Miss Brill Study Guide

Miss Brill by Katherine Mansfield

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Introduction

“Miss Brill," Katherine Mansfield's short story about a woman's Sunday outing to a park, was published in her 1922 collection of stories entitled *The Garden Party*. The story's enduring popularity is due in part to its use of a stream-of-constiousness narrative in which Miss Brill's character is revealed through her thoughts about others as she watches a crowd from a park bench. 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 succinct, complete character portraits in twentieth-century short fiction. "Miss Brill" has become one of Mansfield's most popular stones, and has been reprinted in numerous anthologies and collections. The story is typical of Mansfield's style; she often employed stream-of-consciousness narration in order to show the psychological complexity of everyday experience in her characters' lives.

Author Biography

Katherine Mansfield was born Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp to a wealthy family in Wellington, New Zealand, on October 14,1888. She was educated in London, deciding early on that she wanted to be a writer. She studied music, wrote for the school newspaper, and gained her intellectual freedom by studying Oscar Wilde and the other English "decadent" writers of the early twentieth century. Three years later she returned to New Zealand, where her parents expected her to find a suitable husband and lead the life of a well-bred woman. However, Mansfield was rebellious, adventurous, and more enamored of the artistic community than of polite society. She began publishing stories in Australian magazines in 1907, and shortly thereafter returned to London. A brief affair left her pregnant and she consented to marry a man, George Bowden, whom she had known a mere three weeks and who was not the father of her child. She dressed in black for the wedding and left him before the night was over. Upon receiving word of the scandal and fueled by rumors that her daughter had also been involved with several women, Mansfield's mother immediately sailed to London and placed her daughter in a spa in Germany, far away from the Bohemian artists' community of London and her best friend, Ida Baker, whom Mansfield's mother considered a bad influence. During her time in Germany, Mansfield suffered a miscarriage and was cut out of her parents' will. After returning to London, Mansfield moved in with Baker, continuing to write and conduct various love affairs.

In 1911, Mansfield published her first volume of stories, *In a German Pension*, most of which had been written during her stay at the German spa. That same year she met John Middleton Murry, the editor of a literary magazine. Although they lived together on and off for many years, her other affairs continued, most notably with Baker. Together Mansfield and Murry published a small journal, The Blue Review, which folded after only three issues. However, the experience gained them entrance into the literary community of the day, and one of their newfound friends was D, H. Lawrence. In 1918, Mansfield was finally granted a divorce from Bowden, and she and Murry married. Stricken with tuberculosis in 1917, Mansfield became increasingly ill. She continued to write, publishing her two most well-known collections, *Bliss and Other Stories* and *The Garden Party and Other Stories* in 1920 and 1922 respectively. The collections received favorable critical attention, and she continued to write even after her health forced her to move to Fontainebleau. Though she was separated from Murray for long periods towards the end of her life, it was he who saw that her literary reputation was established by publishing her last stories and her collections of letters after her death in January, 1923, at the age of thirty-four.

Plot Summary

The Jardins Publiques (Public Gardens) in a French town on an early autumn Sunday afternoon is the setting for "Miss Brill." The air is still, but there is a "faint chill, like a chill from a glass of iced water before you sip," so Miss Brill is happy to have worn her fur stole. The stole, in accordance to the fashions of the times, was constructed so that its fake eyes and nose could be attached to its tail, securing it around the wearer's neck. It is the first time she has worn it in a while. When preparing for her stroll in the park, she gives it a "good brush," "[rubs] the life back into the dim little eyes," and teasingly calls it her "little rogue."

Miss Brill watches the people in the park with delight. The band sounds "louder and gayer" to her than it has on previous Sundays. She listens to the concert from her "'special' seat" and is disappointed when the other two people seated there do not speak. Her favorite pastime on Sunday afternoon is to eavesdrop on people's conversations.

In one observation, Miss Brill notices that all the people sitting on the benches listening to the band are "odd, silent, nearly all old" and "looked as though they'd just come from dark little rooms or even—even cupboards." As Miss Brill listens to the band and watches the children playing, her thoughts drift from the pupils to whom she teaches English, to the old man to whom she reads the newspaper four days a week.

As her exuberance grows, Miss Brill likens her position as that of an actress in a play. As dramas are acted out in the park, Miss Brill realizes that she is a character, too: "Even she had a part and came every Sunday. No doubt somebody would have noticed if she hadn't been there." She delights in the metaphor. The band, which had been taking a break, resumes playing. Miss Brill thinks that the "whole company" might begin singing along at any moment. They would sing something "so beautiful— and moving." She feels a vague sense of community with the rest of the people in the park.

A young couple, well-dressed and in love, come and sit near her, and Miss Brill imagines them to be the hero and heroine of the play. She listens to their conversation, but instead of revealing dialogue that fulfills Miss Brill's fantasy of theater, the girl makes fun of Miss Brill's fur collar. The boy, trying to appease his girlfriend, says "Why does she come here at all—who wants her? Why doesn't she keep her silly old mug at home?" The girl, snickering, compares the woman's fur to a dead fish, saying that it looks like a "fried whiting."

Miss Brill's reaction to the comments are not recorded. Instead, she forgoes her usual stop at the bakery on her way back to her "little dark room— her room like a cupboard," where she sits silently for a long time. Finally, she unclasps her fur quickly without looking at it. As she places it back in the box, she thinks that she hears "something crying."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

When Miss Brill sets out for her usual Sunday afternoon at the Jardins Publiques (Public Gardens), she notices a slight chill in the air. It is early fall, and she decides to bring out her favorite fur stole from its box. She shakes out the moth powder, combs out its fur, shines its unseeing eyes and contemplates gluing its nose firmly in place, as it appears to be loosening. Armed against the slight chill in the air with her "little rogue," as she calls it, she sets out. Her fur stole gives her great pleasure, and she almost wishes she could have "taken it off and laid it on her lap and stroked it." As she ponders her fur stole, she experiences a feeling that she will not allow herself to identify as sadness: "something gentle" in her bosom.

She reaches the Jardins Publiques, and settles herself in her "special" seat. She notes that there are many more people out than there were on the previous Sunday, and supposes that the "season" has officially begun. She also notices how the band plays so much better when there are more people around to listen to it, and how even the conductor of the band seems to be looking smarter than usual.

