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**THE JOURNEY TO A TRUE SELF THROUGH THE
USE OF TREE SYMBOLISM IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S
ORLANDO AND KATHERINE MANSFIELD'S 'BLISS'
BA thesis**

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to analyse how the tree symbolism found in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Katherine Mansfield's 'Bliss' contributes to deviating from heteronormativity. The method of close reading is used to identify what specific role the tree symbolism plays in the lives of the main characters Orlando and Bertha. This thesis identifies a gap in the literature written about the texts and attempts to shed light on a specific area of research that could be done.

The introduction gives a brief overview of *Orlando*, 'Bliss' and the time period the texts were published in. The first chapter focuses on previous literature written about the tree symbolism in *Orlando* and 'Bliss' to see what has already been found on the topic. The second chapter analyses the role of the oak tree in *Orlando* and the pear tree in 'Bliss' to show the emotional journey the characters go on to find their true self and how it is connected to nature.

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INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) and Katherine Mansfield's 'Bliss' (1918) show the main characters feeling uncomfortable in their bodies because of compulsory heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is defined by Brandon Andrew Robinson as "a hegemonic system of norms, discourses, and practices that constructs heterosexuality as natural and superior to all other expressions of sexuality." (2016: 1). In *Orlando*, the titular character struggles with coming to terms with her true self not only because of her gender changing overnight, but also because of her queerness. For the purposes of this thesis, queerness will be defined as gender nonconformity and non-heterosexuality. Waking up as a woman after living an entire life as a man is hard for her to accept, and Orlando initially still thinks of herself as a man. For an easier comparison to 'Bliss', this thesis will be mainly focusing on Orlando as a woman and referring to Orlando by the pronoun 'she'. 'Bliss' shows a woman not completely accepting her queerness, since her societal roles of housewife and mother do not allow her to be herself and she constantly has to conform to society's expectations of her. *Orlando* and 'Bliss' demonstrate how in the 19th and 20th centuries women were expected to conform to heteronormative rules, and deviating from them meant facing prejudice.

Both Orlando, specifically at the end of the book, and Bertha seem to not fit under the standard of a 'typical' woman of the 20th century not only for their queerness, but other factors as well. For example, Orlando is different from other women because she had the opportunity to receive better education as a man. Women in the beginning of the 20th century were not able to receive the same education as men, as women's education was focused on domesticity (Zweiniger-Bargielowska 2014: 4). She lived as a nobleman who owned property, which she then lost after her biological sex change and getting married, since married women had to give

up everything they had to their husbands (Zweiniger-Bargielowska 2014: 9). While Bertha is a married woman who does not work and instead takes care of the house, as was the norm at the beginning of the 20th century (Zweiniger-Bargielowska 2014: 6), she is different because of her strong feelings of bliss over her life. She wants to openly express it, which is looked down upon by society. Bertha feels trapped from not being able to express herself and calls the societal norms “idiotic” (Mansfield 1924: 116). Throughout their stories, Orlando and Bertha deviate further from the societal norms and go on a journey to eventual self-acceptance.

Both *Orlando* and ‘Bliss’ can be analysed from the angle of a queer person in a heteronormative society. Orlando is a queer person throughout several centuries and Bertha is dealing with romantic feelings for her friend Pearl in the 1900s. Both Orlando and Bertha have to comply by the norms set by society, otherwise they would be seen as abnormal. Both works have the element of a tree the main characters turn to in a time of need. For Orlando, it is both a literal oak tree in her garden and her poem ‘The Oak Tree’, while Bertha has a pear tree in her garden. The tree symbolism is central to the stories as it shows the difference in Orlando and Bertha’s worldview both while conforming to heteronormativity and after deviating from it. Orlando’s oak tree and Bertha’s pear tree are what help them figure out their identities.

Modernist writing rejected tradition which, for female writers, meant shifting the authority men held in culture. Modernism opened up the possibility to write outside of the norm and create a different culture for more representation and spaces to express themselves (Caneda-Cabrera 2004: 241). However, *Orlando* and ‘Bliss’ were written at a time when literature featuring queer characters had to be censored. For example, in the same year that Woolf published *Orlando*, Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) went to trial because of the overwhelming homophobia that surrounded the reception of the book. Woolf was able to avoid the same fate because she used magical elements to avoid directly depicting homosexuality and

commenting on gender roles (Parkes 1994: 434). Both *Orlando* and 'Bliss' rely heavily on the tree symbolism to hint at the characters' queerness, possibly due to the censorship.

The aim of this paper is to analyse how the tree symbolism found in both *Orlando* and 'Bliss' contributes to deviating from heteronormativity in the 20th century by analysing it from a queer ecological standpoint. Queer ecology is defined by Andrija Filipovic as "a relatively new and evolving field of study that emerged at the intersection of environmentalism, queer theory and social justice" (2024: 16). The first chapter focuses on previous literature written on *Orlando* and 'Bliss' to show what has already been found on the topic of heteronormativity and deviation from it in the 20th century through the tree symbolism. The second chapter consists of an analysis of both *Orlando* and 'Bliss'. Their use of the tree symbolism will be further examined to show the deviation from heteronormativity and what it means for both Orlando and Bertha.

