

Figure and Ground in Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss": A Cognitive Reading

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Abstract

"Bliss" is a masterpiece of Katherine Mansfield's short stories. This article aims to illustrate the prominence of figures and thematic ideas in "Bliss" and to explore its internal cognitive principles based on the figure-ground theory of cognitive poetics. In "Bliss", the prominence of character, image and theme gives rise to the formation and reversal of "figure" and "ground" within the literary text. Through the conflict between different characters such as extramarital affair or triangle love, the focalization of various images like fire, moonlight and pear tree, and the alienation of narrative techniques and language expressions, for example, the third-person and psychological narratives, as well as the visual changes in color words, "Bliss" successfully achieves the prominence of literary figures, expresses the writer's emotions and creative intentions, and deepens the connotations of the story's themes. The prominence of "happy" and "unhappy" figures of the protagonist Bertha Young highlights the story's grounds and themes: after years of happiness in marriage that may have turned into dreamy illusions, women must rely on their own strength to live independently, confidently, and strongly, correctly recognizing their identities in family, finding their positions in society, and living out brilliance and happiness in daily life.

Keywords: Katherine Mansfield, "Bliss", cognitive poetics, figure and ground, prominence

1. Introduction

"Bliss", one of the most representative works written by New Zealand-born English master of the short story Katherine Mansfield, has met with considerable critical and public acclaim since its publication in 1920. This short story has significantly enhanced the writer's reputation, establishing her as one of the most influential New Zealand writers of the past century and making an indelible contribution to the development of the English short story. Mansfield's writing often addresses the struggle and the plight of women, offering a unique literary avenue for exploring themes of female emancipation. The narrative of "Bliss" is centered around the female protagonist, Bertha Young, and unfolds over the course of an afternoon and evening, focusing on a dinner party she hosts. Bertha, a young woman living in a dream-like state, feels a burning sense of happiness. However, when the party ends, she discovers the ambiguous relationship between her husband and her friend, leading her prior sense of bliss into being extinguished by a cold wave of disappointment and pain.

In recent years, scholars from different countries have employed various approaches to analyze Mansfield's "Bliss", including narratology (Sadeq, 2012; Whiting, 2022), stylistics (Lukin & Pagano, 2016; Mahmood & Mohammad, 2019), symbolism (Yahya, 2006; Pracha, 2016), and feminism (Dunbar, 1988; Zimring, 2012; Choe, 2023), etc. However, an interpretation on the basis of cognitive poetics remains unexplored. This article seeks to analyze the "Bliss" from the perspective of cognitive poetics, using the figure-ground theory to examine the prominence of different figures and its thematic ideas in the short story. It aims to uncover the underlying cognitive clues in "Bliss", thereby enabling a deeper understanding of the thematic significance in Mansfield's short story.

2. Figure-Ground Theory and Literary Studies

Cognitive poetics emerges as an interdisciplinary field in the early 20th century, with its theoretical foundations primarily derived from cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology. As a novel literary theory and research

paradigm, cognitive poetics represents “an ontological enhancement of the intersection between linguistics and literature” (Xiong, 2008, p. 299). It aims to explain the reading process, elucidating how the meaning of a text is generated and acquired, and to interpret the literary effects of texts, uncovering new causes, meanings, or formal features and aesthetic values.

The term “cognitive poetics” is coined by Reuven Tsur from Tel Aviv University. In 1992, Tsur published the seminal book *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics*, in which he deemed that “cognitive poetics is that it can bridge the apparently hopeless gap between human values and the stylistic and poetic devices”, effectively addressing the issues that traditional literary criticism methods could not reach (Tsur, 2021, p. 19). In 2002, Peter Stockwell published *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*, followed by a complementary work *Cognitive Poetics in Practice* edited by Joanna Gavins and Gerard Steen in 2003, which together laid the theoretical groundwork for cognitive poetics. Stockwell asserted that cognitive poetics explores “the connections between the stylistic texture of the literary work and the felt experience of the reader” so as to provide “the holistic picture of literary cognition” (Stockwell, 2002, p. 167). Gavins and Steen then emphasized that cognitive poetics helps us understand that engaging with literary works is fundamentally engaging with language: “As our experience within literature is essentially an experience with language, to study literature is to study language and to study language is to study the mind” (Gavins & Steen, 2003, p. 64).