Miss Brill begins to take note of the people around her, as per her usual Sunday routine. There are only two other people sharing her "special" seat, a fine old man with a walking stick, and a large woman with knitting needles. She is disappointed that the two do not speak to each other, as she "had become really quite expert…at listening as though she didn't listen, at sitting in other people's lives just for a minute while they talked round her. " She recalls the couple that shared her seat the previous Sunday, how the woman had moaned incessantly to her husband about needing eyeglasses and how patient her husband had been in spite of her bad-tempered discourse.

She begins to look around her at the passers-by. She watches the poor man selling flowers, the young boys and girls playing together shyly, and the watchful mothers minding their children. Miss Brill notices then that the people sitting on the benches and chairs all had a similar quality: "They were 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!"

She continues to watch the people as they pass by her. She sees two girls meet their lovers and continue on their way. She sees a small child run to rescue some flowers a beautiful lady has dropped, and then she sees the beautiful lady throw them away once again, in front of the disappointed child. She sees an elderly woman in an ermine toque brushed off by a distinguished man in a gray suit. She shares the woman's annoyance for a moment and imagines that the band plays more slowly in commiseration.

It occurs to Miss Brill as the old couple sitting next to her rise to leave that they are all like actors in a play, acting on a stage, each with his or her own part to play. She

reasons that if everyone around her is an actor in the play, then she too must have a small role. She rejoices in the fact that, if she did not show up faithfully each Sunday, then people would notice her absence and the play would not be complete. She suddenly understands why she feels compelled to come to the Jardins Publiques at exactly the same time every Sunday, "so as not to be late for the performance." She thinks how differently people in her everyday life might treat her if they realized that she was an "actress." She once again feels something she refuses to identify as sadness, calling it instead a desire to sing. Her eyes fill with tears as she feels again that she is part of a larger cast of actors, and that a mutual understanding bonds them, although she is not sure what it is they all understand.

A boy and girl sit down where the old couple had sat previously. They are obviously in love, and Miss Brill imagines that they are the hero and heroine of the play. She begins to listen to their conversation, as she usually does with those who share her "special" seat, only to find that they are talking about her. The girl is refusing the boy's advances, telling him that she "can't." He responds angrily, "But why? 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? " The girl laughingly responds that it is her fur stole that she finds to be so amusing, and compares it to "fried whiting."

At the end of Miss Brill's Sunday excursions to the Jardins Publiques, she usually treats herself to a slice of honeycake at the bakery on her way home, which she especially enjoys if there is an almond in her slice. On this particular Sunday however, she goes straight home. Her room now seems like a cupboard to her, and she sits down on the red eiderdown. She sits quietly for a long while, and then she quickly unclasps her fur stole, and without even looking at it returns it to its box, from which she had so lovingly removed it just that morning. As she puts the lid on the box, she thinks that she can hear something crying from inside.

Analysis

Miss Brill is a lonely lady. It is not often that an author undertakes to focus so heavily on the conveyance of one single emotion throughout an entire piece, but Katherine Mansfield is able to show us in this short work a bone-chilling loneliness that is almost unparalleled in the genre of short stories. Mansfield gives us a glimpse of what it is to grow old alone.

The story begins with Miss Brill bringing out her fur stole for the beginning of the chilly season. She sees the fur not as an article of clothing, but almost as an old friend that she has not seen in a long time, or at the very least as a pet, something that she would prefer to lay across her lap and stroke than wear. She affectionately refers to the piece of fur as a little rogue "biting its tail just by her left ear. " She endows the fur with almost human characteristics, shining its dim, sad eyes so that they sparkle, and worrying that its little black nose may fall off. She can almost hear it saying, "What has been happening to me?" as she grooms it and makes it ready for its first Sunday excursion of the season. In all of these details we see Miss Brill's loneliness, for if she had someone

else to talk to, or something else with which to occupy her time, she simply would not lavish that kind of attention on a piece of clothing.

At certain points in the story, Miss Brill comes close to fully recognizing the extent of her own loneliness, but she fights these emotions back in an effort to keep her sanity. As she finishes her ritual cleaning of the fur stole, she feels something similar to sadness, but she pushes it back, and calls it instead a gentleness in her bosom.

The minute details that Miss Brill notices, such as the band's lively playing in accordance with the beginning of the season, the conductor's new jacket, and the trills and repetitions in the tune the band plays, are all reflections of an empty life. Miss Brill's life does not have large or important events in it, so her satisfaction relies upon the small details that escape most people to keep and it is a skill at which she has obviously become quite adept.

Miss Brill is a people-watcher. However, she is not a people-watcher in the same way that many people are. She likes to watch and listen to the people around her so that she can sit "in other people's lives just for a minute while they talked round her. " In other words, she is an eavesdropper. She listens in on other people's conversations, but it is not because she is interested in what they have to say. Rather, she wants to imagine that she is a part of their lives, even if only for a moment. Miss Brill is actively engaged in the lives of the people on whom she eavesdrops. She recalls the couple that was sitting by her the previous week, and remembers how annoying the woman's constant complaining about needing glasses was. As she thinks about how patient the woman's husband was with her, she recalls that she had wanted to shake the woman for being so irritating.

While watching people walk by and interact with one another, she notices that all the people who are sitting on benches or chairs along the path have something in common. Unlike the people who walk by, the people sitting along the path are all odd, silent, old, and appeared to have been recently removed from a cupboard. She fails to recognize herself as one of these odd, old people until the end of the story, when she walks back to her house, and refers to her dark room as a cupboard, finally realizing that she herself is one of the very same people who she had scorned earlier in the day.

Miss Brill becomes enraptured with a scene involving an older woman, obviously someone who had seen better days and was trying to recapture them. The older woman, wearing an ermine toque "she'd bought when her hair was yellow," was now all one color, the same faded, grayish color of the once lovely ermine toque. The faded woman attempts to approach a tall, handsome man in a gray suit, but she is completely snubbed by him, and he continues to walk without even acknowledging her. Miss Brill wonders excitedly what she will do, and admires the way the woman carries on about her business as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. She believes she hears the band playing a drumbeat that sounded like "The Brute! The Brute!" over and over again as the gentleman walked away.