I PREVIOUS FINDINGS ON THE TREE SYMBOLISM IN *ORLANDO* AND 'BLISS'

1.1. Previous findings on the tree symbolism in *Orlando*

The chosen articles focus on resistance to heteronormativity in *Orlando* from the viewpoint of queer ecology. The points discussing it will be mostly focused on one article by Èpha Roe about queer ecology found in *Orlando* due to not enough material on *Orlando*'s connection to queer ecology. The main points brought up in criticism are censorship at the time of the book's publication and nature, more specifically the significance of the oak tree, and its role in going against heteronormativity.

Orlando was written during a time where literature featuring queer characters was censored. All the queer elements of *Orlando* had to stay within subtext and heteronormative language. The book developed a code of double meanings in order to resist the system it was forced to be published in to be effective (Biswas 2020: 40). While the book uses the word ‘queer’ — which had started to mean sexual and gender non-conformity by 1928 — it was not in public use and had a negative meaning (Biswas 2020: 43). The use of subtext could be tied to the tree symbolism as it is present throughout the story and plays a central role in the book. The tree symbolism could be used to censor queerness in the book, while the publication of her poem could mean her accepting her queerness.

The book constantly references Orlando writing her poem ‘The Oak Tree’, which explores Orlando’s life both as a man and as a woman. Writing it is what helps Orlando process things that are happening in her life and, at the end of the book, when the poem is finally published in the 20th century, she feels different: she starts seeing life from another angle; she is happy and cannot wait to tell her husband about it (Woolf 2003: 139). There is also a physical oak tree in her life, which brings her comfort from the beginning of the book, when Orlando, as a man, described loving the feeling of the tree underneath him (Woolf 2003: 8). It was a safe place for her from the start. Èpha Roe points out that the oak tree has a “royal status” in Orlando’s life and ‘The Oak Tree’ is a “poetic manifestation” of it, the two oak trees being separate yet bound entities in the book (2024: 83). Both oak trees are important parts of Orlando’s journey to self-acceptance.

Orlando struggles to write ‘The Oak Tree’ at first (Woolf 2003: 55) but throughout the centuries the poem starts to develop into its final form. When ‘The Oak Tree’ finally gets published, Orlando is so grateful to the tree in the garden that she intends to bury her work to return the favour (Woolf 2003: 160). Èpha Roe claims that the existence of the oak tree is a

“cyclical journey” beginning with the tree and the poem as separate forms until they get brought together in the end (Roe 2024: 83). He equates this to how Orlando sees herself as a man and a woman and how Orlando is seen by others (Roe 2024: 84). It is also mentioned by Pooja Mittal Biswas that “Orlando’s gender performance is a negotiation between the self and the external world” (2020: 44). It is the reason why Orlando intends to bury her poem, to thank the tree that inspired her in the first place. Writing the poem is what helps her figure herself out as time passes throughout the book. Finishing it is what allows her to finally start living her life as a woman who is genuinely happy.

Nature plays a big part in Orlando’s life. According to Roe, ‘The Oak Tree’ starts to play a more significant role in Orlando’s life as she becomes a woman and her identity changes. She has a bigger interest in nature, and it shows how Orlando still remained the same on the inside, but the roles associated with her new female gender changed. He also points out that the physical oak tree stays the same, while the manuscript shows its age and the changes made to it over time, just like Orlando’s body (Roe 2024: 84). When Orlando reaches a breaking point while thinking about societal expectations set for her, she goes to the park where she starts running, causing her to trip and break her ankle. Not being able to get up, she declares herself “nature’s bride” and remains there for hours in peace. But then, only a few hours later, she meets the love of her life, Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, and they get engaged in minutes (Woolf 2003: 122-123). Nature plays a part in the important events in her life and acts as a safe haven. Roe claims nature to be an “agent within the novel, especially during times of great change or challenge for Orlando”, which makes her more connected to it (2024: 85).

Heteronormativity is challenged by how Woolf writes about nature in *Orlando*. She goes against the heteronormative idea of what is ‘natural’ (Roe 2024: 85). Thomas Morton argues that nature itself should not be analysed with a binary difference because it hinders queer

ecology's existence (2010: 274). Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands explains that the idea of queerness being unnatural is a harmful assumption, which has influenced how sexuality is understood, and, in turn, queer ecology challenges this (Mortimer-Sandilands 2005: 7). Woolf goes against assumptions of nature in the book by suggesting that Orlando could get married to nature, which Èpha Roe views as something Virginia Woolf did intentionally by using a "queer ecological method" to challenge heteronormativity (2024: 85).

