



A Literary Stylistic Analysis of Katherine Mansfield's *Miss Brill*

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Abstract: Katherine Mansfield, one of the most renowned female writers in the world of literature, created 93 works in her brief lifetime, many of which are considered classics by posterity. Mansfield's outstanding contribution to literature lies in her innovation in the realm of short stories, and she is widely recognized as one of the finest short story writers in the history of English literature. *Miss Brill* is one such masterpiece, depicting the story of Miss Brill as she dresses neatly and goes to the park on a Sunday, sitting on a bench and observing the people passing by, listening to their conversations and the band playing. She imagines herself as a part of their world, but her illusions are shattered by a young couple, and she returns home, disheartened, to what feels like a cupboard of a home. This short story exemplifies the artistic techniques in Mansfield's storytelling, with one of the prominent features being the charm emanating from the stylistic choices in her works. Literary stylistics is concerned with the language features of literary works, exploring how authors use language to express the themes of their works and enhance their aesthetic value. This paper will delve into literary stylistics, focusing on the text of the short story *Miss Brill*, examining its lexical features, grammatical features, and figures of speech to explore how Mansfield uses specific language choices to convey and enhance the thematic significance and aesthetic effects of her work.

Keywords: Miss Brill, Mansfield, Literary Stylistics

1. Introduction to Katherine Mansfield and *Miss Brill*

Katherine Mansfield is considered the master of the twentieth-century British short story. She is the only writer in the history of English literature to have achieved success with short stories. In her short life, she wrote over ninety short stories and built her enduring reputation as the "Queen of the English Short Story" in the twentieth century. A critic once said that: "She had the same kind of directive influence on the art of the short story as Joyce had on the novel. After Joyce and Katherine Mansfield neither the novel nor the short story can ever be quite the same again. They beat a track to a higher point from which others can scan a wider horizon."^[1] Western critics have long been concerned with the style of Mansfield's short stories. Saralyn R. Daly noted that "Mansfield discovered and developed a more dramatic and lyrical style."^[2] Ian A. Gordon, a Mansfield researcher, claimed that "many of Mansfield's short stories are written in a 'peculiar prose style' which draws on poetic techniques."^[3]

Miss Brill by Katherine Mansfield is a short story about a lonely, unmarried elderly woman. The story depicts Miss Brill, who lives alone in France. She spends every Sunday sitting in the park watching and listening to the passers-by, which is her happiest time and her only way of keeping in touch with the world. She yearned to fit in, to be understood and noticed. Just when she thought she was perfectly integrated into the community, a young couple shattered the dream Miss Brill had been carefully weaving by making an unabashed curse at her. It is that time that she realizes how irritating she has become. And the reality that she has been living in her own fantasy is mercilessly revealed. In the end, Miss Brill is painfully aware of the reality and sadly returns to her closed life. The whole story is short and not dramatic, but the words are full of linguistic artistry.

2. Research Objectives and Significance:

2.1 Research Objectives:

- Analyzing Literary Style: Conducting a literary stylistic analysis of Katherine Mansfield's *Miss Brill* is to explore the language, rhetoric, and narrative techniques employed in the short story. This aids in a comprehensive understanding of Mansfield's writing style and how she uses linguistic elements to convey themes and emotions.
- Revealing Theme Expression: The research aims to uncover implicit themes within the short story. Through a meticulous analysis of literary style, it delves into how Mansfield communicates the deeper meanings of the story through choices in language, narrative structure, and other stylistic elements.
- Decrypting Character Psychology: Through a study of literary style, the research delves into an in-depth analysis of the psychological portrayal of the protagonist, Miss Brill. It explores how Mansfield uses language to reveal the inner world of characters and the impact of such descriptions on the story's development.

2.2 Research Significance:

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- a) **Literary Contribution:** By conducting a thorough analysis of Katherine Mansfield's literary style, this research aims to provide a fresh perspective on the author's unique position and contributions to modernist literature. Additionally, it contributes to understanding the development of short stories in the early 20th century.
- b) **Interpreting Subtext:** By unraveling the intricacies of the literary style in *Miss Brill*, the research facilitates a more nuanced and profound understanding of the themes and emotions embedded in the novel. It offers readers a detailed interpretation of the text.
- c) **Academic Insight:** Through an in-depth exploration of Katherine Mansfield's literary style, this research intends to offer novel viewpoints and methods for the academic discussion of modernist literature and stylistic analysis. It aims to stimulate scholarly discourse in related fields.