Suddenly she is struck with the thought that it is as if everyone at the Jardins Publiques that Sunday is in a play. She carries it one step further, and imagines that they are all on a stage. She becomes obsessed with the idea, and cites it as an obvious reason for her repeating the same seemingly meaningless actions day in and day out. What other reason would she have for coming to the Jardins Publiques each Sunday at the same time if she were not part of a performance for which she could not be late. She toys with the idea, and enjoys the idea of feeling that she is a part of something, speculating that if she were part of a play, with her own role in it, then people would obviously notice if she did not arrive one day. She clutches to this thought, feeling for the first time that she shares an understanding with the people around her. She brings tears to her own eyes at the thought of everyone, including herself, bursting into song along with the band. Almost simultaneously however, she once again feels the pang of that emotion that she will not permit herself to recognize as sadness. She feels it as a chill, but tells herself that it is not sadness, but "a something that made you want to sing. " The obvious irony here is that sadness is completely different that "a something" that makes you want to sing, and it reflects that she has probably been hiding this emotion for a long time to be so adept at the art of self-delusion.

Unfortunately, this delusion will be shattered that afternoon and laid to rest with the fur stole, possibly forever. The next couple that sits down on her "special" seat is a young couple. The mocking words she overhears them saying about her and her fur stole will make her return home immediately, not stopping for her usual piece of honeycake, and put her fur stole, which the young girl cruelly likens to "fried whiting," back in its box.

The ambiguous ending and especially the last sentence leave the story's conclusion open to interpretation. One interpretation is that the fur stole Miss Brill finally had to put away was a symbol for her carefully guarded self-respect, the one thing that allowed her to hold her head high and delude herself into thinking that she was happy. One could also speculate that the crying that Miss Brill thought she heard coming from the box was the beginning of self-realization, the opening of a healthy floodgate of tears that, once opened, would allow her to recognize her sadness and her loneliness and finally begin to break down the wall of solitude that she built around herself. Whatever the interpretation, Katherine Mansfield does an irrefutably powerful job of building a very real character in Miss Brill. Miss Brill is a character with whom we can all identify. We all know someone like her or we are ourselves very much like her. We feel her loneliness deeply, and we are compelled to have compassion for her plight as a very real character that has had the misfortune of growing old alone.

Characters

Miss Brill

Miss Brill is a middle-aged, unmarried English woman who lives alone in a small apartment in France. She teaches English to students and reads the newspaper to an elderly man several times a week. One of her prized possessions is a fur necklet that she wears on a Sunday visit to the town's park. The story takes place during one of these Sunday visits in which she eavesdrops on people's conversations and listens to the band. Miss Brill is an astute observer of others, noticing that the other people sitting on the park benches seem "odd" as if they had "just come from dark little rooms." She fails, however, to realize that she is one of them. Enchanted by the crisp air and the advent of the Season, Miss Brill compares the park to a stage, and the people—including herself—as actors and actresses in a play. The metaphor takes on the proportions of an epiphany in which she believes that she has finally connected with the community. The realization fills her with joy, and she imagines a young, attractive couple on the bench next to her as the play's hero and heroine. She has made a false connection, though, she realizes when instead of partaking of romantic dialogue, the couple insult her. She has managed to connect with others only in her fantasy. Miss Brill retreats to her apartment without having succeeded in establishing the human contact she desperately wants and has sought. Miss Brill, however, suppresses her sorrow when she imagines that she hears her fur stole crying as she returns it to its box. She is unable to recognize the feeling as her own, just as she has been unable to see herself as others in the park perceive her.

Fur necklet

Miss Brill's fur necklet, with its "dim little eyes," a nose "that wasn't at all firm," and a mouth that bites "its tail just by her left ear," assumes many human characteristics in the story. It is a friend to Miss Brill, who calls it her "little rogue," and whose eyes ask the question "What has been happening to me?"—a question that the woman is not able to ask of herself. The fur lives in a box, just as its owner lives in a "dark little room," and together they visit the park on Sunday afternoon. After Miss Brill's day has been spoiled, however, she returns to her apartment and stashes the fur back in its box, ashamed that it has brought her ridicule from people she has admired. The fur, she imagines, is crying—yet another human characteristic Miss Brill ascribes to her fur, which has come to symbolize Miss Brill herself.

The woman in the ermine toque

The woman in the ermine toque whom Miss Brill observes in the park symbolizes the title character herself, and her rebuff by a man in a gray suit foreshadows Miss Brill's rejection later in the story. Miss Brill notes that the woman's fur hat is "shabby," bought

when "her hair was yellow"; characteristics that could apply to the observer herself, though she fails to realize this. The woman is delighted to see the man in the gray suit, just as Miss Brill is delighted by the young couple who approach her bench. When he blows smoke in the woman's face, Miss Brill feels the rejection personally by imagining the drum beat of the band calling out "The Brute! The Brute!"

The young romantic couple

The young, romantic couple approach the bench from which Miss Brill is watching the crowd. They are "beautifully dressed" and in love. Immediately, they become the hero and heroine of Miss Brill's imaginary play. However, instead of revealing some sprightly romantic dialogue, the boy and girl are having a quarrel in which the girl insists, "Not here, I can't." In an effort to placate his girlfriend, the "hero" condemns Miss Brill, asking, "who wants her? Why doesn't she keep her silly old mug at home?" In response, the girl giggles that it is the woman's fur that she finds so distracting. Thus, the couple's dialogue, instead of fitting in with Miss Brill's conception of the situation as a stage play in which they are all welcome characters, makes her realize that her presence in the park is not wanted.

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

Though Miss Brill does not reveal it in her thoughts, her behavior indicates that she is a lonely woman. She thinks of no family members during her Sunday outing, instead focusing on her few students and the elderly man to whom she reads the newspaper several times a week. Even her name, Miss Brill, suggests an isolating formality; with the absence of a first name, the reader is never introduced to her on a personal level. Her fantasy, in which she imagines the people in the park as characters in a play connected in some psychological and physical way to one another, reveals her loneliness in a creative way. Yet, her manufactured sense of connection to these strangers is shattered when she is insulted by the young couple that sit next to her on the bench When her fantasy of playacting is crushed by the conversation of the romantic couple, she is shown to be alienated from her environment— estranged and apart from the others in the park, to whom she only imagined a connection. Symbolically, this sense of alienation is heightened at the end of the story when Miss Brill returns her fur to its box quickly and without looking at it. This action is in stark contrast to her playful conversation with it earlier in the day, when she called it her "little rogue." The final action of the story completes the characterization of Miss Brill as an alienated and lonely individual when she believes that she hears her beloved fur crying as she returns it to its box, just as she herself has returned to her "room like a cupboard."