1.2. Previous findings on the tree symbolism in 'Bliss'

The articles chosen for 'Bliss' focus their analysis on Bertha's sexuality and queerness. Due to a lack of accessibility to newer material, the literature review will focus on older articles written about queerness and the pear tree symbolism in 'Bliss', while also giving a small backstory for the time it was written in. Since there is a lack of queer ecological articles written about 'Bliss', the focus of the literature review will be on the role of the pear tree in the story to find parallels between the pear tree and *Orlando's* oak tree and their symbolism in the texts.

Teresa Caneda-Cabrera argues that Mansfield's writing was meant to go against traditional art and represented the world from another point of view (2004: 243). In her opinion, 'Bliss' goes against the norm by having the main character question reality, which is used when Bertha is upset over not being able to express her bliss (Caneda-Cabrera 2004: 244). Furthermore, Claire Drewery claims that 'Bliss' makes fun of superficiality by showing a group of elites, who in reality are self-centred and unlikeable, which shows that Bertha cannot be her real self around them. Bertha struggles with her identity and cannot explore it further due to a lack of opportunity (Drewery 2020: 443-444).

There are several interpretations for what the pear tree could represent for Bertha. Helen Nebeker claims the pear tree to be a representation of Bertha's sexuality, indicating the fact that Bertha herself sees the pear tree like her own life. Since the tree is sterile and not able to bear fruit due to not being mature enough, it points to Bertha being a person who lacks maturity. It is shown during Bertha's interaction with the nanny that she cannot establish her authority over her and has to beg to feed her own child. She also does not see Little B as her daughter, but instead like a doll, which Nebeker equates to the pear tree only producing flowers, not fruit (1972: 546-547). Ekbal Al-Jabbar sees the tree as a representation of Bertha's pride and happiness. However, Al-Jabbar also brings out that Bertha comparing herself to a rare fiddle suggests her not being able to express herself verbally. The story including elements of both imagination and reality shows Bertha's immaturity despite being 30 years old (Al-Jabbar 2013: 2).

Hemali Depala claims that Bertha's façade of seeming like a happy mother and wife exists to hide her true feelings towards her life, as they might get interpreted as immature due to her childish inner self. Compared to her mature exterior which conforms to norms, Bertha's real self is the opposite (Depala 2020: 70-71). Bertha uses the metaphor of her body being a "rare, rare fiddle" to express her frustration at not being able to show her emotions and instead having to hide them at risk of seeming abnormal (Mansfield 1924: 116). Claire Drewery sees the fiddle comparison as Mansfield commenting on the rigidity of how femininity had to be expressed and bringing light to desires that Bertha could not communicate because of societal norms, therefore trying to normalise the discussion of sexuality (2020: 446). The fiddle comment comes back when Bertha is unhappy with not being able to feed her daughter, questioning why she had to watch another woman hold her baby (Mansfield 1924: 119). Armine Kotin Mortimer interprets this as foreshadowing Bertha being cheated on by her husband Harry

with Pearl Fulton (1994: 49). Depala sees the moment as showing Bertha feeling trapped in a society she cannot express herself in, going as far as to suggest her having symptoms of hysteria (2020: 73).

The outfit that Bertha puts on for the dinner party has great significance. It consists of a white dress with green accessories, which Armine Kotin Mortimer (1994: 43), Claire Drewery (2020: 444), and Hemali Depala (2020: 76) all claim to be a purposeful mirroring of the pear tree in her garden since the tree was moonlit under a green sky. Mortimer sees it as a clue for Bertha's bliss being Miss Fulton's instead, as the tree turns silver later in the story, mirroring Fulton's dress. While Bertha witnesses her husband and her friend being flirtatious with each other, Pearl's bliss remains intact, just like the tree remains full of flowers (Mortimer 1994: 43-44). Drewery claims that Bertha's clothing and how she relates it to the tree has sexual undertones due to having to deal with expectations set on her as a wife and mother, which are hard to maintain because of her seemingly being bisexual. She sees the outfits of both Bertha and Pearl — mirroring the moonlit tree and the moon, respectively — to be a representation of Bertha's attraction to Pearl which Bertha believes to be mutual (Drewery 2020: 444). Depala sees Bertha's attachment to the tree as her repressing her either homosexual or bisexual desire under heteronormativity (2020: 77).

The meaning of Bertha and Pearl's relationship has been interpreted from several different angles. Helen Nebeker points out the mention of Bertha 'falling in love' with Pearl in the story as evidence for Pearl not being the first woman she had had this kind of feeling for. Nebeker also claims that Bertha's blissful reaction to Pearl arriving to the dinner party shows her only having romantic feelings for Pearl and not her husband, subconsciously projecting the women she likes onto him, which makes her falsely believe that she feels attracted to him. Bertha sees Pearl in a romantic, not friendly way, which transitions into the pear tree scene where she

seemingly shares a romantic moment with Pearl (Nebeker 1972: 547-549). Teresa Caneda-Cabrera sees the pear tree scene as Bertha allowing herself a moment of pleasure. She claims that the description of Bertha's bliss is Bertha trying to make sense of her sexual desire for both Pearl and her husband as well as trying to figure out how to express it. Her desire builds up so much that she finds herself being attracted to another woman (Caneda-Cabrera 2004: 246). Armine Kotin Mortimer sees the pear tree scene and the description of both women feeling the same sort of bliss as confirmation that Bertha only met Pearl because the latter was already involved with Harry, Bertha's husband (1994: 44).

