Modernism, a Movement Ahead of its Time: Separating Sex, Gender, and Sexual Orientation in “Bliss” and “Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself”

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The Modernist period was a time of innovation in the arts—authors, artists, and creators of all kinds took Ezra Pound’s challenge to “make it new” to heart. Especially in the literary field, boundaries were pushed in every way. Form, style, and content all underwent a massive transformation, led by writers like Virginia Woolf, E.M. Forster, D.H. Lawrence, and James Joyce. These authors resisted the staunch morals of the Victorian era that directly preceded their work, opting instead for harsher issues and piercing social commentary, especially in subjects regarding sexuality. Some of these Modernist pieces regarding sexuality have become landmark works for both current feminist studies and homosexual studies in literature because of the manner in which they reveal truths that were controversial at the time. Katherine Mansfield’s “Bliss” and Radclyffe Hall’s “Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself” are two striking examples of works that conveyed ideas ahead of their time in terms of sexuality and gender. Although Mansfield and Hall wrote their pieces nearly ten years apart, the two stories, when compared side-by-side, effectively illustrate a distinction between sex, gender, and sexual orientation—a distinction that would not be articulated by researchers until the second wave of feminism in the mid-1960s and later.

With World War I, the world saw a shift in women’s role in society. Women were leaving to work outside the home, cutting their hair and opting for shorter skirts, and challenging the construct of “feminine behavior” that was so rigidly set in the Victorian era. This was evident, even in the periodicals of the time. Christopher Reed cites a vignette in British *Vogue* from October 1925, in which a man in the Turkish baths believes that a woman has stepped into the men’s section. He corrects her, “only to discover that the lady is Bertie Caraway, one of those plump youngsters whose figure and gestures are just too girlish for anything. Which proves that girls sometimes simply *will* be boys” (qtd. in Reed 385). Despite the increasing fluidity of gender post-WWI, the masculine and feminine were still inseparably associated with male and female sexes, respectively, and aspects of sexual orientation were still largely misunderstood. However, the modernists were known for their starkly realness in their characterization and plotlines, and had a knack for representing accurate human behavior, even if they didn’t fully understand the meaning behind that behavior.

In order to ensure readers’ understanding throughout the rest of the essay, I will here define gender, sex, and sexual orientation, as articulated by the current *Oxford English Dictionary*. Sex is defined as “Either of the two main categories (male and female) into which humans and many other living things are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions,” or in other words, one is either male or female depending on his or her physical anatomy. In contrast, gender is a social construct: “The state of being male or female as expressed by social or cultural distinctions and differences, rather than biological ones; the collective attributes or traits associated with a particular sex, or determined as a result of one's sex.” Sexual orientation is “a person's sexual identity in relation to the gender to whom he or she is usually attracted; (broadly) the fact of being heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual.” By observing closely the psychology of the main characters in “Bliss” and “Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself,” readers can begin to see that Katherine Mansfield and Radclyffe Hall were far ahead of their time in showing the distinction between gender, sex, and sexual orientation—even if they themselves didn’t fully understand the implications of their works.

Though Bertha Young and Miss Ogilvy seem to be nearly polar opposites, there are a few common threads that run through the circumstances of both characters that indicate experiences of women who are unable to conform to society’s gender roles. For example, both Bertha and Miss Ogilvy struggle to communicate and connect. Bertha’s thoughts are sprinkled with aposiopesis and discontinuity, and she struggles to find the words that express her feelings, even in her own mind. From the very beginning, when Bertha looks in the mirror, she finds “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” (175). In reading this, one can sense that Bertha is disconnected with the woman in the mirror. The passage reveals Bertha’s own insecurity and failure to understand herself, much less her surroundings. Bertha struggles to communicate with her husband Harry, as well, despite their being “really good pals” (178). On a brief phone call with Harry, Bertha’s disjointed communication fails her again when she cries out “Oh, Harry!” but when he responds, she is at a loss for words. “What had she to say? She’d nothing to say. She only wanted to get in touch with him for a moment. She couldn’t absurdly cry: ‘Hasn’t it been a divine day!’” (176). She can’t find words that both express her feelings and fit the propriety of the conversation, so she decides instead to say nothing at all.