Appearances and Reality

Through the stream-of-consciousness narrative in "Miss Brill," Mansfield creates a story in which the stark contrast between appearances and reality are manifest through the thoughts of the main character. At the beginning of the story, Miss Brill is perturbed by the old couple sitting on the bench near her. Their silence makes eavesdropping on their lives difficult. Yet, she does not realize that their behavior echoes her own silent existence. Similarly, Miss Brill notices that the other people sitting on chairs in the park are "odd, silent, nearly all old" and "looked as though they'd just come from dark little rooms or even—even cupboards!" The irony that she is one of these odd people who lives in a cupboard is not recognized. She also notices an old woman wearing a fur hat, which she calls a "shabby ermine," bought when the woman's hair was yellow. When the woman raises her hand to her lips, Miss Brill compares it to a "tiny yellowish paw." While making fun of this woman in her own mind, the comparisons between the "ermine toque" and her own appearance go unnoticed. Later, when Miss Brill's imagination concocts the metaphor of the park visitors as actors in a play, she thinks of them as connected to her in a harmonious way: "we understand, we understand, she thought." Yet, the attractive couple whom she imagines to be the hero and heroine of the play are revealed through their conversation to not be part of this "appearance" of a stage play. In the reality of their cruel comments, they are not "members of the company" who

"understand." This strong illusion of playacting Miss Brill has envisioned has been dismantled through the harsh words of the boy and girl. In reality, they think of her not as a fellow actress, but as a "stupid old thing" whose fur resembles a "fried whiting." The play—a metaphor which produced a moment of epiphany for Miss Brill— has taken place only in her mind. Thus, this contrast between appearance and reality in "Miss Brill" further illustrates the story's theme of alienation— the idea that Miss Brill is separated and estranged from her environment.

Style

Setting

"Miss Brill" is set in the "Jardins Publiques," the French term for "public garden," or park. Miss Brill, through her name and the indication that she tutors students in English, is revealed to be a non-native of France, and thus an outsider from the start. These factual references reinforce her emotional isolation, which she attempts to overcome by pretending that she is a cast member in a stage production. The pleasant weather, its crispness perfect for her fur collar, echoes Miss Brill's good mood as she sits in the garden listening to the band and watching the people. When her illusion of understanding with the others in the park is shattered by the comments of the young couple, however, Miss Brill retreats to her "little dark room—her room like a cupboard." This change of setting highlights the main character's abrupt change in mood.

Symbolism

The primary symbol in "Miss Brill" is the main character's fur stole. It assumes various lifelike traits, echoing the traits that characterize Miss Brill herself. She has "taken it out of its box that afternoon" just as Miss Brill has left her "room like a cupboard" for a walk in the park. It is given other human qualities: its nose "wasn't at all firm," and Miss Brill imagines its eyes are asking "What has been happening to me?," and when placed back in its box at the end of the story, she thinks she hears it crying. The boy in the park criticizes Miss Brill's appearance, suggesting that she should "keep her silly old mug at home." Likewise, his girlfriend criticizes the fur, giggling that it looks "exactly like a fried whiting." When Miss Brill takes the fur off at home, she does it "quickly; quickly, without looking," perhaps symbolizing the way she failed to examine her own life or recognize how she appears to others.

Narration

"Miss Brill" is told in a third-person, stream-of-consciousness narrative, a common device in Mansfield's works which serves to heighten the story's psychological acuity and perceptive characterization. Though the narrative is third-person, the stream-of-consciousness technique allows the reader full access to Miss Brill's thoughts, but nothing more than Miss Brill's thoughts. Thus, the thoughts of others in the story are revealed by dialogue (such as the young couple's), or they are not revealed at all (like the couple seated next to Miss Brill who do not speak). Likewise, the reader is privy to Miss Brill's thoughts about her fur: "Dear little thing! It was nice to feel it again," but is left to intuit much of Miss Brill's character by what she does not realize. The stream-of-consciousness narrative reveals, for example, Miss Brill's perception of the woman wearing an old ermine hat. Miss Brill slightly scorns the woman, calling her hat "shabby" and her hand a "tiny yellowish paw," yet she fails to note that her own appearance is

somewhat similar to the woman's. Thus, part of Miss Brill's character is revealed by what her stream-of-consciousness narration fails to address.

Historical Context

In the 1920s, Europe was rebuilding after World War I, the most destructive and deadly war in history. As the economy grew, spurred on by the advances in medicine and technology gained during the war, a newfound era of wealth and cultural growth permeated many Western European countries. France, especially, became a haven for expatriate artists and writers from England and the United States drawn to its affordable living conditions. The values of the "Jazz Age" spread to the continent, where the dismantling of strict Victorian protocol resulted in the rise of controversial art like Expressionism and Surrealism and explicit literature from writers like James Joyce.

"Miss Brill" is set during this tumultuous time period, when the sight of an older, single woman wearing an outdated fur stole represented a genteel world forever obliterated by the atrocities of trench warfare, the promise of air travel, and the cynicism generated by the millions of casualties in the war. Like others of her day, Miss Brill is a foreigner living in France, but she is alienated from the thriving community of artists and writers who formed the "moveable feast" in Paris during the 1920s. Instead, Miss Brill has a few students to whom she teaches English and she reads to an elderly gentleman until he falls asleep. Miss Brill's association with this man further represents her alignment with an era now obsolete. The young couple on the bench are of a younger generation, and their comments reveal the attitude towards which young people now regarded their elders.

Mansfield, whose numerous affairs always marked her as a bit of a free spirit, fit into this new social order quite comfortably. However, by the time she wrote "Miss Brill," she was weak from tuberculosis and exerted the bulk of her energy writing stories and letters. In England, the Bloomsbury writers, a loosely-knit group that included Virginia Woolf and whose main literary goal was to eradicate the old social order of the Victorians, were in frequent correspondence with Mansfield.

In "Miss Brill," Mansfield created one of her most famous characterizations; one that illustrates the illusions of the old order and how they are shown to be just that: illusions.