The commonly employed theoretical approaches in cognitive poetics include figure-ground theory, prototype and cognitive models, deixis and cognitive grammar, script and schema, discourse world and mental space, conceptual metaphor, blending and compression, immersion and ambience, and among others. Figure-ground theory is a fundamental and influential concept in cognitive linguistics, first introduced by Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin in 1915. Through his study of the figure of face/vase illusion, Rubin demonstrated that human’s cognition divides into two parts in the mind: figure and ground. Different focal points of attention lead people to either perceive the faces as the figure and the vase as the ground, or vice versa. The figure and ground cannot be perceived simultaneously, which is known as figure-ground separation and prominence. Figure-ground theory is based on the principle of prominence, which posits that in cognitive concept or perception, the prominent entity or image is identified as the “figure”, while the setting that highlights the “figure” is identified as the “ground”. Subsequently, Gestalt psychologists adopted this concept and introduced the principle of Pragnanz to further establish the concepts of “figure” and “ground”:

The figure has form or shape whereas the ground is formless and the shared contour seems to belong to the figure. Besides shape and contour the figure seems to have other thing-like qualities such as structure and coherence, whereas the ground is unstructured, shapeless and uniform. The figure appears to lie in front of the ground which extends more or less continuously behind it. All in all, the figure is perceived as being more prominent than the ground, and psychological research has shown that it is more likely to be identified and remembered, and to be associated with meaning, feeling and aesthetic values (Ungerer & Schmid, 2006, p. 164).

Based on the figure-ground theory, Stockwell points out that in cognitive poetics, or cognitive stylistics, “figure/ground” can be used not only to analyze the grammatical phenomena in detail but also to explore the content of the discourse (Stockwell, 2002, p. 61). According to Ronald W. Langacker, during the process of perceiving the prominence of “figure” against the “ground”, “impressionistically, the figure within a scene is a substructure perceived as ‘standing out’ from the remainder (the ground) and accorded special prominence as the pivotal entity around which the scene is organized and for which it provides a setting. Figure/ground organization is not in general automatically determined for a given scene; it is normally possible to structure the same scene with alternate choices of figure” (Langacker, 1987, p. 120). The principle of “prominence” achieves the “foregrounding” in literary expressions, making the “figure” in the text effectively stand out during the process of reading. Foregrounding allows certain aspects of literary texts to be “cognitively more important or salient than others” (Stockwell, 2002, p. 12). Thus, it has higher value of discussion, becoming a “coordinate” for understanding and interpreting the thematic connotations of literary texts.

Cognitive poetics incorporates the figure-ground theory into literary reading and criticism, holding that the prominence of “figure” and the weak appearance of “ground” facilitate an active and dynamic reading process: “reading a literary text is a dynamic experience, involving a process of renewing attention to create and follow the relations between figure and ground” (Stockwell, 2002, p. 18). In textual reading, a character who appears throughout the story or exhibits unique physical, psychological, or personality traits always becomes the focal point of the narrative, capturing the reader’s attention and serving as the “figure” within the text. At times, in order to highlight the theme, a character or a scene may also detach from the “ground” to become the “figure”. Through the selection of focus, the narrator can achieve the foregrounding of textual expression in various ways,

such as through unusual naming, distinctive descriptions, deviations from conventional language, a rich array of stylistic features, and the use of creative metaphors, etc.

These unique techniques ensure that the reader's attention remains fixed on the most characteristic elements of the text and the "figure", while less perceptible elements merge into the "ground". The reader's attention can be continuously converged, dispersed, and shifted with the dynamic interplay of the figure and ground, yet it is consistently centered on the most distinctive figures. By following these prominent figures and engaging with both existing knowledge and immediate associations or imaginations, the reader is able to comprehend and grasp the contents and thematic significance of the text. The function of "moral teaching" of the literary text is achieved through "the reader's esthetic experience in the process of reading" (Nie, 2021, p. 191). In "Bliss", the prominence of character, image and theme in the story embodies the change and reversal of "figure" and "ground" in literary text. Through the conflict between different characters, the focalization of various images, and the alienation of narrative techniques and language expressions, Mansfield successfully achieves the prominence of figures, which actually promotes to express her emotions and creative intentions, as well as to deepen the connotations of the story's themes.