There are differing opinions on what the meaning of Bertha's husband Harry supposedly cheating on her near the ending of 'Bliss' is, and if it stands for a hidden storyline throughout the book, but it is agreed upon that Bertha is dealing with her queerness in the background of the story. Armine Kotin Mortimer claims that the scene where Bertha sees Harry and her friend Pearl Fulton flirting with each other is meant to reveal Bertha getting cheated on from the start. Focusing on her takes away the spotlight from the real story of Pearl Fulton being the other woman in Bertha and Harry's relationship, causing the illusion of anything happening between the two women to break in the end (Mortimer 1994: 43). Ekbal Al-Jabbar suggests that it is meant to represent the illusion of a happy marriage between Bertha and Harry breaking by Harry showing his true colours and the realisation that Pearl wanted to be in Bertha's place all along (2013: 6). Claire Drewery counters these points by claiming that the scene is meant to show Bertha not being able to interpret her own or anyone else's sexuality and could instead be a "metaphorical interpretation" of what really happened based on her assumptions (2020: 446).

The ending of the short story has also been interpreted in several ways. The end presumably reveals that Harry and Pearl seem to be romantically involved, and Bertha realises Pearl does not share the same feelings towards her, which Nebeker sees as Bertha realising that

she only shared her husband with her and nothing more (1972: 549). When Pearl whispers about the pear tree to Bertha, causing her to run to look at it again, Nebeker claims it to be a moment of several realisations that Bertha's bliss was only hers and Pearl had not felt the same about her, seeing the pear tree being as still as she is again (1972: 551). Ekbal Al-Jabbar also claims it to be a moment of realisation, instead seeing it to be about Bertha being naïve, Harry's authority over her and Pearl wanting her husband all along. He sees the last point being the representation of female victimisation during the Victorian period. He claims that the final moment of the story is to show Bertha's crisis over understanding that she and her husband are barely a married couple, which causes her to reevaluate her life (Al-Jabbar 2013: 7-8). Teresa Caneda-Cabrera interprets Bertha running to look at the pear tree as leaving the story without an ending and letting Bertha contemplate what happens next. She sees the end of the story as Katherine Mansfield deliberately making a point about the ending and people's assumptions of it by leaving it open to interpretation and letting the reader theorise about the meaning by themselves (Caneda-Cabrera 2004: 247).

II THE TREE SYMBOLISM IN *ORLANDO* AND 'BLISS'

2.1. The oak tree symbolism in *Orlando*

Woolf's *Orlando* is about a nobleman named Orlando whose life is documented from the 17th century to the 20th century. The book begins with Orlando's life in the royal court and the events in her life until she becomes an ambassador for Constantinople and, shortly after, a duke. One day Orlando unexpectedly falls into a deep sleep for a week and wakes up as a woman. Going from a man with freedom to a woman with restrictions is not a pleasant experience for Orlando, and the entire second half of the book deals with her reluctance to accept

the roles associated with female gender, even if she already refers to herself as a woman. *Orlando* thus deals with gender identity and tells the story of a person trying to find her true self. This thesis will analyse Orlando's gender transformation to argue that there is a noticeable connection between Orlando and nature, and to show how the tree symbolism plays a part in significant moments of her life. The analysis of Orlando's resistance to heteronormativity and the role of the oak tree will mainly focus on the second half of the book starting from Orlando's physical transformation into a woman.

Since Orlando's gender identity is not specified but her biological sex is, it opens several possibilities for interpreting who she could identify as. Orlando's refusal to conform to heteronormativity is subtle throughout the book, but still prominently present through *Orlando's* subtext from the start. The opening line sets up Orlando dressing in a gender-neutral way: "He – for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it ..." (Woolf 2003: 5). The mention of 'the fashion of the time' disguising her casts some doubt on Orlando's gender, although the texts playfully suggest there is no doubt. It is implied that Orlando simply presents herself as a man and establishes the possibility of Orlando expressing her gender in a fluid manner from the beginning. Orlando's gender seems to be performative, as it depends on her clothing choices and how she chooses to express her gender in the moment.