Critical Overview

Mansfield is one of only a few writers to gain critical prominence on the basis of her short stories alone; she published no novels during her short lifetime. Though published widely while she was still alive, her literary reputation was permanently established after her death with the publication of her collected letters and correspondence. In The Letters of Katherine Mansfield, the author gives readers insight into the way in which she constructed "Miss Brill": "I choose the rise and fall of every paragraph to fit her.... After I'd written it I read it aloud—numbers of times—just as one would play over a musical composition—trying to get it nearer and nearer to the expression of Miss Brill—until it fitted her." "Miss Brill" has always been on of Mansfield's most popular stories. Clare Hanson and Andrew Gurr argue in their book Katherine Mansfield that Miss Brill is more than a characterization of a lonely spinster: "In Mansfield's view we are all ultimately solitary, and human beings are fundamentally cruel and indifferent to one another except in the rare instances where they love. Without love, and without the comfort of illusions, the reality of life can be grim indeed." They further note that "Miss Brill" has often been regarded as a moral, even as a sentimental story. Echoing the opinion of many critics, Robert L. Hull's essay in *Studies in Short Fiction* states that "[t]he principle theme of Katherine Mansfield's 'Miss Brill' is estrangement."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Robert Peltier is an English instructor at Trinity College and has published works of both fiction andnonfiction. In the following essay, he provides a general overview of Mansfield's "Miss Brill."

Katherine Mansfield, bora Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp in 1888 in Wellington, New Zealand, lived a short life, but she established a literary reputation at a young age. Her first published book, *In a German Pension*, was published in 1911, when she was only twenty-two years old. She became friends with some of the great literary figures of her day, including D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, and married the writer and critic J. Middleton Murry.

Her stories are full of detail and small, albeit significant, incidents in her characters' lives. In an often-quoted letter published in *The Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, she says of "Miss Brill": "I chose the rise and fall of every paragraph to fit her, and to fit her on that day at that moment." Katherine Fullbrook notes in her biography titled simply Katherine Mansfield that "while the surface of her stories often flash with sparkling detail, the underlying tones are sombre, threatening, and register the danger in the most innocent seeming aspects of life."

"Miss Brill," is one of her finest stories, capturing in a moment an event that will forever change the life of the title character. Miss Brill is an older woman of indeterminate age who makes a meager living teaching English to school children and reading newspapers to an "old invalid gentleman." Her joy in life is her visit to the park on Sunday, where she observes all that goes on around her and listens to the conversations of people nearby, as she sits "in on other people's lives." It is when she tries to leave her role as spectator and join the "players" in her little world that she is rebuffed by that world and her fantasy falls apart.

On this particular Sunday, she has taken her fur necklet out of its box, brushed it, cleared its eyes, and put it on. She is glad that she wore it, because the air contains a "faint chill, like a chill from a glass of iced water before you sip." It is a beautiful day, the first Sunday of the Season, so everything seems nicer than usual. Even the band seems to play "louder and gayer."

Miss Brill is somewhat disappointed that there are only two older people near where she is seated. They do not speak, and her observations of the life around her begin in silence. It is clear at this point in the story that she considers herself a spectator, detached from the activities around her. She expects entertainment from the strollers and sitters, but she has been disappointed more than once. Last week, we learn, an Englishman and his wife held a boring conversation which drove Miss Brill to the point of wanting to shake the woman. But she didn't shake her, because that would have meant involving herself in the actions she so quietly observed.

Mansfield's eye for detail and the telling moment exhibits itself here as we, along with Miss Brill, watch the activities in the park: "... couples and groups [parade], [stop] to talk, to greet ... children [run] among them, swooping and laughing." A "high stepping mother" picks up her child who has "suddenly sat down 'flop.'" It is a scene made up of details that we have all, at one time or another, witnessed ourselves. And that is all that Miss Brill does right now: witness the world parading past her.

But then she takes note of the people on the benches. She sees "something funny about nearly all of them." And as she looks at these "odd, silent, nearly all old" people who look as if they have "just come from dark little rooms or even—even cupboards!" she does not see that she is one of them. Mansfield's prose gives us an objective look at the people and events around Miss Brill while at the same time allowing us to see the subjective interpretation Miss Brill makes of that world. We don't know what she thinks of herself, or even if she thinks of herself at all. But if she does, she must not see herself very clearly. She must not believe that she is old or odd or funny.

Now the band strikes up, and the procession continues with young girls and soldiers and peasant women leading donkeys and a nun and a beautiful woman who drops her flowers and, when a little boy picks them up for her, throws them away "as if they'd been poisoned." Miss Brill doesn't know "whether to admire that or not!"

Then an older woman wearing an ermine toque (a hat made of white fur)meets a man. Theermineis "shabby" and bought when "her hair was yellow." Now her hair, as well as her face and "even her eyes" are as white as the fur. She makes superficial, yet somehow strained and desperate conversation but the man walks away after lighting his cigarette and blowing smoke in her face. The band plays more softly as the woman stands there, exposed and alone, but it picks up the tempo and plays even more loudly than before after the woman has pretended to see someone and walks away.

The fur connects them—her toque and Miss Brill's necklet—and we see, as the woman is snubbed by the man, a foreshadowing of what is to happen to Miss Brill later in the story. The woman tried to engage the man in conversation, and Miss Brill will later try to engage with the world.

The pageant resumes with an "old man with long whiskers" nearly being knocked over by "four girls walking abreast." Miss Brill is lost in her fantasy world now, thinking how wonderful it all is. She decides, suddenly, that it is "exactly like a play." The scenery is perfect enough to be a painted backdrop. When a little dog trots on-stage, then off again, she realizes that not only is she—and everyone else—the audience, but they are also the actors. She has her part to play; that is why she comes at the same time each week: so that she will be on time for her performance! This wonderfully romantic idea captures her imagination. It is, she thinks, the reason that she "had quite a queer, shy feeling at telling her English pupils how she spent her Sunday afternoons." (In those days, the theater was not considered a proper or legitimate career and also had dark, often sexual connotations). She imagines telling the old man whom she reads to that, yes, she is an actress, that she "has been an actress for a long time."

