

LRJ for “Miss Brill”

by Lori Valentine

The work, “Miss Brill” by Katherine Mansfield, tells a story of a woman who, on Sundays, goes to a park or “the Jardins Publiques” to people watch. At this park a band plays and many people, some of whom are regulars, visit for extended periods of time while others were merely passers by. Ms. Mansfield describes the “old couple” vividly with words that you could almost feel such as “velvet coat” or “a roll of knitting on her embroidered apron.”

The passage progresses through the course of Miss Brill’s afternoon by describing the people coming and going until she realizes that this Sunday afternoon ritual was also a performance. She ultimately realizes she, too, is “an actress” whether reading the paper four times a week to an ailing man or taking part in the Sunday activities at the park.

Typically the main character, Miss Brill, treated herself with honeycake where the almond may or may not be present. “A tiny surprise” is how this almond was described if it was in the cake. However, on this particular day, she did not; the reason is because of a realization. I believe the turning point where Miss Brill concluded she was also a character on the “stage,” in the “manuscript,” and a member of the “company” and was being mocked by the young couple changed everything for her. She did not even take the same care to put up her fur as she did putting it on in the beginning of the piece. She even thought she heard it cry in the box. So sad.

LRJ for “Miss Brill” by Tammy Vinson

I first read Katherine Mansfield’s “Miss Brill” in one of my high school English classes. Even after 20 years, I still remember the vivid description of the main character’s fur wrap—“the sad little eyes,” the nose that was somehow damaged. It seems to me that the fur is an extension of Miss Brill, and she projects her own feelings of hurt, rejection, and sadness onto it. At the end, she also rejects the fur herself when “she unclasped the necklet quickly; quickly, without looking, laid it inside.”

At first glance, Miss Brill seems like nothing more than a crazy old lady—one that makes you so uncomfortable when you encounter her that you just wish she’d go away. But when I re-read the story, I found that some of her feelings, some aspects of her character truly resonate with me. I can easily identify with the feeling of wanting so badly to be a part of something—to fit in, to *belong*—only to be slapped with the realization that I am and have always been an outsider. Miss Brill is always the spectator, never the participant—although she doesn’t seem to realize this fact. Life is happening all around her, but she’s a non-entity. And when the young couple makes fun of her, it literally shatters her image of how she sees herself. Before, she looked down on the other regulars in the park; after hearing the conversation, she sees herself in the same way—in “her room like a cupboard.” All along, she’s imagined herself as being connected to the other park visitors; the end of the story reveals that she doesn’t know she’s the one who’s crying.

LRJ for “Miss Brill” by Jenifer S. Lemke

British 20's authoress Katherine Mansfield masterfully employs symbolism throughout the short story, “Miss Brill.” Miss Brill, a character created by Mansfield, is a lonely older woman with considerable hope of making connections with people at the beginning of this short story. Throughout the story, Mansfield weaves a tale of increasing sorrow and solitude using Miss Brill's judgment of others, their clothing, and their actions to paint the reader a picture of the theme, “judge not, lest ye be judged.” Mansfield's use of symbolism is what helps to seal the theme for readers.

At the beginning of the story, Miss Brill happily prepares for a day of connection with others at a nearby park by donning her fur, a slightly bent out of shape, “Dear little thing!” described as something, “nice to feel again.”

Once she arrives, she begins her habit of going through the people like one who goes through clothes on a sale rack--looking for just the right gems. For example, Mansfield describes one woman in an audience as “the ermine toque,” a description which gives the reader the impression she believes the woman to be of wealth. Ermine, a fur traditionally designated only for those of royalty is used to show this woman's socio-economic status and contrast Miss Brill's lack of it with her own shabby dull-eyed fur. It is important to note, Miss Brill sees “the ermine toque” is easily taken advantage of by the “funny old man” with whom she flirts; yet, it is Miss Brill who sits alone in the park without the benefit of a mate. Here, Mansfield symbolizes Miss Brill with her beloved fur necklet that is dreadfully out-of-style and smells of mothballs. Even still, Miss Brill is unaware of its circumstance or her own.

By the end of the story, after Miss Brill spies a young couple whom she describes as “beautiful” even the stuff of heroes. But when she overhears the young couple overtly make fun of her and more specifically her fur which is “exactly like a fried whiting,” Miss Brill is left feeling forlorn after her trip to the park.

Sadly, Miss Brill “unclasped the necklet quickly; without looking, laid it inside. But when she put the lid on, she thought she heard something crying.” Here, Mansfield allows the reader to feel Miss Brill's true distress by exemplifying the symbolism of the putting away of the tragic fur into a box. Indeed, the fur seems to be weeping--yet, the reader feels innately it must be Miss Brill who is left crying alone in her own box of a room or, as Mansfield described it, “cabinet.”

Frequently, people associate themselves with what they wear, i.e., the doctor, the policeman, the minister, the old lady. Additionally, they are judged by what they wear. Judgments can be hurtful. This seems to be the case with Miss Brill.

LRJ for “Miss Brill” by Teresa Baker

In “Miss Brill” by Katherine Mansfield, the story is told from the point of view of Miss Brill, a woman who is obviously critical and a bit delusional about the happenings around her. Early on, however, it is clear that Miss Brill excitedly prepares for her typical Sunday by wearing her precious fur around her neck. Her plan is to travel to the park as she does every Sunday.

With a detailed eye, Miss Brill examines and describes peoples’ clothing as well as their behaviors. She recounts the Sunday before as a young couple debated whether or not the girl should get glasses. By the end of the conversation, Miss Brill “just wanted to shake her.” Obviously, she is very critical of others.