3. The Prominent "Figure" of Character in "Bliss"

Characters are the life of literature: "they are the objects of our curiosity and fascination, affection and dislike, admiration and condemnation. Indeed, so intense is our relationship with literary characters that they often cease to be simply 'objects'. Through the power of identification, through sympathy and antipathy, they can become part of how we conceive ourselves, a part of who we are" (Bennett & Royle 2023, p. 83). In literary works, for fictional characters to be vivid or life-like, they should be, to some extent, unpredictable and conflicted or contradictory, which could make them become the most perceptible "figures" within the text for readers. From the perspective of cognitive poetics, the "figure" generally possesses the characteristics of gestalt and mobility. Characters, as the main subjects of the story, appear and permeate the entire text, thus serving as the dominant "figures" above all else:

Attention is focused on an object—which is typically a character in a fictional narrative or a building or other setting in a lyrical poem, for example—and attention follows that object if it moves (that is, as the text develops). In the visual field, perceptual grouping attracts attention more effectively than locational grouping: objects (figures) are more attractive than backgrounds. [...] In other words, attention is paid to objects which are presented in topic position (first) in sentences, or have focus, emphasis, focalisation or viewpoint attached to them (Stockwell, 2002, p. 19).

In fact, "perception is the first stage of human's cognition" (Nie, 2020, p. 91). From the very title, "Bliss" directs the reader's attention to the journey of happiness experienced by the story's protagonist Bertha Young. It encourages readers to consciously perceive, focus on, and appreciate this figure, engaging in rich associations and imaginations. As the story progresses with the contrast and the complement of different "grounds", such as the environment and the secondary characters, the readers would gradually enhance their perception of the thoughts and emotions that the writer puts on the character or the "figure" through various focal points.

Characters are the core elements of a short story, and due to their highly focused features throughout the storyline, they can be the most perceptible "figures" for readers. The beginning paragraphs of "Bliss" vividly build the "figure" of Bertha as an innocent, blissful, and contented character for the readers: "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" (Mansfield, 2014, pp. 141–142). Accompanying the development of the storyline, Bertha moves towards the dining room to start preparing for a dinner party. Despite the dining room's darkness and coldness, Bertha remains oblivious to it because "in her bosom there was still that bright glowing place—that shower of little sparks coming from it" (p. 142), and "for the dark table seemed to melt into the dusky light and the glass dish and the blue bowl to float in the air" (p. 143). At this moment, Bertha seems to be living in an illusory world of happiness from which she cannot extricate herself. Soon afterwards, Bertha runs to the baby's room upstairs, where the child "looked up when she saw her mother and began to jump" (p. 143). Bertha's husband Harry calls, and she feels overjoyed, but she certainly cannot shout out in a comical manner: "Hasn't it been a divine day!" (p. 144). Bertha then walks into the living room and lights a fire, with the flames of happiness beginning to blaze brightly, making her radiant. So, she cannot help but whisper, "I'm too happy—too happy!" (p. 145).

As the guests start to arrive, Bertha begins to experience "four seasons" of her happiness. She is dressed in the colors of "spring"—a white dress, an emerald necklace, and green shoes and stockings, joyfully welcoming her

guests. Harry returns and quickly rushes upstairs, making Bertha smile: “She knew how he loved doing things at high pressure” (p. 147). A few minutes later, a “find” of Bertha’s called Pearl Fulton makes a dazzling entrance: “All in silver, with a silver fillet binding her pale blond hair, came in smiling, her head a little on one side” (p. 147). Until now, Bertha has been the “figure” in readers’ cognition, with other secondary characters serving as the “grounds”. However, the arrival of Miss Fulton gives rise to a shift in the “figure” and “ground”, transforming the singular figure of Bertha into an illusion of dual figures, Bertha and Fulton: “The two women stood side by side looking at the slender, flowering tree. Although it was so still, it seemed, like the flame of a candle, to stretch up, to 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” (p. 149). At this moment, Bertha’s happiness reaches its peak, and her inner emotions are as intense as the blazing sun of “summer”.

