not indicate her longing for the wealth nor an attachment to Adams. Although her excitement at these luxuries ostensibly represents her materialistic desire, they become worthless to her once she accomplishes her wish to change Ted (*PO* 163). Elsie's real wish was not to flirt with Adams, but to dance with Ted that night, and her wish has actually been realised through their fight. She has succeeded in freeing Ted's body from restraint, and also in conveying her experience to him, which she could not do appropriately that night.

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4 Keith Cushman writes that the experience of the first two years of marriage with Frieda gave Lawrence an insight that he used in 'The White Stocking' and their relationship 'convinced him of the dark irrational forces that any marriage has to cope with and of building a marriage that provides strong support for both partners while maintaining essential freedom' (64-65).

Ted becomes utterly unable to control himself and hits Elsie at the end of the story, and 'A great flash of anguish went over his body' when he sees her shedding tears with a swollen face (*PO* 164).<sup>5</sup> The story concludes with the description of Ted, which says: "My love — my little love ————" he cried, in anguish of spirit, holding her in his arms' (*PO* 164). The repetition of the word 'anguish' resonates perfectly with the same phenomenon as Elsie experienced before, and which concludes Ted's change. Ted painfully regrets his violent behaviour, though he has surely realised intuitively the fearful change he has gone through. The connective tissue between the couple has also been created instead of Ted's earlier depressing inferiority complex and their constant conflict. Lawrence's use of the term 'anguish' thus refers to an existential pain which accompanies the epiphanic recognition of one's change, though it is not only a private experience or sensation. At this stage of his writing, Lawrence believes in the possibility of sharing a particular feeling with one's partner: it is the transmittable, dynamic rhythm of the body that Lawrence attempts to express.

## Conclusion

Both Lawrence and Mansfield deal with the energy of instinct, the uncontrollable bodily feeling, and their conflict with social norms and gender relationships. The contrasting endings of their stories, which focus respectively on change and the absence of change, reveal the difference between the novelists' views on the possibility of female characters challenging the system of marriage and society. Whereas one can anticipate a change in the relationship of Elsie and Ted, Bertha remains forlorn and passively responds to the current of her environment.

Additionally, this article has explored the ways in which Mansfield and Lawrence tried to verbalise intuitive feelings by reconceptualising the traditional modes of feeling in fiction. The two writers reconfigure the feelings of bliss and anguish beyond conventional

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5 Several scholars have regarded this scene as representing Elsie's defeat. When she flinches from Ted's physical violence, she looks terrified and fragile. However, it does not mean that Elsie has been persuaded to become a conventional manageable wife under his patronage, as argued by Michael Squires, who writes that her 'flirtatious bid for Sam Adams's affection is a disguised plea for her husband to discipline her capricious behavior' (85). F. R. Leavis also comments that Ted's violence is 'the decisive assertion of authority', and involves a disciplining of his 'flirt' wife (258). These ideas reveal themselves as having been based on patriarchal interpretation and pay no attention to Elsie's desire to change Ted's way of life.

notions of representation by presenting them as ambivalent feelings imbued with the characters' existential confusion. On the one hand, Mansfield innovatively connects multilayered meanings with the general notion of bliss, which involves the ambiguous characterisation of Bertha as an unreliable heroine, and also an evocation of the limits which she places on herself and which restrict her growth. Since Mansfield uses this specific feeling as the title of the story, the meanings of bliss also undermine the readers' expectations of the plot. Lawrence, on the other hand, demonstrates the parallel process of change in Ted which follows that of Elsie; and the uniqueness of the way in which he uses the notion of anguish suggests a dynamic transition from the old self to the new. Both bliss and anguish in these stories reveal that the meanings of these terms have to do with the existential depth of the characters, more than with general psychology in romantic, sentimental novels. This perspective can throw new light on the relation between Lawrence and Mansfield in terms of their belonging to the same faction in the modernist movement.

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