When Bertha encounters a feeling she doesn’t know how to handle—often in relation to her sexuality—she falls back on her laughter. Bertha laughs when her husband Harry is late to the party, when Harry insults Pearl, while she is waiting for Pearl­ to arrive, and while she is waiting for Pearl to give “the sign.” In this circumstance, Bertha realizes, “While she [Bertha] thought like this she saw herself talking and laughing. She had to talk because of her desire to laugh. ‘I must laugh or die.’ But when she noticed Face's funny little habit of tucking something down the front of her bodice–as if she kept a tiny, secret hoard of nuts there, too–Bertha had to dig her nails into her hands–so as not to laugh too much” (182). This last example allows the reader to draw a connection between Bertha’s lesbian tendencies and urges to laugh. Her inability to address her own feelings causes her inability to connect with others, and interpret their actions correctly. She lives under a façade because of the societal construct of the blissful, compliant, heterosexual, “modern” housewife mold that she is pressured to fit.

Similarly, Miss Ogilvy struggles to communicate because of her failure to fit the mold of femininity. In communicating with other females, she represses her own feelings by replying in conversations with a simple, “‘Oh?’ on a rising inflection – her method of checking emotion” and keeping her hands “thrust deep into her pockets” at all times (238-9). The reader gains a clear sense of the pressure she received from all sides, as her body language and terse communication resembles that of a tightened coil, ready to burst at any moment.

Morgan and Neal make the argument that Miss Ogilvy’s abrupt verbal interactions indicate her “fictional butch” character, and she “conforms well to the finding of studies showing that men prefer not to talk about emotions, engaging instead in task-oriented talk” (255-6). While one cannot deny that Miss Ogilvy’s personal identification with men and masculinity is a factor in her language pattern, masculinity is not her only reason for curtailing her speech. If it were the only reason, she would not have called her sisters “two damn tiresome cranks!” and run away to a nearly deserted island to escape them (244). Miss Ogilvy’s outburst was a result of the pressure she felt to conform to society’s expectations for her as a female, as well as play the male caretaker for her sisters.

The most progressive aspect of the two stories, however, is the way they begin to push against the female-feminine-heterosexual and male-masculine-heterosexual norms when constructing characters sex, gender, and sexual orientation. Again, in juxtaposing the stories, the reader can grasp a fuller understanding of the distinction between sex, gender, and sexual orientation as demonstrated by Miss Ogilvy and Bertha Young. The two characters are nearly exact opposites, which highlights the peculiarities of each character. Bertha Young would be classified as female-feminine-homosexual. In other words, “Bliss” succeeds in separating sex and sexual orientation, but not sex and gender. Especially in comparison with Miss Ogilvy, Bertha is a highly feminine character. According to D’Arcy, the text indicates the following about Bertha’s femininity:

Her discourse is tempered by social conditioning. In other words, behind her discourse lies the dominant ideology of a "civilization" that suppresses such embarrassingly feminine notions as bliss to the sphere of the unrepresentable. Accordingly, Bertha's high excitement, which she interpreted at first as ‘bliss’ but soon calls ‘hysteria,’ must be seen as the reactive symptom of a woman trapped within middle-class, phallocentric notions of femininity…although the heroine's self-deception was not immediately obvious, at this point of the story, her uncritical view of herself as a supposedly happy, middle-class housewife now shows her up as a pathetically fallible or unreliable narrator. (257)

She conforms the best she can to the societal construct of the vivacious, modern, upperclass housewife. She is overly concerned in preparations for the party, and plans her ensemble of “a white dress, a string of jade beads, green shoes and stockings” that she had thought up hours before the party (178). Despite her efforts at conformity, she has very clear sexual feelings toward Pearl Fulton.