Due to the difficulty on perceiving the “figure” and “ground” simultaneously, Bertha and Fulton gradually separate and spotlight to the figure and the ground. In the short story, one main factor driving the development of plots is the conflicts and contradictions between different characters, and the relationships between characters are reflected in the figure-ground relations composed of main and secondary characters. Throughout the process of reading, readers would consistently focus their attention on the most distinctive elements of the literary text, the “figures”, while the less perceptible elements always blend into the “grounds”. In a short story, the main characters typically stand out as “figures”, such as Bertha, while the secondary characters serve as the “grounds”, like Harry and Fulton. However, “sometimes in order to intensify the conflicts or highlight the themes, the secondary characters can detach from the grounds and become the figures themselves, thus achieving a cognitive reversal of figure and ground” (Chen & Tao, 2022, p. 510). In “Bliss”, following the ending of dinner party, the guests begin to depart, Eddie and Bertha are “left by the fire” dying in the night (Mansfield, 2014, p. 151). This scene, reminiscent of autumnal desolation, gradually dampens Bertha’s spirits. As she converses, Bertha discovers the love affair between her husband and her friend:

She turned her head towards the hall. And she saw Harry with Miss Fulton’s coat in his arms and Miss Fulton with her back turned to him and her head bent. He tossed the coat away, put his hands on her shoulders and turned her violently to him. His lips said: ‘I adore you’ and Miss Fulton laid her moonbeam fingers on his cheeks and smiled her sleepy smile. Harry’s nostrils quivered; his lips curled back in a hideous grin while he whispered: ‘To-morrow,’ and with her eyelids Miss Fulton said: ‘Yes’ (p. 151).

In an instant, the revelation of her husband’s infidelity and betrayal plunges Bertha into the abyss, sinking her into a wintry chill and shattering her blissful image. At this moment, Harry, Fulton, and Bertha form a triangle “figure”, a triangular relation structure, each protruding along different lines and directions. Each triangular vertex represents a distinctive figure, presenting entirely divergent angles and perspectives. In the dynamics of love triangle, the reversal of figure and ground often drives the plots of story and the conflicts between characters to climax. As Gavins and Steen point out: “cognitive poetics, too, sees literature not just as a matter for the happy few, but as a specific form of everyday human experience and especially cognition that is grounded in our general cognitive capacities for making sense of the world” (Gavins & Steen, 2003, p. 1). The readers, drawing from their own cognitive experiences in daily life, can focus and scrutinize the love triangle “figure”, observing the vertices and figures underlined along different directions: for example, Harry’s betrayal and infidelity, Fulton’s cunning and complacency, or Bertha’s heartbreak and misfortune. When each highlighted vertex in the triangle enters the reader’s cognitive vision, the image of character belonging to the vertex rotates to the top and become as the “figure”, while others are at the bottom and become the “grounds”. In this dynamic cognitive process of figure-ground reversal within the love triangle of characters, the thematic ideas of marriage and love in the text are also sublimed. The term “bliss” is no longer directed against specific individuals or events but serves as the “ground” of the whole story, foregrounding the disharmony of married life between Bertha and Harry, with an allusion and irony to the loss of morality and the chaos of ethical order in society.

At the end of the story, Bertha simply runs over to the long windows and sees that “the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still” (Mansfield, 2014, p. 152). This moment Bertha is crystallized into a solitary and contemplative “figure”. In the process of the cognition of “figure”, readers often engage in imagining and creating a genuine character as they read and make the fictional character get the “self”: “to identify with a person in a novel or play is to identify oneself, to produce an identity for oneself. It is to give oneself a world of fictional people, to start to let one’s identity merge with that of a fiction. And it is, in effect, also to create a character for oneself, to create oneself as a character” (Bennett & Royle, 2023, p. 90). In “Bliss”, the readers continuously follow the dominant “figure” designed by the writer, explore Bertha’s journey of happiness, and validate the unforeseen outcomes through self-association and self-imagination. Through the power of assimilation, the empathy or the aversion, the character gradually becomes a part of the reader’s life

and self-imagination.

Throughout the process of “figure” cognition and textual reading, the characters and their “figures” in the textual world gradually transform from “them” into “us” in the real life. This projection of character’s figure enables readers to fully grasp the character’s nature, so as to promote strong emotional resonance. Thus, the process of searching for self-identity within the text is actually intricately tied to the prominence of character’s “figure”. As “human’s cognition is not only a process of self-selection, but also a process of constant confirmation” (Nie, 2020, p. 94), readers can construct the “figure” of character during the process of reading, then label it, self-evaluate it, or identify it, and finally generate self-identification or negation, searching for the true self, so as to establish a new and complete “figure” of character. Taking Jacques Lacan’s “mirror stage theory” to explain, the readers firstly perceive “who he/she is” through the mirror of character in the cognitive process of figure, and then start to think about “who I am”. The way that readers view the “Other” serves as a mirror for self-identification (Chen & Tao, 2022, p. 509). The projection of the “Other” figure of character enables the readers to scrutinize the nature of people in literature, thus completely shaping the “figure” of character in the short story.