She has entered fully now into the world she has previously only observed. She is a part of the play, someone in the cast who would be missed if she were not to come on Sunday afternoons. She delights in this newfound role as the band begins to play again. The music is "warm and sunny," yet there is a "faint chill" to it, echoing the beginning of the story. It makes her want to sing and, as the music gets brighter, she believes that the whole company of actors in her little theater in the park will start singing together at any moment, "and then she, too, and the others on the benches." Having entered the world, she is on the verge of becoming active in it. She feels at one with all the other actors. Her eyes fill with tears and she knows that they understand, although what they understand she is not quite sure.

It is at this moment of epiphany, when she feels a connection to the world, that a young couple arrives and sits on the bench. Miss Brill casts them immediately as the hero and heroine of her drama. She imagines them as just having arrived from his father's yacht and "with that trembling smile," she listens to their dialogue. But the dialogue is not heroic, but vulgar and common. The boy is trying to seduce the girl, and she is playfully, half-heartedly resisting his advances.

In the next few sentences, Miss Brill's illusions are shattered, and she is forced to confront her life as it is. Brutal and direct, the boy asks: "Why does she come here at all —who wants her? Why doesn't she keep her silly old mug at home." And the girl answers:"It's her fu-fur which is so funny .... It's exactly like a fried whiting," comparing the woman's stole to dead fish. Miss Brill has discovered her part in her play, and now she finds that it is a tragedy, not a romance.

She leaves the park and goes home. She does not even stop at the bakery for her Sunday treat. Instead, she goes straight to her "little darkroom— her room like a cupboard," which again connects her to the old, odd, silent people on the park benches whom she has imagined as having come from just such rooms. She sits on the bed and puts her fur away in its box, but as she does, she hears something crying. She has now withdrawn so far from the world that has hurt her, that she does not realize that it is she who is crying.

Source: Robert Peltier, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Research, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In the following portion of a chapter from their book Katherme Mansfield, Hanson and Gurr recount what is known regarding Mansfield's impetus for writing "Miss Brill" and discuss how Miss Brill manufactures a "false sense of community" that brings about her epiphany.

.. .'Miss Brill', written soon after Katherine Mansfield arrived in Menton in November 1920, is structurally related to 'Bliss' as a story in which a shift of feeling in one character is conveyed in a single scene. With unity of action, time and place these shorter stories tend to seem more 'realistic' than episodic pieces like *Prelude* or 'Je ne parle pas franc, ais'. However, this smooth narrative texture is in a sense appearance only. As much as in *Prelude* the stories are structured according to the demands of symbolist patterning and almost every detail has a symbolic as well as narrative context. There are also narrative suppressions and ellipses in stories like 'Miss Brill', though they are less obvious than in the longer stories as they are not signalled by formal divisions in the text.

'Miss Brill' has often been regarded as a moral, even as a sentimental story. It drew letters of thanks from solitary readers, and the author herself seems to have rather basked in such attention, writing to Murry after she had received these letters:

One writes {*one* reason why is) because one does care so passionately that one *must* show it—one must declare one's love

But in writing the story she adhered to Symbolist principles. Rather than 'declaring her love' she kept her own, or rather the narrator's point of view rigorously out of the story. The events and images function dramatically, the narrator providing only 'objective' description. This is true even of the famous last lines of the story:

The box that the fur came out of was on the bed She unclasped the necklet quickly; quickly, without looking, laid it inside. But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying

The narrator provides objective information, then the rapid rhythms of 'quickly; quickly, without looking' shade into the representation of Miss Brill's agitated state. The closing perception of the story is Miss Brill's and not the narrator's and is entirely in accord with her neurotic, fantastic imagination. And it is entirely unsentimental, suggesting very firmly the fear and horror which attend the suppression of any human being.

In 'Miss Brill' all is conveyed obliquely, through concrete imagery and the dramatic device of Miss Brill's inner monologue. Not once is her inner state alluded to or described directly. The story is thus the perfect example of the technique Mansfield described to Murry—oblique, delicately suggestive-

I might write about a boy eating strawberries or a woman combing her hair on a windy morning and that is the only way I can ever mention [deserts of vast eternity].

The language of the story also reaches a high degree of perfection. She wrote in a well-known letter to Richard Murry that:

In Mm Brill I choose not only the length of every sentence, but even the sound of every sentence. I choose the rise and fall of every paragraph to fit her, and to fit her on that very day at that very moment After I'd written it I read it aloud—numbers of times—just as one would play over a musical composition—trying to get it nearer and nearer the expression of Miss Brill—until it fitted her

The author's own satisfaction with the style of 'Miss Brill' suggests her success in the story. A poetic intensity and concretion is sustained throughout, the sound of the words and the prose rhythms conveying and enriching meaning. The use of the musical analogy for 'Miss Brill' in the passage quoted above also has more direct relevance. The story is shaped, specifically, as a lament, and something of the quality of a sung lament is deliberately infused into it by the use of para-musical prose rhythms in some sections.

The story is constructed around a series of parallels and contrasts designed to expose with increasing clarity the inner state of the central character. The key themes are the opposition between age and youth, stasis and vitality, solitude and community, illusion and reality.

Miss Brill herself is old, as we realize immediately from the author's handling of her stylized inner monologue. Her speech patterns are those of a nervous, fussy, elderly person. She is associated in the first paragraph of the story with her fur, which acts as a mirror image of the woman herself. The fur, too, is old, with 'dim' eyes, and its nose is 'not at all firm'; 'Never mind—a little dab of black sealing wax when the time came—when it was absolutely necessary ..." The ellipsis signals Miss Brill's reluctance to recognize a time when 'it' will be absolutely necessary, her avoidance of the thought of decay or decomposition.

In the five and a half pages of the story Miss Brill's state is explored through a series of figures who act as parallels for her. At the Jardins Publiques she sits beside an old couple who are as 'still as statues', and she notices the other regular visitors to the park—'There was something funny about nearly all of them. They were odd, silent, nearly all old'—though Miss Brill does not, explicitly, include herself in this company. The most extended view which she has of any other visitor to the park is of a single woman in an ermine toque 'bought when her hair was yellow. Now everything, her hair, her face, even her eyes, was the same colour as the shabby ermine, and her hand, in its cleaned glove, lifted to dab her lips, was a tiny yellowish paw.' The woman in the toque parallels Miss Brill in the efforts which she has made to 'touch up' her shabby appearance before entering the park. The link between the furs—dead animals retaining the appearance of life—and the old people, is insisted on. Miss Brill is linked finally to another elderly man to whom she reads the newspaper:

She had got quite used to the frail head on the cotton pillow, the hollowed eyes, the open mouth and the high pinched nose If he'd been dead she mightn't have noticed for weeks; she wouldn't have minded.