In summary, the purpose of this paper is to unearth the literary artistry inherent in Katherine Mansfield's *Miss Brill* through a stylistic analysis, shedding light on the impact of these features on the story's themes and emotional conveyance. The research aims to provide new insights and understanding to the field of literary studies.

3. Literary Stylistics

The study of literary stylistics is concerned with the linguistic style and stylistic features of literary works. Literary stylistics is considered to be the bridge between linguistics and literary criticism. Linguists and literary critics are far apart in their analysis of literary works because of their different emphases. Linguists treat a literary work simply as a linguistic material and analyses the structural relationships between the various linguistic components, whereas literary critics focus more on the social and moral concerns of the work and the intuitive aesthetic feeling it gives. Literary stylistics combines the two, but with a corresponding change.^[4] On the one hand, it analyses the linguistic components like linguistics, without being so exhaustive that every part must be covered. On the other hand, it explains the meaning of the content of a text but is supported with linguistic forms. It can therefore be said that literary stylistics is an approach to the analysis of works that takes into account both linguistics and literature, using the methods of linguistics as a tool for interpreting the meaning of texts. It not only studies the use of language and style in literary works, but also explores the influence of words choices on the thematic meaning and aesthetic effect of texts.

In short, literary stylistics takes the linguistic form of literary texts as its starting point. Through the detailed analysis of various linguistic phenomena such as speech, diction, grammar and figure of speech, it further reveals the psychological motives, individual characteristics and the aesthetic and cultural implications.

A classic work of literary stylistics is Geoffrey N. Leech and Michael H. Short's *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*. In this book, Leach and Short systematically present a model of stylistic analysis that covers four main categories, including "lexical categories", "grammatical categories", "figures of speech, etc.", and "context and cohesion".^[5] However, as stylistic analysis focuses on the stylistic effects produced by linguistic forms, this model is not universally applicable. Some linguistic features will be more prominent and important in a specific textual analysis, while others will be less obvious or insignificant. The analyst must make a judgement based on the text and select those linguistic features that are more prominent and important to study.

4. A Literary Stylistic Analysis of *Miss Brill*

In this paper, the author starts from Leach and Short's analysis approach, and look at three aspects of the text: "lexical categories", "grammatical categories" and "figures of speech, etc." (the fourth aspect of the model "context and cohesion" is not obvious in the text thus is not included in the study).

4.1 Lexical Categories

The time spent on the park bench every Sunday afternoon was certainly sacred in Miss Brill's eyes. The solemnity in the detail of her careful grooming of the fur was evident. "She had taken it out of its box that afternoon, shaken out the moth-powder, given it a good brush, and rubbed the life back into the dim little eyes."^[6] Four verbs and verb phrases are used in this short sentence ---- "had taken", "shaken", "given...a brush", "rubbed". Short syllables with rhymes are helpful to portray the sacred care and meticulousness and her love for it. The fur is mentioned several times in the short story and becomes a powerful prop for Miss Brill's emotional crisis. At the beginning of the story, it gives Miss Brill a touch of warmth amidst the coolness, and she has to wear this warm, intimate and even luxurious fur to go to an event of her life. Here, the fur symbolizes Miss Brill's aspirations for a better life and her active pursuit of it. But in the end of the text, the fur, so dear to Miss Brill, is denounced by a young couple as "a fried whiting". It is a shock and a bolt from the blue to the dreaming protagonist. For the readers, it is also a bolt from the blue. The fur, thought to be of great value, turns out to be worthless. Miss Brill's careful grooming of the fur earlier becomes a futile exercise, and her caution in handling it makes her actions seem comical. This adds to the tragedy of the character Miss Brill and makes the reader sympathize with the self-deceiving and unremarked character. It also inadvertently deepens the theme of the work: the irreconcilable contradiction between imagination and reality.