In “Bliss”, the prominent figure of character and the love triangle present the conflicting tensions among the characters, vividly highlighting the alienation of love and marriage between Bertha and Harry. This portrayal also underlines the writer’s ethical appeal for the returning of true love in marriage, as well as the reconstructing of moral order in society. Since literature has the function of “moral teaching” (Tao & Chen, 2023, p. 6) and “enables people to understand society and life from an ethical perspective, offers moral warning for people’s material and spiritual life, and provides moral experience for reference in their pursuit of self-perfection” (Nie, 2021, p. 191), the emphasis on the figure-ground dynamics in “Bliss” not only endows the short story with significant artistic tension, but also establishes a platform and space for spiritual exchange and mental communication between the readers and the writer. It facilitates moral experiences that contribute to the readers’ self-perfection, allowing the ethical themes and metaphorical meanings of “bliss” in the short story to be elevated and comprehended.

4. The Prominent “Figure” of Image in “Bliss”

Ezra Pound, the pioneer of American Imagist poetry, once defines “image” as “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (Pound, 1968, p. 4). So, the image can be an artistic representation created by the cognitive subject through their own emotional activities to imagine and process the objective things in real life. In literary works, the image can guide the structure and organization of textual events and characters and then form rich metaphorical meanings at different stages of the narrative so as to “make the readers construct the metaphorical figure of the image and deeply understand the thematic connotations and artistic implications of the story” (Chen & Tao, 2022, p. 515). Through the combination of emotion and image, the writer can integrate the scenes into images, embedding personal sentiments within the objective elements, thereby foregrounding the “figure” of image in emotional expressions in the text.

During the process of reading, readers will focus on the writer’s designed focal point of image, interpreting it through their own life experiences and resonating with it spiritually and emotionally. This process enables readers to construct the “figure” of image that is related to the textual themes and enhances their understanding of them. In the short story “Bliss”, the writer organizes and constructs the images such as fire, moonlight, and pear tree, imbuing them with profound symbolic significance. These images transcend mere narrative descriptions, pervading the entire story as unique symbols that detach from the “grounds” to become the “figures”, prominently standing over other elements with metaphorical meanings. Besides, these images can continuously draw the readers’ attention, redirect their focus, and stimulate their imaginations and emotional resonances while the readers follow the narrator within the text. This immersion makes the readers gradually validate and comprehend the symbolic and metaphorical meanings of the image changing from the “ground” to the “figure”.

In “Bliss”, the image of “fire” prominently appears, totally six times, symbolizing Bertha’s inner happiness and passion and serving as a recurring thematic “figure” throughout the story. The image of “fire” occurs in the first time at the beginning of story: “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” (Mansfield, 2014, p. 142). At this moment, Bertha is filled with excitement and joy, and her enthusiasm for marriage and life is akin to a burning fire, which vividly expresses her sense of happiness. Then, as she moves towards the dining room, “in her bosom there was still that bright glowing place—that shower of little sparks coming from it. It was almost unbearable. She hardly dared to

breathe for fear of fanning it higher, and yet she breathed deeply, deeply” (p. 142). By this time Bertha is almost afraid to look into the cold mirror, but nonetheless, she does so. In the mirror, there is a radiant woman, smiling with her lips trembling, which illustrates her inner shyness and suppressed happiness, as well as hints at her libido.

The image of “fire” appears for the third time when Bertha enters the nursery and sees the baby illuminated by the firelight: “her neck as she bent forward, her exquisite toes as they shone transparent in the firelight—that all her feeling of bliss came back again” (p. 144). The child is the symbol of a couple’s love and happiness. Then, Bertha walks into the living room, kindles a fire, and excitedly embraces a cushion, “but it did not put out the fire in her bosom” (p. 145). Now, the fire of happiness in Bertha’s heart begins to burn brightly. The first four appearances of “fire” all represent Bertha’s love for her husband and family. The fifth appearance of “fire” occurs with the arrival of Miss Fulton, with whom Bertha’s sense of happiness reaches its peak: “what was there in the touch of that cool arm that could fan-fan-start blazing-blazing—the fire of bliss that Bertha did not know what to do with?” (p. 147). The “fire” mentioned here symbolizes the protagonist’s happiness before the dinner party, representing both her personal bliss and mutual affection even love between two women. By the end of dinner party, “the fire had died down in the drawing-room to a red, flickering” (p. 149), which foreshadows the waning of Bertha’s passion and implies the impending chilliness devoid of fire. The image of “fire” leaping and extinguishing indicates Bertha’s happiness and sorrows, which constantly appears in the readers’ cognitive vision when they follow the writer’s depiction, fostering a kind of identity recognition and emotional resonance towards the protagonist.

