

## On the Alienation in *Miss Brill*\*

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Katherine Mansfield is a world famous woman master of short stories in English literature. Her stories are sensitive revelations of human behaviour in quite ordinary situations, through which we can glimpse a powerful, and sometimes cruelly pessimistic view of life. *Miss Brill* is one of her short stories published in her collection of stories entitled *The Garden Party and Other Stories* (2007), describing an afternoon in the life of a middle-aged spinster who visits the public park on a weekly basis, leading to her reassessment of her view of the world and the secular reality. Short as it is, it is really worth careful analysis and appreciation. This paper will mainly deal with the theme—alienation that the story conveys in two aspects: some obvious alienate elements in *Miss Brill*, in which some background information is provided; some less obvious alienation in *Miss Brill*, in which a detailed analysis is made into the story to reveal its alienation.

*Keywords:* alienation, *Miss Brill*, theme

### Introduction

Katherine Mansfield, the famous woman master of short stories of 20th century English literature, was born in New Zealand. Since 1917, she led a wandering life in search of health and wrote under difficulties. *Miss Brill* is one of her most popular stories published in her 1922 collection of stories entitled *The Garden Party and Other Stories* (2007). The story is the typical style of Mansfield who wrote in an impressionistic style, focussed on psychological conflicts, and articulated the characters, inner voices by the use of interior monologues (LIU, 2001, p. 457). In the short story, Miss Brill's character is vividly depicted through her psychological change when spending her Sunday afternoon on the park bench listening to the band playing and observing the crowd.

At the beginning of the story, the central character, referred to as Miss Brill throughout the story and without a given name, sets out for her regular afternoon promenade at the public gardens. Miss Brill was happy and excited preparation of wearing her prized fur stole and scarf. Her excitement continues when she is sitting on the bench in the bustling park filled with people from all walks of life, enjoying the warm afternoon, listening to the band's loud and gay playing and observing different people and their interesting behaviors astutely. She was so happy that she even transforms the real, human scene in the park into a set scene from a play, "It was exactly like a play... They were all on the stage... they were acting. She was part of the performance, after all" (WANG, 1987, p. 128). All perfectly interacting to form an idyllic backdrop for her studies of human nature. She believes herself to be an active and vital actress in this play. Unfortunately, her excitement was destroyed by a young

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couple's flippant comment on her, she is just "that stupid old thing" and "Who wants her? Why doesn't she keep her silly old mug at home?" (WANG, 1987, p. 130). Consequently, her vivacious mood and illusion have been totally and cruelly shattered. She then leaves the park and went into her little dark room—a room like a cupboard—just like the little rooms of the lonely people she pitied at the garden. When she put the fur back in its box, Miss Brill thought that she heard something crying.

Whatever Miss Brill sees, she reduces to the parameters of her own constricted world.

The present paper will mainly analyze the alienation in *Miss Brill*.

### **The Alienation in *Miss Brill***

#### **Some Obvious Alienate Elements in *Miss Brill***

It is well-known that Katherine Mansfield spent a considerable amount of her later years in warmer climates in France due to her illness. Thus *Miss Brill*, written in the early 1920s, appears to be set in the south of France coinciding with Mansfield's period of stay there. Miss Brill is an elderly, lonely alien woman who is forced to confront the handicaps in her life in France. This fact alone can account for some of her estrangement and inability to communicate freely. Being lonely in another country with poor physical condition, *Miss Brill* exposes the theme of alienation.

The theme of Katherine Mansfield's *Miss Brill* is alienation or loneliness. Miss Mansfield gives, in this story, a significant survey of the small world that the lonely woman inhabits, through the eyes of Miss Brill. Indeed, Miss Brill's world is more than lonely; it is also an existential world in which she finds herself in complete solitude estranged from the outside world, without friends or relatives. Her only relationships are with her students, in whom she naturally cannot confide, and with an old invalid gentleman who is practically dead. No one else figures in her life. She maintains only the most tenuous of contacts with the outside world.

Another obvious element of alienation in *Miss Brill* is Miss Brill's name. Brill in French (*briller*) means to shine. The irony is that she does not shine but is indeed a dull spinster without a shining personality or the warming glow of love. The name further suggests Miss Brill's estrangement from herself. All that she can see and know of herself is that "varnish and tinsel" of the surface. Her fur is the most obvious of the surface fixtures with which she identifies. However, we can still find the some less obvious indications of alienation in the story.