Orlando has a love for nature that she refuses to abandon. She first starts writing 'The Oak Tree' as a boy but struggles with it: "...it looked as if in the process of writing the poem would be completely unwritten." (Woolf 2003: 54-55). She does not seem to be satisfied with her writing which indicates her not being happy with her work or, perhaps, herself. The process of writing 'The Oak Tree' becomes easier for Orlando as a biological woman. While staying in a camp with Romani people, she develops a love for nature which is looked down upon, and it disorients her: "She began to think, was Nature beautiful or cruel; and then she asked herself

what this beauty was; whether it was in things themselves, or only in herself..." (Woolf 2003: 71). The mention of Orlando questioning whether nature was only beautiful in her eyes indicates her love for nature getting stronger as a woman, since she is now seeing the world differently. She decides to write about her conflict in the poem, making her own ink from berries and wine, which is a sign that Orlando writes an ode to nature, using natural resources to help her express herself. She decides to write on the manuscript of the poem she had been carrying with her, finding any blank spots she can, showing that she has an urgent need to express her thoughts. Orlando being "as tolerant and free-spoken as a man" (Woolf 2003: 127) as is said later in the book is unlike a typically seen woman of the 18th century. Her ability to suddenly write her poem with ease seems to show her feeling more comfortable with being a woman.

Nature surrounds her in important moments in her life. The voyage back to England after leaving the Romani camp is the first time she can think about her new life: "It is a strange fact, but a true one, that up to this moment she had scarcely given her sex a thought." (Woolf 2003: 75). She comes to terms with being a woman, but starts to think about the fact that she still loves a woman, Sasha, who she had a romance with as a man, indicating her to be queer, since her feelings seem to have deepened according to the book: "...and if the consciousness of being of the same sex had any effect at all, it was to quicken and deepen those feelings which she had had as a man." (Woolf 2003: 79). Her thoughts get interrupted by the captain of the ship, who shows her the cliffs of England on the horizon. Orlando is thrilled, since she needs a break from contemplating life. Nature has helped her again in coming to terms with her life as a woman loving a woman. As the ship is getting closer to its destination, Orlando reluctantly says goodbye to her life as a man. She doesn't want to say goodbye to the privileges of a man's life or her love for Sasha until the moment she instead chooses to focus on her love for poetry: "The distraction of sex, which hers was, and what it meant, subsided; she thought now only of the glory of

poetry...” (Woolf 2003: 80). From this point onwards she is mentioned to always carry her poem, ‘The Oak Tree’, which could also be considered a physical representation of her connection to nature, with her.

When the 19th century begins, Orlando sees the world in a gloomier way, possibly feeling suffocated from societal expectations of her. Orlando tries to pretend her life is still the same, but has to accept that the world around her has changed again. When she returns to ‘The Oak Tree’, she sees that despite working on it for 300 years, Orlando never changed on the inside: “She had the same brooding meditative temper, the same love of animals and nature, the same passion for the country and the seasons.” (Woolf 2003: 117). The mention of Orlando remaining the same person despite the physical change seems to show that the change only brought out her true inner self. This further demonstrates how the change only happened in biological sex, but Orlando’s identity remained the same. Orlando eventually starts feeling pressure to be married, and once she realises she has no one to marry, she becomes overwhelmed and goes to the park by herself. She starts running on the way there, which causes her to fall and break her ankle. Since she is no longer able to get up, she instead lays and declares herself nature’s bride and embraces the possibility of never being found: “‘I have found my mate,’ she murmured. ‘It is the moor. I am nature’s bride,’ she whispered, ...” (Woolf 2003: 122). She is soon found by Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, the man she would later marry. In a time of need, nature saved her and brought her love.

Shelmerdine is not seen as a typical man of the 19th century, just like Orlando is not typically seen as a woman of the 19th century: “...it was to each such a revelation that a woman could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman...” (Woolf 2003: 127). They accuse each other of being the other sex a few times, which seems to indicate that Shelmerdine is also not conforming to gender rules. Orlando thanks him for making

her feel like a 'real woman', which also becomes legally confirmed days later. The fact that Orlando only feels like a 'real woman' after meeting Shelmerdine seems to point to Orlando assuming that she was not a woman unless she found love and conformed to gender roles. The decision for them to get married comes after spending time in nature for days and feeling the wind on the tenth day, causing Orlando and Shelmerdine to run to the Chapel to get married. Nature is always in the background of their love story, which seems to tie into the fact that Orlando loves nature, and nature reciprocated it by giving her a husband. During the 19th century, married women relied on their husbands, as they had no legal rights themselves (Zweiniger-Bargielowska 2014: 9). Having a husband is what Orlando needed to keep living her life the way it was before she lost the rights of a man.

