

The Fragile of Miss Brill's Fantasy

-- A Formalistic Approach to Katherine Mansfield's Miss Brill

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Abstract: Katherine Mansfield's short story, *Miss Brill*, is published in her 1922 collection of stories entitled *The Garden Party*. It is one of Mansfield's most popular stories and *Miss Brill* has become one of the impressive female characters in English literature. The story's enduring popularity is due partly to its narrative strategies. This paper is intended to view the main character, *Miss Brill* and present the shattering of her fragile fantasy from the perspective of narrative strategies. Mansfield's skillful handling of narrative strategies displays the conflicts of *Miss Brill*'s subjective world and the objective reality and predicts the shattering of her fragile fantasy in front of reality.

1. Introduction

Katherine Mansfield(1888-1923),the famous short story writer, wrote beautiful and sensitive stories. Subtle melancholy floods her short stories. Her sensitive and melancholic stories originated from her experiences of life. She was born in Ellington in New Zealand as Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp. Her father, Harold Beauchamp, was a successful businessman and banker. Katherine had a comfortable and privileged material life in her childhood. Katherine Mansfield showed a particular fondness of short-story writing. She thought that the short story form was the best vehicle for literary experimentation and reflecting the spirit of her time. Mansfield showed a new style of short fiction and she decided to break away from the narrative tradition. During Mansfield's short life, Mansfield wrote 88 short stories collected in the three collections: *In a German Pension*, *Bliss and Other Stories* and *The Garden Party and Other Stories*. Among the three collections, *The Garden Party and Other Stories* is regarded to be the best one. Katherine's stories, artifacts themselves, are full of other artifacts such as exquisite, minute flowers and shells. Her sensitive and delicate stories give us pictures of ordinary people and trivia. Her work was motivated by the wish to express not only something delicate and lovely, but also deep sense of hopelessness. Themes of making and spoiling dominate her work. Katherine Mansfield revolutionized the 20th century English short story. Her best work shakes itself free of plots and endings and shows rich interior life, the poetry of feeling and the blurred edges of personality. Her open-ended story raised questions about identity, belonging and desire. Her exquisite style, melancholy and beautiful tone, subtle irony and symbolic images all show her individuality as a writer.

Katherine Mansfield's short story, *Miss Brill*, published in her 1922 collection of stories entitled *The Garden Party*, is about an elderly lady's encounters in a park. The story's enduring popularity is due partly to its narrative strategies in which *Miss Brill*'s character is revealed through her perceptions of others as she watches people passing by. Mansfield's talent as a writer is illustrated by the fact that she at no point tells what *Miss Brill* is thinking about her own life, yet the story draws one of the most animated character portraits in twentieth-century short fiction. *Miss Brill* has become one of Mansfield's most popular stories, and has been reprinted in numerous anthologies and collections.

Katherine Mansfield's *Miss Brill* paints a picture of an elderly woman, *Miss Brill*, who views everything she observes in the park and sits in other's conversation. She imagines herself as a needed part of something spectacular on Sundays although she has little contact with outside world.

Her fantasy is soon shattered by the inconsiderate and harsh remarks of a young couple. Through the skillful use of point of view and speech representation, Mansfield makes Miss Brill reveal herself to readers and present the shattering of her fragile fantasy.

2. From the Perspective of Narrative Strategies

2.1 The Use of the Third-Person Limited Omniscient Point of View

The point of view is the “head” or “camera angle” from which the action will be filtered. Depending on which source you study, there are a variable number of points of view to choose from. Experienced writers will strategically choose the point of view that can effectively develop their characters and tell the story. Many well-known literary critics have attempted to provide their own ways of categorization of point of view. In *Understanding Fiction*, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren sorted out four main kinds of point of view, namely, 1. first-person (I-Character) narration, 2. first-person (I-Witness) narration, 3. authorial (author-witness) narration and 4. omniscient narration. From their classification, we may conclude that Brooks and Warren’s point of view theory comes down in one continuous line with those of James and Lubbock. However, Norman Friedman in *Point of View in Fiction* presented probably the most detailed and complete classification of point of view. He distinguished eight different kinds of classification: the first two types fall into the omniscient narrating, one is with authorial intrusions and the other without authorial intrusions; the second pair are first-person narrating I-witness and I-protagonist; the third couple are together under the title of selective omniscient narrating, either with restricted multiple point of view or with restricted single point of view; and the last two types are purely objective narrating, one is dramatic mode and the other is camera eye.