Miss Brill’s point of view continues to guide the reader through the day’s events. Her point of view seems to take on a fantasy-like element as she determines that everyone at the park is a member of the play. She determines that they’re not only the audience, but “they were acting.” In her mind, everyone is an actor on the stage of life.

But as Miss Brill listens in on her last conversation, she feels the sting of the overly critical, something she has been throughout the story as evidenced from her comments of other people. The young couple makes fun of her saying, “Why doesn’t she keep her ugly mug at home?” In addition, they insult her prized fur which is the ultimate insult to her.

By the end of the story, Miss Brill’s attitude changes as a result of the overly harsh comments. However, she has done the same thing to other people, even if they never knew it. In the beginning of the story, she is excited about the day’s events. By the end of the story, she is in complete despair as a result of the couple’s ruthless comments. As she sadly retires her fur into its box, it is noted that when she put the lid on, “she thought she heard something weep.” Indeed, the insult cut deeply and forever changed her perception and reality.

LRJ for “Miss Brill” by Ginger Mason

Katherine Mansfield’s “Miss Brill” is a poignant look at an elderly woman’s attempt to lessen her loneliness by being part of a Sunday ritual. Each character exemplifies the differences between young and old. It comes together for Miss Brill when she says she understands as she imagines that everyone begins to sing with the band. “The young ones, the laughing ones, who were moving together, they would begin, and the men’s voices, very resolute and brave, would join them. And then she too, she too, and the others on the benches – they would come in with a kind of accompaniment.” This shows how Miss Brill no longer feels a part of the main choral part of life, but only a quiet, background accompaniment.

The roles of the minor characters are crucial here because they further emphasize Miss Brill’s feelings. Initially, there is an elderly couple sitting on the bench with her, who disappointingly do not talk. She needs glasses, but says that they will only slide off her nose. Her husband tries lovingly and patiently to encourage the purchase, but she refuses. Miss Brill doesn’t like this. There is also a couple who meet and the woman tries desperately to hold the man’s attention, but he blows smoke in her face and walks away while she is still talking. This saddens Miss Brill and she imagines that the band slows down. Finally, a “funny old man with long whiskers” is nearly knocked down by four girls walking abreast.

Miss Brill is very brave in her fight to remain cheerful and happy, but evidence all around her points to a society that has moved her over. She returns home, sad and lonely.

LRJ for “Miss Brill” by Tammy Vinson

I am awakened by a soft jolt as she takes my box from the shelf in her wardrobe and sets it on the bed. At first, I am startled and unsure of what is happening. After a moment, the fear is replaced by excitement as I realize that the movement means I am going out.

She lifts the lid carefully. The sudden brightness is painful to eyes that are accustomed to the dark. As she lifts me from my cozy nest, I realize that my body is stiff from lying in the same position for so long. The cacophony of scents is overwhelming after the familiar musty odor I am used to. I sneeze at the combination of moth powder and dust that fills my nostrils.

As I enter the park draped smartly about her shoulders, my senses are overloaded. I drink in the feel of the crisp air and the warm sun on my fur, the sights of nature and people—so many things to look at!—the sounds of the band and the conversations going on all around me.

A boy and girl sit down in front of her and me. As soon as they sit, they begin to talk about “that stupid old thing at the end.” At first, I don’t realize who they are talking about. The object of their scorn soon becomes apparent when I realize they are laughing at her and feel a bright burst of pity. Then, with sudden horror, I realize that they are now mocking me as well! The bright day dims; the band’s tune suddenly goes off-key. In the blink of an eye, this lovely outing is ruined.

We trudge home, me hanging limply around her neck. She sits in her dark room for a long time, unmoving, silent, staring at nothing. Finally, she reaches up and drags my boneless body off her shoulders. Without a single pat or stroke, she carelessly drops me back into my box. I land in a heap, but she replaces the lid without straightening my body. I begin to cry, sobs filled with pain; she either does not notice or does not care, because she does not react at all. My world goes dark again.

She carries my box back to the wardrobe as if it weighs a thousand pounds. She places it on the usual shelf, but slides it past its customary spot into the farthest, darkest corner. I hear her shut the door, and then all is silent. This box, once my cozy little nest, is now my prison, and I know it will be a very long time before I leave it again, if ever. I go back to sleep.

LRJ for “Miss Brill” by Carol Hammons

Retelling “Miss Brill”

Katherine Mansfield used “Miss Brill”
To tell a story that would cause a chill.

In her home so all alone
Poor “Miss Brill” wanted to belong.

Sundays spent in the park
Made her happy as a lark.

This experience “played all the year”
With her companion fur whispering in her ear.

While she watched, she pretended with all her heart
That in this life she had a part.

She judged everyone and every age
And thought her life played out “on stage.”

Yet, she soon found
Other attitudes did abound.

Appearances can be so wrong
Leaving you to sing a different song.

For Miss Brill had to soon discover
That people and books cannot be judged by the cover.

Even the elite with all their frills
Were mean and talked badly about poor Miss Brill.

The fantasy ended and all hope seemed gone.
Once again she felt all alone.

This tough lesson was hard to take
And could not be sweetened by a “honeycake.”

So she hurried home to put the fur back in the box
To protect it and her from life’s unending hard knocks.

Then, she heard cries from the fur’s four walls
But as readers we know that is not all.

In the end the reader feels a sudden chill
To realize the tears were shed by poor Miss Brill.