In addition to the image of “fire”, there are other prominent “figures” such as the moonlight appearing five times and the pear tree, three times. Moonlight symbolizes the peace, purity, fairness and goodness. Under the moonlight, all secrets are exposed, and all ugliness is revealed, so the truth may ultimately come to light. For instance, when someone praises the poet Eddie Warren’s socks upon his arrival as a guest, Eddie replies, “they seem to have got so much whiter since the moon rose” (p. 147). In Western culture, gentlemen typically do not wear white socks, revealing Eddie’s foolishness and pretentiousness. What is more, at the end of the story, the writer mentions the moonlight last time: “Miss Fulton laid her moonbeam fingers on his cheeks and smiled her sleepy smile. Harry’s nostrils quivered” (p. 151). Through the striking and dazzling “moonlight”, the writer starkly exposes the ambiguous actions and romantic behaviors of Fulton and Harry to Bertha, causing her to suffer a double whammy of betrayal. Bertha’s beloved friend and husband have both betrayed her. She is in failure both in love and marriage, whether in homosexual or heterosexual relationship, which leaves her shattered in an instant especially after years of happiness.

As an independent existence beside Bertha, the delightful pear tree, full of blooming flowers, symbolizes her own mood even life. In Bertha’s eyes, the pear tree is “tall and slender” when she first sees it, and it is “in fullest, richest bloom; it stood perfect, as though becalmed against the jade-green sky” (p. 145), which resembles a burning flame of happiness in Bertha’s heart. Upon secondly visiting the pear tree, Bertha feels that the flame of happiness reaches its zenith: “Although it was so still it seemed, like the flame of a candle, to stretch up, to 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” (p. 149). In the final depiction of pear tree, the theme of “independence” is highlighted. Despite her husband’s infidelity and her friend’s betrayal, Bertha shows great resilience and tries to confront the challenges of life: “the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still” (p. 152). Here, the word “still” implies Bertha’s awakening of rational will and her decision to rely on her own strength to live an independent life in spite of the unfortunate in love and marriage.

Bertha’s happiness begins with the burning “fire” and vanishes with the dying “fire”, while the truth of love behind it is unveiled by the “moonlight, and the ending is culminated with the “pear tree” standing as still as ever. Through the continuous appearances of different images, Mansfield transforms the “grounds” (images) of fire, moonlight, and pear tree into distinctive visual “figures”, constantly repeating and highlighting them to evoke rich imaginations and associations in readers’ mind, so as to foster great resonance and gradually reveal the thematic ideas and metaphorical meanings embedded in the images. The repetitive images construct the “figures” of Bertha’s “happiness” and “unhappiness”, and those “abstracted figures” processed through consciousness can enrich the readers’ cognition and thoughts (Nie, 2020, p. 98). Indeed, the dying “fire” of happiness can be lighted up again with the “moonlight”, and Bertha, like the pear tree, can also return to a state of “still” in its initial appearance. Throughout the short story, those images, with their unique connotations, become the “figures” from the “grounds”, generating profound poetic atmosphere and creating significant artistic tension and aesthetic space within the text. Through their prominence, the thematic ideas of women’s independence and freedom are well presented in the short story.

5. The Prominent “Figure” of Theme in “Bliss”

Foregrounding, corresponding to the prominence of figure and ground, is a concept introduced into literary criticism by Czechic linguist Jan Mukarovsky in the early 20th century. Mukarovsky thinks that foregrounding is related to the attention-getting, novel, and unconventional stylistic features, meticulously designed by the writer for the need of “esthetic valuation” and the expression of thematic significance (Mukarovsky, 2014, p. 48). Willie Van Peer takes the “foregrounding” into cognitive literary studies, viewing it as “a pragmatic concept, referring to the dynamic interaction between author, (literary) text and reader. On the one hand, the material presence of certain foregrounding devices will guide the reader in his interpretation and evaluation of the text; on the other hand the reader will look for such devices in order to satisfy his aesthetic needs in reading a literary text” (Van Peer, 1986, p. 20). Therefore, foregrounding is closely linked to readers’ aesthetic evaluation of the literary texts and their understanding of the literary themes.