He too is a moribund figure, retaining little more than the appearance of life.

The pictures of the old are counterpoised by glimpses Miss Brill has of the younger people in the park, who all seem to be much further away. The old people are solitary and motionless. The younger ones are presented as energetic and vigorous—the conductor of the band flaps his arms, the bandsmen blow out their cheeks. Little children 'swoop' and 'laugh', young mothers 'rush', 'high stepping'. Their vitality distinguishes them, as does the fact that they are all in groups or, more relevantly, in pairs:

Two young girls in red came by and two young soldiers in blue met them, and they laughed and paired and went off arm in arm.

The theme of solitude against community has already been introduced in the second paragraph where Miss Brill ironically sees herself and the other regular visitors to the park as 'the family', as compared with the 'strangers', the seasonal visitors. (The reverse is of course the case: the regular visitors are all strangers-r-all alone—whereas the visitors are in family groups.) The theme of false community appears again in the scene with the 'ermine toque'. This woman approaches a 'gentleman' and tries to engage him in conversation. As she chatters, he lights a cigarette and 'while she was still talking and laughing, flicked the match away and walked on'. The 'ermine toque's' pitifully inappropriate behaviour and her imaginary sense of relationship anticipate the central moment of the story. The theme of false community is an integral part of Miss Brill's epiphany, as is the theme of the discrepancy between appearance and reality which is also developed through the story.

From the beginning, the things which Miss Brill sees are described in 'stagey' terms. She herself touches up her fur, that is, her appearance, before she sets out for the park. She sees other elderly people as 'statues'; the running little girls are 'dolls'. Towards the end of the story, her vision flowers into explicit recognition.

She realises that everything she sees is like a play:

How she loved sitting here, watching it all! It was like a play. It was exactly like a play. Who could believe the sky at the back wasn't painted? But it wasn't until a little brown dog trotted on solemnly and then slowly trotted off, like a little 'theatre' dog, a little dog that had been drugged, that Miss Brill discovered what it was that made it so exciting. They were all on the stage. They weren't only the audience, not only looking on; they were acting. Even she had a part and came every Sunday.

When she realises this, Miss Brill looks again at the band, the play within the play. As the music flows out, she has her false epiphany. She feels at one with everyone else, everyone seems united, through the music and also because they are all part of a play and are in this sense a 'company':

... And Miss Brill's eyes filled with tears and she looked smiling at all the other members of the company Yes, we understand, she thought—though what they understood she didn't know.

The falsity of this sense of community is revealed almost immediately. A young couple replace the silent old couple on the seat beside Miss Brill. They are drawn immediately into her imaginary play— "The hero and heroine, of course, just arrived from his father's yacht'—only to destroy all its meaning as soon as they actually speak:

'.. Why doesn't she keep her silly old mug at home? "It's her fu-fur which is so funny... It's exactly like a fried whiting '

Thus it is revealed to Miss Brill in the most painful possible way that her play is a play within her mind only. We are made to see the isolation of each individual within their own consciousness, and the all too common discrepancy between on the one hand the appearance which the mind creates through imagination and memory, and on the other hand reality, in the sense of what is generally agreed to be the truth. Miss Brill's most recent sustaining illusion has been that on her Sunday afternoon visits to the Jardins Publiques she has been part of a community of feeling and interest She has felt that the part which she plays in the Sunday afternoon pageant has mattered to others as theirs had mattered to her. We know that Miss Brill's existence is barely tolerable, but we also know that she transforms her meagre situation, by the power of her imagination, which is creative. She idealises what she sees around her and idealises herself, revealing herself as an artist in this sense.

The young couple tear down the veil of illusion, leaving Miss Brill with nothing. She realises the cruelty of other human beings in the cruelty and indifference of the young couple—whom *she* has idealised. She has hoped that if she were to miss a Sunday afternoon (for reasons not admitted to consciousness) she would in her turn be missed. It is now apparent that this is doubtful, and that certainly no one would care. And Miss Brill realises finally that she does not appear to others as she does to herself (she does not see her face as a 'silly old mug').

Miss Brill's epiphany is too unbearable and her new knowledge cannot be admitted to consciousness at this moment. Hence the ellipsis which follows the speech of the young couple. Miss Brill does not think about what she has just realised, though it may make its way back into consciousness by degrees. But, we sense, she will then transform this knowledge too by the power of her imagination, the saving grace of her life. This is suggested through the coda of the story as she puts her fur away, thus showing her ability to adjust and construct new appearances.

Miss Brill's situation is extreme and her isolation is intensified because she is a spinster abroad in a foreign country. Yet in Mansfield's view we are all ultimately solitary, and human beings are fundamentally cruel and indifferent to one another except in the rare instances where they love. Without love, and without the comfort of illusions, the reality of life can be grim indeed, 'Miss Brill', for all its brevity, presents a genuinely tragic view of experience. The central character lacks love and has only her capacity of creative

imagination between herself and the void. She will go on living and transforming her experience into tolerable forms, but the value and meaning of life on this level is questionable. Without love, what other 'real ideal' can enter Miss Brill's life? The brief descriptions of natural beauty—the sea, the golden leaves, the blue sky— suggest one possibility, but these are the perceptions of the narrator, and are introduced as thematic motifs, rather than being important to Miss Brill. Through a combination of character and circumstance, Miss Brill's life has been reduced to the barest minimum necessary to continued existence. The story is a radical questioning of the meaning of such existence, and of the purpose of the life-force which makes her carry on on these terms....

Source: Clare Hanson and Andrew Gurr, "The South of France 1918-20," in *Katherine Mansfield, St*. Martin's Press, 1981, pp 75-82.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Hull analyzes the principal theme of "Miss Brill," which he states is estrangement from love, and which Mansfield stated was her primary reason for writing the story.

The principal theme of Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Bnir' is estrangement. Miss Mansfield gives in this story a significant look, through the eyes of Miss Brill, a look short and startling and at once full of pity, at the world that the lonely woman inhabits. 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 God, man, and, more importantly, from herself. Exphcators of the story have wholly or partly ignored the theme of estrangement that I feel is the major theme.