Some could argue she is experiencing not personal homosexual discovery, but a sexual birth in general, citing her name (“Bertha” being reminiscent of “birth”) and the moment when, “for the first time in her life Bertha Young desired her husband” (184). However, as D’Arcy asserted earlier, Bertha is an extremely unreliable narrator. She often misinterprets the actions of others because she has become so used to deceiving herself in her lifestyle. Bertha misinterprets her husband’s feelings toward Pearl when he offers her cigarettes, for he does not “really dislike [Pearl],” but is actually having an affair with her (183). Similarly, Bertha misreads her own feelings toward her husband immediately after. The feeling of “desire” comes directly after Bertha’s moment with Pearl at the window, when the two were “caught in that circle of unearthly light, understanding each other perfectly” (183). Though Bertha again misinterpreted Pearl’s reciprocation, she truly felt blissful in the light of the moon, which can be interpreted as female sexuality. Though she feels “ardently” when she looks at Harry and asks herself “Was this what that feeling of bliss had been leading up to? But then, then—” she cannot finish the sentiment because of her confusion, for she cannot convince herself to fully feel in love with her husband (184). In the end, though she is deceived by both her husband and Pearl, she sees the pear tree, which was “as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still,” which indicates that things didn’t change from the beginning to the end of the story (185). Bertha, though she has come to a realization of her female sexuality via the light of the round silvery moon, is still left with the obligation of stifling her lesbian feelings in order to fulfill the role of a feminine modern housewife. Despite Bertha’s need to stifle her homosexuality, the story indicates clearly that Bertha’s sexual orientation was not inherent in either her sex or her gender. Although she was female and feminine, she was also lesbian.

While Mansfield’s “Bliss” is able to separate sexual orientation from gender and sex, but not sex from gender, Hall’s “Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself” takes a different approach. Miss Ogilvy is classified as a female-masculine-heterosexual. Therefore, the story separates sex from gender, but struggles to separate sexual orientation from sex or gender. Though many critics see Miss Ogilvy as a lesbian character, I make a case for the heterosexuality of Miss Ogilvy especially through Radclyffe Hall’s beliefs about her own sexuality. First, though, I will address Miss Ogilvy’s masculinity. Miss Ogilvy is nearly the exact opposite of Bertha in his aspect—quiet and brooding instead of maniacal and superficial. Her physical appearance is also very masculine: “Her tall, awkward body with its queer look of strength, its broad, flat bosom and thick legs and ankles, as though in response to her jerking mind, moved uneasily, rocking backwards and forwards” (238). Additionally, Hall specifies that it was not the war that made Miss Ogilvy this way, for even when she was young, she was “a queer little girl who loathed sisters and dolls, preferring the stable-boys as companions, preferring to play with footballs and tops. And occasional catapults…She remembered insisting with tears and some temper that her real name was William and not Wilhelmina” (240). Since Miss Ogilvy’s appearance is so masculine, the readers could accept more easily an attraction to women. However, she seems an almost asexual character until she transcends reality into the fantasy of the Neolithic warrior. For example, the text explains:

Miss Ogilvy’s instinct made her like and trust men for whom she had a pronounced fellow-feeling…But men had not wanted her, except the three who had found in her strangeness a definite attraction, and those would-be suitors she had actually feared, regarding them with aversion. Towards young girls and women she was shy and respectful, apologetic and sometimes admiring. (240)

She cannot connect with women and her search for friendship with men is rejected. Even in visits her sister in war, “a girl who, more faithful to her than to the others, would take the trouble to run down to Surrey. These visits, however, were seldom enlivening,” showing that, although Miss Ogilvy sometimes admires young women, there is no overt evidence for sexual attraction.

