

Course: English Literature 1st Year

Lesson 04: Analysis of Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill" (1920)

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Analysis of Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill" (1920)

I. Plot Summary:

This short story is about a middle aged woman called Miss Brill. The events take place in France and they centre around Miss Brill and her Sunday routines. Miss Brill is a teacher of English. She is described as a peaceful lady who enjoys going to the park near her home every Sunday to watch a band playing music or to just sit on a bench watching people and secretly listening to their conversation. Gradually, she realises that people at the park see her as a sad, stupid and lonely woman. This is seen in the way that a young couple in the park make fun of her and her fur. At this point, she returns home feeling belittled and unimportant. The story ends with Miss Brill crying.

II. Plot elements:

- **Exposition:** in the introduction of the story, the reader learns about Miss Brill and her Sunday routine.
- **Rising Action:** Miss Brill starts thinking that she is an actress and that she is playing an important role in society.
- **Climax:** the young couple hit Miss Brill with the truth that she is a sad and lonely woman.
- **Falling Action:** Miss Brill returns home filled with sadness.
- **Resolution/Denouement:** She puts her fur back in the box and bursts into tears.

III. Conflict of the story:

- **External conflict:** Miss Brill against society. She is clearly struggling to fit in the society where she lives.
- **Internal conflict:** Miss Brill struggles against her desires of wanting to belong to a society when she keeps being rejected.

IV. Characters of the Story:

- **Major character:** Miss Brill
- **Minor/supporting characters:** the old silent couple, the woman with ermine toque, the Englishman with his wife, two soldiers and two girls, a little boy, a nun and the young couple.
- **Analysis of Miss Brill's character:**

Throughout the story, Miss Brill attempts to fit in a society in which she feels lonely and alienated. One indication of her loneliness is seen earlier in the story where she speaks with her fur. This shows that she has no one to talk to. She only experiences joy through her Sunday visits to the park where she sits and observes people. She listens to their conversations, she analyses, criticises and at times she sympathizes with some. For example, an old couple sits next to her on a bench and she gets eager to listen to what they would talk about. However, she gets disappointed as the old couple has barely spoken. She finds them boring and comments that they sit there “still as statues” (Mansfield 185). She shifts her attention to the crowd in search of some amusing conversations but she finds them boring and repetitive saying: “Other people sat on the benches and green chairs, but they were nearly always the same, Sunday after Sunday” (Mansfield 185).

In this way, Miss Brill creates her own world in which she seems to take a vital part. In her world, she thinks that she is an actress and that she can connect to people around her and their presence makes her feel important. Believing that she is part of a play, Miss Brill thinks that she plays an important role in society. She dreams further by imagining that the whole crowd would join her in singing. She is so immersed in her dreams that tears begin to fill her eyes and this shows the extent of her loneliness and the way she desires a unification with the public from which she is actually detached.

Miss Brill returns to reality after having been painfully crushed by the young couple who has sat next to her. The young couple call her “that old stupid thing” (Mansfield 189) and they mock her fur, the only thing she is currently attached to. Throughout the story, we see a transformation of Miss Brill's mental state from being seemingly optimistic to becoming sad and distressed in the end.

V. Central themes of the story: Alienation and Denial

It is evidently clear that Miss Brill is estranged from society. She lives alone in a small room, she has no friends and no engagement with other people. Another evidence of her loneliness is that she does not attempt to engage in small conversations with the people who sit next to her. This is stressed further when the young couple refer to her as a lonely person.

It is important to note that Miss Brill is in a state of denial throughout the story. This means that she seems to be happy and goes about her regular Sunday routine feeling positive, however, it is shown that she rejects her alienation by constantly believing that she is part of the community around her. An example of this occurs when she starts imagining that she is an actress in a play, believing that she is connected to the public around her.

Everytime she describes the people she encounters in the park, she actually describes herself. For example, in her description of the old couple as boring and that they sit still as statues, she is actually describing herself. She also sits on benches every Sunday as a statue. Another

example is when she refers to people in the crowd as “ odd, silent, nearly all old, and from the way they stared they looked as though they’d just come from dark little rooms or even—even cupboards!” (Mansfield 186). As a matter of fact, she is the one who has come out of her little dark room like a cupboard. She is strange because she is a foreigner living in France, she is silent because she does not take part in any conversation and she is old. She also notices a woman in an ermine toque, referring to her ermine toque as old and shabby. Not surprisingly, she reflects the woman in the ermine toque who is old.

Her sense of denial is resolved when the young couple hit her with the truth about her isolated position in a foreign society. It is only then that Miss Brill faces the harsh reality of her isolation.

VI. Foreshadowing: An example of foreshadowing in this story is when she arrives at the park, there is a faint chill in the air. We get the sense that something will leave her "cold" later in the story. This means that she is hit by the truth about her alienation in the same way she has been hit by the chill in the air earlier in the story.

VII. Symbolism: An example of symbolism is the fur that Miss Brill speaks to and happily wears at the beginning of the story. This fur represents Miss Brill in the way that they both come out of boxes and return to boxes. Miss Brill comes out of the dark little room and returns to it in the same way the fur emerges from a box and returns to the box towards the end. Also, The fur’s ending-like nose looks as though it has taken a hit and this symbolises the way in which Miss Brill is hit by the harsh truth from the part of the young couple. In the end, Miss Brill says that she hears the fur crying inside the box when in reality she is the one who is crying.

Another example of symbolism is the old and shabby ermine toque which represents Miss Brill who is old.