As Orlando continues to write her poem, there is still an indication of her being attracted to women from her reaction to a line about Egyptian girls she wrote: "...girls? Are girls necessary? You have a husband at the Cape, you say? Ah, well, that'll do." (Woolf 2003: 131). The hesitation of including a line about girls while having a husband seems to be another clue that she might be queer. The book constantly mentions 'the spirit of the age' during the 19th century, which could mean heteronormativity — pressuring Orlando to live a certain way — and she treats it like an examination that she passed by getting married and staying herself, which made her happy and gave her the opportunity to write more than ever. Orlando seems to realise she does not have to sacrifice who she is to live a happy life. She continues to write her poem, finishes it a year later and realises nothing changed around her. That makes her angry, since she felt like the manuscript had to be read: "For the first time in her life she turned with violence against nature." (Woolf 2003: 134). She immediately sets off from her house to London where she meets her old friend Nick Greene, who loves her poem and immediately wants to publish it. He takes the poem from Orlando, which leaves her with an empty place where it used

to be after carrying it around for hundreds of years. She goes to the park to try to write something other than her poem, during which she mistakes a toy boat for her husband's ship, and when it disappears for a moment, she is overcome with agony thinking it sank. The agony is quickly replaced by ecstasy as she sees the toy boat resurfacing. Orlando realises that ecstasy is the thing that matters in life over anything written, foreshadowing the end of the book where she finds happiness.

At the end of the book, she goes to the oak tree in her garden and sits on the roots when she gets the idea to bury her poem. She ends up not being able to do it, but her intention was to give back to nature: "‘I bury this as a tribute,’ she was going to have said, ‘a return to the land of what the land has given me,’..." (Woolf 2003: 160). Although she proceeds to find her thought process confusing, the book still seems to return to the idea that nature gives Orlando what she needs, for which she is grateful. Nature is present for the final time when she gets lost thinking about the life she has lived and comes back to the present time. She is overcome with ecstasy once more as she stands by the oak tree and watches her husband's ship appear. She is surrounded by nature; she has made peace with her life and who she is, and she is excited to see her husband. Nature has given her a sense of purpose and an identity as a woman, and she is ecstatic to live her life exactly how it is now.

2.2. The pear tree symbolism in ‘Bliss’

Mansfield's 'Bliss' depicts a young woman named Bertha, who is preparing for a dinner party she is hosting in the evening, and follows the events leading up to and during the gathering. As the story goes on, Bertha becomes aware of changes happening in her mind, such as seemingly having feelings for a woman. It creates a conflict within herself as she does not know

what to do about it. There is an emphasis on the norms set for her throughout the story, as Bertha feels like she cannot express herself the way she wants to. She compares herself to a 'rare fiddle' several times due to feeling trapped by the expectations of society, which signifies her lack of opportunity to show her real self to the world and the need to appear perfect like the pear tree in her garden. From the very beginning of the story, 'Bliss' shows the journey of a woman coming to terms with herself in a society where being blissful is met with prejudice. This thesis will analyse the emotional journey Bertha goes through to see how she comes to a realisation about her queerness.

Throughout the story, it can be seen how she seems to be happy with her life, but there are cracks in the façade, such as the moment in the beginning of the story where Bertha has just arrived home. She immediately throws off her coat because she finds it suffocating: "...she could not bear the tight clasp of it another moment..." (Mansfield 1924: 117). When she sees herself in the mirror, she seems to see someone else: "She hardly dared to look into the cold mirror—but she did look, and it gave her back a woman, radiant, with smiling, trembling lips, with big, dark eyes..." (Mansfield 1924: 117). It could mean Bertha feeling suffocated from the norms set for her. The coat could be a physical representation of her forcing herself to conform and throwing it off could be her letting herself be free at home. Being forced to hide her happiness at the risk of seeming abnormal seems to be exhausting to the point of losing her real self in the mirror.

The pear tree in Bertha's garden is crucial to the story. The first time the tree is mentioned, Bertha looks at it by herself before the dinner party. She sees the pear tree in full bloom, and it is described as standing perfect with no visible imperfections. It is mentioned in the story that Bertha considers it to be "a symbol of her own life" (Mansfield 1924: 123). The pear tree could be seen as the ideal version of Bertha she wants to be without sacrificing her real

self but is unable to be due to the heteronormative society she has to be a part of. On the other hand, Bertha could see the pear tree as the version of herself she shows to others: a perfect housewife, mother, and woman, because she feels like she cannot be herself to avoid judgement.

It is shown several times that Bertha is constantly suppressing her emotions, which is why she feels suffocated by societal norms. The first time it happens in the story is when she has finished making two fruit pyramids for the dining room. She is overcome with laughter at the beautiful sight but promptly stops herself: ““No, no. I’m getting hysterical.” And she seized her bag and coat and ran upstairs to the nursery.” (Mansfield 1924: 118). Bertha does not allow herself to feel genuine joy at the risk of seeming ‘hysterical’, showing that her home is not a safe place to express herself in either. The second time she suppresses her emotions is on a phone call with her husband. Bertha is in a state of bliss since she had just been spending time with her daughter, whom she loves and she wants to tell her husband how happy she has been on this day, but ends up not saying anything. Bertha questions why she needs to tell him about it: “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!”” (Mansfield 1924: 120). Bertha’s emotions and how she decides to express or suppress them rely on other people’s reactions.