The story changes completely, however, when Miss Ogilvy enters her fantasy and becomes a male Neolithic warrior in ancient times. The warrior is blatantly masculine—even overbearingly so, especially when compared to his gentle young woman companion. In order for Hall to completely sever the tie between sex and gender in Miss Ogilvy, she had to prove that Miss Ogilvy is, in a way, male. Radclyffe Hall spent her own life convincing people that she herself was, as she called it, “sexually inverted.” When her female lover expressed doubts about their relationship, Hall replied (referring to herself as John):

My dearest child, it is not emotionally wrong for your John. I have never felt an impulse towards a man in all my life, this because I am a congenital invert. For me to sleep with a man would be ‘wrong’ because it would be an outrage against nature. Can’t you try to understand, to believe that we exist— we people who are not of the so called normal? Where’s your medical knowledge— we do exist and believe me you must not think us perverted. (qtd. in Dellamora 214-15)

Dellamora notes that “[Hall] acknowledges that this new identity is ‘not of the so called normal.’ To Hall, it was important to emphasize that inversion occurred naturally, that is, congenitally. She claimed that because of this origin, her desires were not inherently immoral or ‘perverted’” (215). Readers can reasonably infer that Miss Ogilvy is a largely autobiographical character for Radclyffe Hall, especially with correspondences such as the one mentioned above.

In order to represent this sexual inversion (a foreign concept for the majority of readers of the era), Miss Ogilvy goes on a journey to “find herself,” which leads to her enter into a fantasy triggered by ancient bones from a male skeleton. Judging from the evidence in the text, it seems that Miss Ogilvy may be the reincarnated soul of the Neolithic warrior. As Miss Ogilvy arrives on the nearly-deserted island, subtle signs of this reincarnated soul emerge. For example, as the fisherman takes her to the island, she “remembers” a cave, which had since been obscured by water. The fisherman confirms her memory, although she had never been to the island before in her life. She continues to uncover vague memories and emotions, thinking, “‘I remember…I remember…’ she kept repeating. Then: ‘That’s all very well, but what do I remember?’” (246-7). The final catalyst for Miss Ogilvy’s fantasy is the bones and artifacts that Mrs. Nanceskivel shows to her. Hall ensures that the reader knows that Miss Ogilvy’s mental transition back to her previous existence as a Neolithic male is very much real, for “Miss Ogilvy knew that she was herself, that is to say she was conscious of her being, and yet she was not Miss Ogilvy at all, not had she a memory of her. All that she now saw was very familiar, all that she now did was what she should do, and all that she now was seemed perfectly natural” (249). It seems that Miss Ogilvy, in this passage, escapes the societal construct pressing upon her and surrenders to the masculine self within her.

Once Miss Ogilvy becomes the male warrior, Radclyffe Hall complies with very strict gender roles for the rest of the story. The warrior is hyper masculine, communicates sparingly, and overpowers his female companion—who is submissive, poetic, and lives to please the warrior. Some readers take issue with this section of the story, where the warrior takes the virginity of the young woman rather violently, because it seems to undercut the persecution that Miss Ogilvy went through as a woman who couldn’t conform to gender roles. However, Hall didn’t write the story to change gender roles, but to help her audience understand her own sexual inversion. Because Radclyffe Hall was a devout Catholic, this story was a way to reconcile her sexual orientation with her religion, bringing me back to my original statement: Miss Ogilvy is classified as a female-masculine-heterosexual. Miss Ogilvy is actually male, as shown by her transcendence from reality into her fantasy realm, and so for the purposes of this paper, she is considered heterosexual.

Interestingly enough, the distinctions between gender, sex, and sexual orientation are still unclear for many people today. Because strict masculine and feminine gender roles are so entrenched in society, it can be hard to take a step back and understand the repercussions of these expectations. Katherine Mansfield and Radclyffe Hall, in their Modernist endeavor to write edgy content and portray stark realism, were able to reveal some of the harmful implications of gender, sex, and sexual orientation when they are considered inextricable. These brilliant women were also able to begin to parse gender, sex, and sexual orientation through their characters, and lead to the more progressive understanding of the three terms that we use today. Though contemporary society still has room for further progress in comprehending the relationship between gender, sex, and sexual orientation, we can trace some of the earliest destabilizations of the terms back to modernist literature.

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