#### **Some Less Obvious Alienation in *Miss Brill***

The story opens with the vivid description of the atmosphere:

The blue sky powdered with gold and great spots of light like white wine splashed over the Jardins Publiques... the air was motionless, but when you opened your mouth there was a faint chill, like a chill from a glass of iced water before you sip, and now and again a leaf came drifting—from nowhere, from the sky. (WANG, 1987, p. 125)

One immediately can feel the first throes of autumn, that "faint chill" anticipating the colder chill of winter. Yet para-doxically, Miss Brill finds in the chill the feeling of the vibrancy of spring. "She had taken it out of its box that afternoon, shaken out the moth-powder, given it a good brush, and rubbed the life back into the dim eyes" (WANG, 1987, p. 125), and then like an awakening "she felt a tingling in her hands and arms, but that came from walking, she supposed. And when she breathed, something light and sad—no, not sad, exactly—Something gentle seemed to move in her bosom" (WANG, 1987, p. 125). Sunday afternoons at the Public Gardens are

special outings for Miss Brill, so she was extremely excited and happy. She has a great longing for this outing. This passage certainly parallels the passage in the later part of the story:

The Band had been having a rest. Now they started again. And what they played was warm, sunny, yet there was just a faint chill—a something, what was it? not sadness—no, not sadness—a something that made you want to sing. (WANG, 1987, p. 129)

The “chill” or the “something” points directly yet subtly to Miss Brill’s alienation. For her, love is a desire that she cannot get, she can only imagine it in her mind. She imagines all those gathered in the park singing and thus communicating with one another—a carved walking-stick, a Panama hat, button boots, ermine toque, a trotting dog, laughing children, hobbling old men, gay young men and women—which is faintly chill because she has been somehow excommunicated from a real experience of love. Thus not knowing love’s warmth or having any framework of reference for the experience of love, she can feel or imagine love only in the solitude devoid of warmth, estranged and left cold with absence.

So she almost has at loving, tender relationship to her fur necklet—a decorative fur piece worn about the neck like an ornament, which functions like an unsympathetic mirror into which she cannot see. The tenderness that she shows the dead animal—the fur necklet, reminds us of the absolute loneliness enveloping her life. We take sympathy for her because the only emotional outlet for her affection is a dead animal. She is rejected by the human world.

A further suggestion of alienation is in the meeting of the woman in the ermine toque and the man in the gray suit. The “ermine toque” was no longer young, her hand was a tiny yellowish paw, yet she tried all her means to seduce the “gray suit”. “But he shook his head, lighted a cigarette, slowly breathed a great deep puff into her face... flicked the match away and walked on” (WANG, 1987, p. 128). The man refused the woman, whom Miss Brill admires and with whom she identifies. Mansfield, at this moment, described: “... the band seemed to know what she was feeling and played more softly, ..., the Brute! The Brute!” (WANG, 1987, p. 128). Miss Brill in her identification feels that her experiences of rejection are like those experienced by the flirtatious woman. Miss Brill took sympathy for the flirtatious woman just as she took pity for herself. Both women passionately desire to express their love, the woman wearing the toque through the physical contact of sex, while Miss Brill through what she imagines. Society rebuffs both expressions. It rejects the one because sex is only one manifestation of love; it rejects the other because of failure to communicate. The society cannot read Miss Brill’s mind. Katherine Mansfield says in her letter “... one *must* declare one’s love”. Miss Brill’s declaration, is unheard and thus, to society, unexpressed (LU, 2008, p. 12).

We can find still further evidence of alienation in the story. Miss Brill had a wonderful time at the park, and she is gathered up into an imaginative experience with all the people gathered in the park singing together as a harmonious whole. This imagination filled her with tears. But even this imaginative attempt at an expression of love fails as Miss Brill thinks, “Yes we understand, we understand, she thought—though what they understood she didn’t know” (WANG, 1987, p. 130). Even in her most vivid imaginings, Miss Brill can find no understanding or communication with others and with the outside world. She finds herself completely alone, yet she denies or fails to understand or to confront her position.

Yet the final and most overwhelming evidence of alienation is the tragic scene in which Miss Brill is

rebuffed by the young man and young girl courting on the seat next to her. What the young people said are crude and brutish. It destroyed all of her imagination and desire, it brings her back to the cold, lonely society. With this confrontation of her solitude, she returns to her “cupboard” with nothing left her but self-pity in her loneliness.

Thus the theme of alienation is what Miss Mansfield wants to reveal to the readers. Miss Brill has made ever so passionate attempt to express love, to be a part of the whole of society that means so much to her. Her imagination, though sensitive, has failed from lack of experience. She is left, as she began, in her pathetic solitude.

### Conclusions

*Miss Brill* is a quiet and understated story about the alienation of growing old woman without love, without human companionship in a foreign country. Even though Miss Brill does not seem to have intimate friendships or relationships of any kind, she has a curious mind and a kind and loving heart capable of deep feeling, love, and care. She quietly absorbs the impressions of the world around her, into which she wants to blend herself. However, the world returns her curiosity and gentleness with anonymity, disinterest, and the cruelty with which the young lovers treat her. And yet, her condition of isolation is so extreme that one thoughtless bit of cruelty is capable of wrecking everything. Mansfield shows us the character from the inside, in order to disclose why Miss Brill could be made so unhappy by such a remark. That is to say: Miss Brill’s misery is caused not only by Miss Brill’s personality of herself but by the cruelty of the unfeeling external world, represented by the young couple.

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