Bertha seems to be hinted as being queer since it is implied that Bertha has feelings for a woman named Pearl Fulton. Bertha and Pearl had met at a club and Bertha is described to have “fallen in love with her, as she always did fall in love with beautiful women who had something strange about them.” (Mansfield 1924: 121). The line seems to hint at her having unusual feelings towards Pearl, possibly romantic, as Bertha refers to her husband as a ‘good pal’, suggesting her to not feel romantic feelings towards him. When Pearl shows up to the dinner party, Bertha takes her arm to lead her to the dining room: “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?” (Mansfield 1924: 128). Bertha does not understand her seemingly non-platonic feelings towards Pearl. Throughout the dinner party, she seems to share intimate moments with Pearl, thinking that Pearl shares Bertha’s feelings for her, which is unclear, but Bertha describes their relationship as something that happens “very, very rarely between women” (Mansfield 1924: 130). She hopes Pearl will give her ‘a sign’, yet she does not know why: “What she meant by that she did not know, and what would happen after that she could not imagine.” (Mansfield 1924: 130). Bertha seems to be having an inner conflict about her identity. Saying that she cannot imagine what would happen after Pearl gives her ‘a sign’ indicates her being afraid to act on her feelings, further suggesting her being a queer woman.

The story comes back to the pear tree when Bertha and Pearl are standing in the drawing room looking at it. The tree is glowing in the moonlight, and they seem to share a moment admiring it, but it is unclear if Pearl feels the same bliss as Bertha: “And did Miss Fulton murmur: “Yes. Just *that*.” Or did Bertha dream it?” (Mansfield 1924: 131). Bertha and Pearl’s outfits are described as resembling the pear tree and the moon to the dinner party, as has been previously noted by Claire Drewery (2020). It could be said that the tree and the moon symbolise Bertha and Pearl, and Bertha constantly looking at it could symbolise wishing to be together with Pearl. Bertha questioning if she heard Pearl seemingly feeling the same as her suggests her secretly wishing for it. Before they went into the drawing room, Bertha thought about the pear tree, and how the now moonlit tree resembles Pearl. Considering Bertha thinks about the tree in the moonlight and not the tree as she saw it in daylight, she seems to imagine herself and Pearl together. The moment in the drawing room is gone as they get interrupted by the light in the room being switched on.

Bertha cannot accept herself because she does not allow herself to do it, but she is on the path to discovering her true self. The last part of the story seems to be the time for realisations.

While thinking about telling her husband what Bertha and Pearl had shared earlier, she supposedly feels desire for her husband for the first time. The thought of it makes Bertha flustered: “Oh, she’d loved him—she’d been in love with him, of course, in every other way, but just not in that way.” (Mansfield 1924: 133). The line seems to indicate that the desire she is feeling is in fact for Pearl, since she herself acknowledges she has never felt romantic feelings for her husband. The feeling of desire is triggered by Bertha thinking about Pearl, yet Bertha fails to realise this and instead directs her desire at her husband.

At the end of the story, Bertha presumably witnesses Pearl flirting with Bertha’s husband Harry, which puts Pearl’s true feelings into question. Bertha sees it from another room, which could mean that she is not seeing or hearing what really happened between them. The description of Harry and Pearl’s interaction seems to indicate an aggressive conversation instead of a romantic one: “He tossed the coat away, put his hands on her shoulders and turned her violently to him.” (Mansfield 1924: 135). Harry is constantly shown being cold and dismissive towards Pearl throughout the story, which Bertha is hurt by: “Bertha realised that she not only bored him; he really disliked her. And she decided from the way Miss Fulton said: “No, thank you, I won’t smoke,” that she felt it, too, and was hurt.” (Mansfield 1924: 133). The description of what Bertha sees seems to be Bertha projecting her feelings towards Pearl on Harry: “His lips said: “I adore you,” and Miss Fulton laid her moonbeam fingers on his cheeks and smiled her sleepy smile.” (Mansfield 1924: 135). She still sees Pearl as the moonlight lighting up the pear tree in her garden. Bertha could be imagining Harry feeling the same for Pearl as she does, but Harry seems to be peeved by Pearl in reality: “Harry’s nostrils quivered; his lips curled back in a hideous grin...” (Mansfield 1924: 135). Harry is described in a negative way, despite Bertha apparently feeling desire for him. His words and his actions seem to not match up, suggesting him to not have romantic feelings towards Pearl, and the interaction to be Bertha’s imagination.