Mansfield is a capable user of shifting narrative perspectives, that is, the shifting from the outside narration of the author into the inner world of the characters, moreover, which happens unconsciously. In most of the mature stories of Katherine Mansfield, the authorial voice is either mute or subdued, and the reader is placed directly within the consciousness of a character. An internal perspective is in fact the ultimate goal that she desires to achieve, for her aim in writing is to dig deeper in life and explore its meanings. Often, although the story is told through from a constant changing perspective, the focus is most frequently on the central protagonist so that the reader shares that character’s experience in particular.

Miss Brill narrates what Miss Brill sees, hears and feels in a Sunday afternoon. By telling the story from the third-person limited omniscient point of view, readers are allowed to observe and view through Miss Brill’s eyes’ and share Miss Brill’s perceptions.

From Miss Brill’s perspective, the narrator relays the events around her. At first, Miss Brill’s view of the world is a delightful one, and readers are invited to share in her pleasure: the day was “so brilliantly fine”, and “the band sounded louder and gayer”. She notices and appreciates small things. She enjoys her life and finds wonders and beauty in everyday things as she watches people pass in front of her. As Rhoda Nathan comments, “...the genteel Miss Brill is an observer of life, one who sits on the sidelines and watches the game in all of its striving, contending, and passion” [1]. Through her eyes’, a lively and bustling scene of everyday life is represented:

Little children swooped and laughed; two young girls came by and two young soldiers met them; two peasant women passed leading beautiful smoke-colored donkeys; a cold, pale nun hurried by; a beautiful woman came along dropping her bunch of violets and a little boy ran after to hand them to her, but she threw them away as if they’ve poisoned [2].

This careful observation proves that she possesses keen eyes for outward appearances and detail, but she seems little knowledge of her inward life and insensitive to her own situation. She “reads” the people around her and thinks that she is interacting with them in this way, though no one really speaks to her, or even notices her. Miss Brill also views herself as a needed part of something spectacular on Sundays. “They were all on stage. They weren’t only the audience, not only looking on; they were acting. Even she had a part and came every Sunday. No doubt somebody would have noticed if she hadn’t been there; she was part of the performance after all”. In reality, she is a part of

nothing. She despises those “odd, silent and nearly all old” people and refuses to be one of them. Meanwhile, she is ridiculed by the young couple and denied to be one of them. In the process of sharing her perception, readers may suddenly realize these perceptions are her fantasy, which are highly romanticized. A dramatic irony is hence formed and it is essential to our understanding of her real situation. This effect should be attributed to Mansfield’s skillful handling of point of view, which encourages readers to view Miss Brill both from her perceptions and from their own judgment.

Mansfield use of third person point of view in this story allowed her to keep Miss Brill fears and realities hidden from the reader. If the reader had been aware of everything from the beginning, there would have been no point at all to the story. Carefully revealing pieces of Miss Brill character through this point of view illustrated her own passage into a new reality. Keeping the point of view limited to Miss Brill and excluding the thoughts of other characters make the reality of her hidden from readers. As Miss Brill travels from her isolated existence into self-awareness, readers are able to share a meaningful experience and go through the same journey as she does. They are given no real clue about her other than her profession, a teacher, and that she goes to the park every Sunday. Her age is unidentified and hard to guess. She appears to be much younger due to her distain towards the old. Readers are also made to share her excitement as she realizes that she is a part in the play. Only until the two young lovers’ comments on her appearance, the reader is suddenly aware of how old she really is and how unaware she is about her reality. For the first time in the story, both the reader and Miss Brill see other people view her. At the end of the story, when she put the fur in its box and thought she heard something crying. She finally reveals her real emotion, which evokes our sympathy for her.

2.2 The Skillful Handling of Free Indirect Speech and Free Direct Speech

An outstanding feature of Mansfield’s female characters is that they often indulge themselves in their imagination and weave their fantasy and she often resorts to free indirect speech to represent the conflicts between the reality and the imagined world of the character. In *Miss Brill*, the skillful handling of free indirect speech and free direct speech successfully reflects the sharp contrast between her subjective world and the objective reality. At the very beginning of the story, Miss Brill appears to a person with rich and exquisite emotion.

Dear little thing! It was nice to feel it again. ... Oh, how sweet it was to see them snap at her again from the red eiderdown! ... But the nose, which was of some black composition, wasn’t at all firm. It must have had a knock, somehow. Never mind---a little dab of black sealing wax when the time came---when it was absolutely necessary... Little rogue! [2]

These quotations are the interior monologue of Miss Brill. She kindly called her fur “dear little thing” and “little rogue”. It was not only used for warmth and decoration but also regarded as a part of her life. Here the shift of the point of view to free indirect speech helps the narrator to go deep into the inner world of Miss Brill and unveil her mental activity. Moreover, it shortens the distance between readers and Miss Brill and encourages their active participation in the narration with narrator’s self-effacing.