Stockwell mentions various methods to achieve the foregrounding in literary expressions, such as the defamiliarization of literary themes, which can make the readers experience from the familiar world to the unfamiliar one through a variety of devices including “repetition, unusual naming, innovative descriptions, creative syntactic ordering, puns, rhyme, alliteration, metrical emphasis, the use of creative metaphor, and so on” (Stockwell, 2002, p. 14). Foregrounding makes the “figure” become prominent and dominant in the process of reading, thereby separating the “figures” from the “grounds”. In “Bliss”, the writer employs many unique techniques to achieve the foregrounding in the text, seeking for specific literary effects. By highlighting the narrative styles and linguistic forms, the writer uses a variety of deviations from the conventions so as to attract the readers’ attention, as well as to encourage the readers to make choices, to focus on the “figures” and develop imaginations and associations in the dynamic changes between the “figure” and the “ground”. This approach expresses the writer’s intentions, deepens the thematic ideas, and reveals the ethical appeals hidden behind Bertha’s “bliss”.

Firstly, in “Bliss”, the writer deviates from the traditional first-person narrative in literary works, and from the outset, it is used in a third-person narrative to create suspense, focusing on the inner world of characters to evoke the curiosity and interests of readers: “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” (Mansfield, 2014, pp. 141–142). This opening sentence of the short story prompts readers to ask: Who is Bertha? Why does she behave like a child? What is she laughing at? This focused attention initiates a dialogue between the text and the reader. Subsequently, the writer mainly utilizes the narrative technique of “internal focalization” (Genette, 1980, p. 192), which emphasizes the character’s psychological experiences and reflects his/her thoughts and feelings within specific contexts. Indeed, “bliss” or “happiness” is a kind of universal emotional experience shared by human beings, and “emotion” fundamentally belongs to the cognitive category. According to Stockwell’s viewpoint:

The emotional “content” of a literary work has almost been regarded as a coincidental side-effect, or simply part of the rhetorical trickery involved in putting a moral message over on a reader under the guise of entertainment. The text is seen as responsible for emotional cues, but the actual emotions which are evoked have been regarded as within the bounds only of readerly whim (Stockwell, 2002, p. 172).

Throughout the story, Bertha’s love for her husband and child, as well as the love affair between her friend Fulton and husband Harry, is brought into light from Bertha’s narratives and perspectives. Through the dialogues in various settings, the story portrays Bertha’s psychological journey of “happiness”, revealing her ethical appeals to be recognized by her husband and loved by her family and friends. By using the narrative technique of psychological focalization, the writer directly immerses readers into the character’s inner worlds, allowing them to focus on the things and events through the character’s narratives. Thus, Bertha’s journey of “happiness” becomes graphically depicted, and the readers’ attention is also focused accordingly.

By walking into the character’s inner worlds, the readers are placed in vivid experiences and can generate strong emotional resonances, which makes the character’s consciousness and emotions gradually detach from the “grounds” and become the “figures”, while the writer’s descriptions of other events become the “grounds” as they are out of the readers’ attention and focus. Bertha begins as a character filled with happiness: “in her bosom there was still that bright glowing place—that shower of little sparks coming from it” (Mansfield, 2014, p. 142). However, as the plot develops, Bertha’s sense of happiness evaporates with her inadvertent glance of the “betrayal”, and then she begins to think independently: “Bertha simply ran over to the long windows. ‘Oh, what is going to happen now?’ she cried” (p. 152). Through the narrative mode of “internal focalization”, the writer

graphically depicts Bertha's inner consciousness, enabling readers to enter her worlds, experience her psychological changes and spiritual growth, and perceive the parabolic and graphical representations of her happiness shifting from less to more and then back to less. Bertha's trajectory of happiness, depicted as a parabolic curve from less to more and back to less, prompts readers to search for reasons within the great cognitive disparity and to ponder over the ethical appeals the writer wants to express, so as to gain a better understanding of the short story's thematic ideas.