Pearl gives her hand to Bertha while saying goodbye, holds her hand for another moment and mentions the pear tree. It could be a hint that Pearl feels the same as Bertha, which Bertha seemingly assumes to be the case. When Pearl leaves, Bertha runs to look at the tree for the final time in the story, unsure of her future: ““Oh, what is going to happen now?” she cried.” (Mansfield 1924: 136). Bertha is disoriented in trying to figure out her true feelings. She has gone through an emotional journey during the events of the story, which has taken a toll on her, and she is confused about the future. The pear tree appears to have stayed the same despite Bertha’s inner conflict: “But the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still.” (Mansfield 1924: 136). It could mean Bertha’s feelings for Pearl remaining despite thinking she desires her husband. Her asking what will happen next could mean a realisation of her having romantic feelings towards Pearl, which she is afraid to act on.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to analyse how the tree symbolism in *Orlando* and ‘Bliss’ contributes to Orlando and Bertha deviating from heteronormativity. *Orlando* and ‘Bliss’ use the tree symbolism to bring Orlando and Bertha closer to their true selves. As Orlando and Bertha deviate further from the norms set on them, they seem to turn to their respective trees for comfort in a time of need. In *Orlando*, Orlando turns to the physical oak tree to get comfort while her poem ‘The Oak Tree’ helps her process her feelings. In ‘Bliss’, Bertha constantly looks at the tree in her garden, since it seems to represent a future she would like to be reality, whether it is being as perfect as the pear tree at the start of the short story as previous analyses suggest, or, as this thesis claims to be the case, wanting to have a romantic relationship with her friend Pearl at the end of the story.

The trees are used to show Orlando and Bertha's emotional state during important moments in the texts. 'The Oak Tree' appears throughout *Orlando* as she becomes a woman, starts loving nature, says goodbye to her life as a man, and finally finds true happiness and peace in her life. While Orlando gets to a blissful state at the end of the book, Bertha feels bliss throughout the short story and ends up being confused instead. Bertha turns to the tree for comfort. The first time she looks at it, she has just had a negative experience with having to force herself to conform to the norms set for her, while the second time she has seemingly realised her feelings for Pearl, which leaves her questioning what happens next. Although Bertha has not reached the true bliss that Orlando has, she has come to a realisation about her true self which sets her story up for an ending similar to Orlando's — where she can live a happy life as her real self, and not as someone who has to constantly hide it.

The tree symbolism plays a role in the code of subtextual meanings in the texts to avoid explicitly stating that the characters are queer and therefore help avoid censorship. Intertwining the trees with the overall storyline creates an unusual way to criticise heteronormativity while still remaining present only in subtext. It goes beyond the constraints of censorship, just like Orlando and Bertha deviate from heteronormativity as queer characters who cannot fit the mould of the norms set on them. The presence of the trees in both Orlando and Bertha's lives symbolises their similarity in turning to nature for comfort and clarity over their future. Both Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield depict characters who want to break free from societal expectations, and they show how the trees help them on their journey to their true self. More research could be done on *Orlando* and 'Bliss' from a queer ecological standpoint in the future, as it is an interesting angle that should be analysed in depth.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Sigrid Kaevand

The Journey to a True Self through the Use of Tree Symbolism in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Katherine Mansfield's 'Bliss'

Teekond tõelise endani läbi puusümbolika kasutuse Virginia Woolfi romaanis „Orlando“ ja Katherine Mansfieldi lühijutus „Bliss“

Bakalaureusetöö

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Annotatsioon:

Virginia Woolfi romaani „Orlando“ ja Katherine Mansfieldi lühijutu „Bliss“ keskpunktis on tegelased Orlando ja Bertha, kes pöörduvad looduse poole kriisihetkedel. Nende seost loodusega kujutatakse läbi puusümbolika. „Orlando“ romaanis ilmub tammepuu nii füüsiliselt kui ka tema luuletuse „Tammepuu“ kujul ning lühijutus „Bliss“ on pirnipuu Bertha aias.

Orlando ja Bertha on mõlemad sunnitud alluma heteronormatiivsetele normidele ning ühiskondlikele rollidele, millest nad oma lugude ajal järjest lahti laskma hakkavad. Käesoleva töö eesmärk on teada saada, kuidas mõjutab Virginia Woolfi romaanis ja Katherine Mansfieldi lühijutus leiduv puusümbolika heteronormatiivsusest eemaldumist ning etteseatud normidest lahti ütlemist.

Töö koosneb sissejuhatausest, mis annab lühikese ülevaate romaani ja lühijutu kohta ning ka ajaperioodi kohta, milles need avaldati. Esimene peatükk koosneb kirjandusülevaatest, et uurida, mida on eelnevalt romaani ja lühijutu puusümbolika kasutuse kohta leitud. Teine peatükk kasutab lähilugemise meetodit, et analüüsida tekstides leiduva puusümbolika tähendust ja kasutust lähemalt.

Romaani ja lühijutu lähilugemine näitas, et puusümbolikat kasutatakse tegelaste emotsionaalse seisundi näitamiseks ning tsensuuri vältimiseks. Puusümbolika ilmneb tekstides hetkedel, kui tegelaste elus midagi suurt toimub, näiteks mõlema teksti lõpus, kus Orlando leiab viimaks rahu ja õnne ning Bertha saab oma tegelikest tunnetest aru. Puud mängivad romaanis ja lühijutus suurt rolli tegelaste kvääridentiteedi varjamiseks, et vältida tsensuuri ja kriitikat.

Märksõnad: Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, heteronormatiivsus, puusümbolika

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