The use of free indirect speech and narrator’s self-effacing make the whole story permeated with Miss Brill’s perceptions. “Wasn’t the conductor wearing a new coat, too?” Here readers seem to hear a vague voice from the narrator. Yet, it is soon replaced by Miss Brill’s strong voice. “She was sure it was new.” “She was sure it would be repeated.” [2] These words not only suggest Miss Brill’s delight but also her confidence.

While Miss Brill interprets other around her, she also revealed herself to us. “Miss Brill had often noticed--- there was something funny about nearly all of them. They were old, silent, nearly all old and from the way they stared they looked as though they’d just come from dark little rooms or even cupboards!” [2] This seems to be narrator’s voice, but it is actually Miss Brill’s perception of old people. Ironically, she distains them and shows her superiority over them. The mocking note is noticeable here. Later, when she mentioned the old invalid gentleman to whom she read the newspaper, she thought to herself: “if he’d been dead she mightn’t have noticed for weeks; she

wouldn't have minded." [2] She exposes herself to be indifferent and unsympathetic towards the old, whose situation is a real reflection of her position.

After her sudden realization that she was not only an observer but also a participant, she became more excited. "And Miss Brill's eyes filled with tears and she looked smiled at all the other members of the company. Yes, we understand, we understand, she thought---though what they understood she didn't know." At this moment, Miss Brill's completely indulge herself in her imagination and fantasy. She excludes others' thoughts and feelings. Here, the use of the pronouns "we", "she" and "they" is interesting and should be given close attention. Miss Brill seems to replace "their" understanding with "hers" and she regards herself as one member of "we". But the fact is otherwise. The narrator tried to correct her: she didn't know what they understand. "In free indirect speech, the narrator's objective interpretation suppresses the character's subjective consciousness to some extent, and weakens the excitement and exaggeration in the character's speech." [3] As a matter of fact, she doesn't understand what they think and also is not understood by them because she is not one of them. However, she is still unwilling to face the reality. Just at this moment, the sudden appearance of the direct speech of the young lovers breaks her fantasy and brings her into the reality.

"Because of that stupid old thing at the end there? Why does she come here at all---who wants her? Why doesn't she keep her silly old mug at home?" [2]

Their words forced Miss Brill to step out of her daydream and face reality. Her slim contact with the outside world is cut off. Her hope for other's understanding was shattered. She suddenly realized that in the eyes of other people, she was an old, disgusting lady, a marginal figure. Here the strong contrast of the direct and indirect speech both in form and content constitute the conflicts of Miss Brill's subjective world and the objective reality.

2.3 Narration of Impersonal Objects--- the Weather and the Band

The description of the impersonal objects, namely, the weather and the band also provide some hints of Miss Brill's fantasy and reveal her situation to us.

Although the weather was "brilliantly fine", there was "a faint chill, like a chill from a glass of iced water". Obviously, Miss Brill has immersed herself in herself the fine weather and ignores "the cold". It sets a tone for the whole story-a sadness below the excited surface. For several times, she has felt something sad moving in her bosom, but she refuses to admit and acclaim as "something gentle" or "a something that made you want to sing". The narrator suggests that sadness is just below the surface but she tries to suppress. As to the band, it is a reflection of her mood. When she was happy, the band played quickly and cheerfully. When she felt sad, the band played softly and gently. It seemed to play for her benefit. In fact, the performance of the band didn't change. Therefore, Miss Brill's perceptions of these impersonal objects are full of her own feelings and emotions. It reflects that she is completely immersed in her fantasy in order to escape from the reality.

Mansfield's skillful handling of narrative strategies displays the conflicts of Miss Brill's fantasy and the cruel reality, and makes her a convincing and impressing character.

3. Conclusion

Miss Brill is forced to face reality of who she is, where she came from, and what others think of her. However, instead of understanding who she is, Miss Brill chooses to ignore it. When the girl in the park refers to the fur as a fried whiting it hurts Miss Brill so much because it is almost as if she is referring to her as that. When the boy refers to her as the stupid old thing that no one wants reality "sinks in". At this point in the story Miss Brill is finally forced to realize who she is and what others think of her. At the end of the story when the fur is put away in its box it is inferred that the fur will not come out of the box again. Likewise Miss Brill will not likely go out to the gardens anymore. This becomes apparent because she did not stop for the special piece of cake. This story's enduring popularity is due partly to its narrative strategies. While analyzing the main character, Miss Brill, the shattering of her fragile fantasy is presented from the perspective of narrative strategies.

Through the skillful use of point of view and speech representation, Mansfield makes Miss Brill reveal herself to readers and present the shattering of her fragile fantasy. Mansfield's skillful handling of narrative strategies displays the conflicts of Miss Brill's subjective world and the objective reality and predicts the shattering of her fragile fantasy in front of reality.

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