In addition to the discourse-level narrative techniques, the writer secondly makes use of literary innovations, creative descriptions, and rhetorical devices in semantic level to highlight the themes. Since "to study literature is to study language and to study language is to study the mind" (Gavins & Steen, 2003, p. 64), in the process of textual reading, the conventional and ordinary languages typically function as "grounds", while the novel, systematic, and unconventional ones emerge as "figures". The purpose of deviation is "to highlight the intended contents and achieve the foregrounding of thematic ideas" (Chen & Tao, 2022, p. 513). In "Bliss", Mansfield repeatedly utilizes various color words to create profound visual images and figures for readers, thereby shortening the external distance between the text and the reader.

At the beginning of the story, "there were tangerines and apples stained with strawberry pink. Some yellow pears, smooth as silk, some white grapes covered with a silver bloom and a big cluster of purple ones" (Mansfield, 2014, p. 142), and "the baby had on a white flannel gown and a blue woollen jacket, and her dark, fine hair was brushed up into a funny little peak" (p. 153). At the ending of the story, there is "the black cat following the grey cat" (p. 152). The different colors at the beginning and the ending create a sharp contrast. The shift from warm colors to cool colors not only brings the visual impact to the readers, but also serves as a witness to the protagonist Bertha's feelings and emotions. Through the focus on colors, the writer triggers the readers' attention and facilitates a unique aesthetic enjoyment during the process of reading, thus conveying the short story's distinctive artistic charms. In depicting Bertha's psychological journey of "happiness", the writer takes the "fire" as a metaphor for Bertha's passion for life and happiness for love, the "moonlight" to suggest Bertha's unfortunate experiences, and the "pear tree" to represent Bertha's spiritual growth. Those three images are also full of striking colors, not only promoting to foreground the textual themes, but also showing the writer's ethical appeals for "true love" and "women's independence".

Mansfield's "Bliss" achieves the foregrounding through unique narrative techniques and unconventional rhetorical devices, thereby highlighting its themes. Meanwhile, cognitive poetics suggests that the foreground, (middle-)ground, and background cannot be completely separated during the process of reading, rather, they together contribute to the cognitive activities to form a "figure" within the text so as to enrich the social significance of the story's themes. The more background knowledge one has about a literary work, the deeper one's understanding of its themes. In terms of the background, "Bliss" is a later work of Katherine Mansfield, breaking away from earlier narratives rooted in individual life experiences and beginning to explore the spiritual dimensions and address women's existential issues. Mansfield's life is fraught with adversity. From a very young age, she struggles with frail health despite her intellectual prowess. At twenty, she persuades her father to allow her to live independently in England, and thus embarks on the path of literature, settling in London as a writer. Her bohemian lifestyle seems to be free, but it often makes her feel lonely and helpless. The real life is far from what she has thought about. An unhappy marriage to George Bowden leads her to leave him the day after their wedding and travel around the world. The independence of personality, the harshness of reality, the unhappiness of marriage, and the loneliness of traveling construct the "figure" of Mansfield's life, becoming the background of the short story. In "Bliss", through Bertha, the writer expresses her ethical appeals for women's independence, freedom, and resilience. The story ends with the metaphor of a "pear tree" standing "still" in full blossom, presenting a "figure" of Bertha's future: the misfortune of marriage does not determine the misfortune of life, and becoming independent, courageous, and strong can also lead to self-fulfillment and a vibrant existence.

6. Conclusion

Cognitive poetics, as a new literary theory and research paradigm, provides different methods and perspectives for interpreting the reading processes of readers, as well as for explaining the literary effects of texts. From the perspective of cognitive poetics, this article interprets Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss" through the theory of figure and ground, aiming to deeply understand the short story's thematic significance and perceive its unique artistic aesthetics. Through the construction of figure-ground relationships, Mansfield employs the narrative techniques focusing on psychological focalization, uses the metaphorical rhetoric devices, and sets the contrasts of foreground and background, so as to highlight the story's thematic ideas. These techniques guide the readers to follow the writer's designed focal points, facilitate the perception, transition and cognition between different figures and grounds, and emotionally resonate with the literary text, thus achieving a better understanding of the

story's profound meanings and artistic implications. From the blazing fire in the beginning to the chilling emptiness at the ending, the narrative behind Bertha's story projects and reflects the "ground" and the "theme": when years of happiness in marriage turn into ephemeral illusions, women need to rely on their own strength to live independently, confidently, and bravely, thereby living authentically, vibrantly, and happily.

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