Two passages from Miss Mansfield's letters to John Middleton Murry present evidence for her purpose in writing "Miss Brill." "One writes (one reason why is) because one does care so passionately that one must show it—one *must* declare one's love." In another letter she writes: "Last night I walked about and saw the new moon with the old moon in her arms and the lights in the water and the hollow pools full of stars—and lamented there was no God. But I came in and wrote 'Miss Brill' instead; which is my insect Magnificat now and always." The reason for writing and the mood reflected in these two passages point to a clearer definition of purpose in "Miss Brill" than anyone has shown. Lamenting an absence of God and striving to show that one must love, Miss Mansfield created Miss Brill, who strives to show love but is incapable of showing or receiving it. In her solitude she is certainly not protected by any godly benevolence. It is the estrangement from love that alienates Miss Brill.

Some obvious elements of alienation occur in Miss Brill's name and in her residence. Miss Brill's name 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. In a Swiftian sense, 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. Secondly, Miss Brill is an alien in France. This fact alone can account for some of her estrangement and inability to communicate freely. However, we can find the less obvious indications of alienation in the paradoxes and comparative events.

The story opens with a thematic paradox. From the 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"— one immediately can feel the first throes of autumn, that "faint chill" anticipating the colder chill of winter. Yet paradoxically, Miss Brill finds in the chill the feeling of the vibrancy of spring. She takes out her fur piece, renews it for the season, questions its appearance, 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." This passage certainly parallels the passage beginning what Miss Welty calls Miss Brill's "vision of love." "The Band had been having a rest. No w 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." The "chill" or the "something" points directly yet subtly to Miss Brill's alienation. For her, love—the love of her fur piece, which functions like an unsympathetic mirror into which she cannot see, and the "vision of love," in which she imagines all those gathered in the park singing and thus communicating with one another—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.

A further suggestion of estrangement is in the meeting of the woman in the ermine toque and the man in the gray suit. The man rejects the woman, whom Miss Brill admires and with whom she identifies. Mansfield drives home the rejection with the man's blowing smoke in the woman's face and with the beat of the bass drum drumming "the Brute, the Brute." Miss Brill in her identification feels that her experiences of rejection are like those experienced by the flirtatious woman. However, as Mr. Thorp points out, the woman is probably a prostitute. Miss Brill, not understanding the nature of the woman, fails to see the significance of her identification. Both women passionately desire to express their love, the woman wearing the toque through the physical contact of sex; 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 (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

We can find still further evidence of alienation in the "vision of love," in which Miss Brill is gathered up into an imaginative experience with all the people gathered in the park singing together as a harmonious whole. But even this imaginative attempt at an expression of love fails as Miss Brill thinks: "Yes, we understand, we understand ... though what they understood she didn't know." Even in her most vivid imaginings, Miss Brill can find no understanding or communication She finds herself completely alone, yet she denies or fails to understand or to confront her position.

The final and most overwhelming evidence of alienation is the tragic scene in which Miss Brill is rebuffed by the young man courting on the seat next to her. The rejection parallels that of the man in the gray suit blowing smoke in the face of the woman in the ermine toque. Both exclusions are crude and brutish. With this confrontation with her solitude, she returns to her "cupboard" with nothing left her but self-pity in her loneliness.

Thus the theme of estrangement has run its course. Miss Brill has made an 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.

Source: Robert L. Hull, "Alienation in 'Miss Brill'," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. V, No. 1, Fall, 1967, pp 74-6.

Topics for Further Study

Explain how the narration of the story can be both third-person and stream-of-conscious-ness. How would the story be different if it had been written in first person? Do you think it would have been as successful?

If the story was written today, where might it take place and how might Miss Brill be dressed?

Mansfield stated that "One writes (one reason why is) because one does care so passionately that one must show it—one must declare one's love." Miss Brill is a character who desperately seeks love, but is incapable of giving or receiving it. What events in the story illustrate this

Compare and Contrast

1920s: Few professions other than nursing and teaching are deemed socially acceptable for women who must support themselves.

Today: College graduates are as likely to be female as male, and a majority of women are employed in the workforce and in virtually every profession.

1920s: One's social rank can be determined from one's clothing. Gentlemen wear hats, ladies gloves, and fur denotes a position of some social standing. Women, with few exceptions, always wear dresses or skirts.

Today: Social conventions regarding dress are relaxed. Hats and gloves are uncommon in many circles, and pants are a staple of most women's wardrobes. Many believe fur to be a symbol not of status but rather an indication of cruelty and conspicuous consumption.

1920s: Common forms of recreation include reading, going to the theater, and gathering in public places such as parks or pubs. People often dress up to appear in public.

Today: 98 percent of all households in the United States own televisions. Other forms of mass communication, including the telephone, radio, and the personal computers have infringed on the time spent socializing with others in a public sphere. In suburban areas, the most crowded space is often the shopping mall.

What Do I Read Next?

Mansfield's "Bliss," written in 1918, is another story of a woman's struggle with dissatisfaction and alienation. Bertha is young, married, and a new mother. Her husband is successful, and a nurse helps her with her new baby. A joyous dinner party, with its liveliness and opportunity for interpersonal penetration and imagination, only serves to heighten Bertha's isolation when it ends and she is left once again with a comparatively empty house.

Kathenne Anne Porter's "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" (1929) concerns a dying woman's final thoughts. Written in the stream-of-con-sciousness style, Granny Weatherall's interior monologue is notable for what it contains as well as for what is left unspoken.

A more intimate biography of Katherine Mansfield is provided by LM (Ida Constance Baker) in her 1971 memoir *Katherine Mansfield: The Memories ofLM*. LM was Mansfield's close friend and assistant. The book was published in 1971 by Michael Joseph Ltd. and reprinted in 1985 by Virago Press.

Virginia Woolf s "The Mark on the Wall," first published in 1917, also uses a stream-of-consciousness narrative style like "Miss Brill." A woman contemplates a mark on the wall, imagining what it might be. In the course of her thoughts, her mind wanders over a variety of subjects.

"Araby" by James Joyce, first published in Dubliners (1914), recounts a young narrator's stark realization that the world of romance and religion in which he had immersed himself is a foolish, inaccurate view of reality.

Heather Murray's *Double Lives: Women in the Stories of Katherine Mansfield* provides a feminist interpretation of Mansfield's work. It was published in 1990 by the University of Otago Press.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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