There is much more evocative portrayal of the characters' movements in the short story. In fact, Mansfield seems more inclined to focus on the other people who come and go in the park than on the actions of the protagonist. There are many behavioral characteristics of the individuals of different identities and ages in the crowd. "Little children ran among them, swooping and laughing."^[6] From "swooping" and "laughing" the innocent, playful and noisy state of children at play is vividly showed. "And sometimes a tiny staggerer came suddenly rocking into the open from under the trees, stopped,

stared, as suddenly sat down ‘flop,’ until its small high-stepping mother, like a young hen, rushed scolding to its rescue.” In this sentence, a series of verbs focus on the child’s naive appearance when first learning to walk. The word “flop” is used in a particularly evocative way, truly reproducing the situation of a child who, as a first-time and unsteady walker, suddenly collapses heavily. In capturing the movements of these different individuals, the writer’s diction is simple and natural, subdued and subtle.

Another outstanding feature of this short story is the author’s use of vague words and phrases, which stimulate the readers’ imagination. An air of unease permeates the opening of the short story: “The air was motionless, but when you opened your mouth there was just 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.”^[6] The dreary air makes Brill agitated. The author repeatedly uses the phrase “a faint chill”. Semantically, “faint” is associated with vagueness, and chill can have multiple meanings. In many dictionaries, the word “chill” has psychological and sociolinguistic implications. However, the author does not elaborate on where coolness comes from, and readers have no way of knowing the answer. This leaves readers imagination. The coolness may come from a slightly chilly autumn day, or the reader may interpret it as Miss Brill’s loneliness, which hangs like a shadow over her heart.

4.2 Grammatical Categories

The short story is mainly made up of declarative sentences, but there are also a considerable number of exclamatory sentences. Of the 17 exclamatory sentences that appear throughout the text, 12 ones are closely related to Miss Brill’s psychological activities, which shows the richness and passion of her inner activities. The three consecutive exclamations at the beginning of a paragraph are particularly noteworthy. “Oh, how fascinating it was! How she enjoyed it! How she loved sitting here, watching it all!”^[6] The narrator of these three sentences is not Miss Brill herself, but the exclamation marks within them reflect a strong sense of subjectivity, belonging to the typical “free indirect speech.” “Free indirect speech” and “free direct speech” differ in that the latter allows readers to directly enter the character’s inner world, but it means the narrator is entirely disconnected from the character’s thoughts. In “free indirect speech,” what readers hear is the narrator’s rendition of the character’s words. In such cases, a compassionate narrator’s voice will be filled with sympathy for the character, inevitably infecting the reader and thereby enhancing the reader’s empathy.^[7] It is the climax of the short story, in which Brill convinces herself that society is a big stage and she is an actress on it. The three exclamations express her delight at discovering the value of her existence. In the short story when a lady is seen to be rudely pushed away by a man, Brill is anxious and worried. She imagines that even the drums of the band are rebuking that man: “The Brute! The Brute!”^[6]

There are also some exclamations used with a strong ironic effect. For example, Brill describes the old men sitting on the benches: “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!”^[6] This exclamation indicates Brill’s gloating, and the reader may judge her to be a vigorous and wonderful young woman. In reality, like the old people sitting on the benches, she is old and frail and lives in a cramped and dark house. Did she not realize that her situation was similar to that of the old people? Certainly, she does. She just avoids it.

The number of non-finite clauses used in the text is also considerable, especially when describing the behavior and dressing of the characters in the park. Three examples are enumerated as follows.

- a. An Englishman and his wife, he wearing a dreadful Panama hat and she button boots.
- b. Little children ran among them, swooping and laughing.
- c. Two peasant women with funny straw hats passed, gravely, leading beautiful smoke-colored donkeys.

With the use of the non-finite clauses, Mansfield brings a series of images together in a sentence at a high density, avoiding the rigid separation of images by conjunctions such as ‘and’ and ‘but’. Thus, the language can achieve the high level of coverage that only poetry can provide. The richness of the imagery contained in each sentence is breathtaking. The language used by the writer is highly condensed and poetic.

4.3 Figures of Speech

In *Miss Brill*, Mansfield’s repetition of certain words and expressions plays an inestimable role in portraying the character’s inner feelings and bringing out the themes.

The tenth paragraph of the text is the climax. It’s the moment when the protagonist’s emotions reach their peak with the lively music played by the band in the park. And the words are repeated most intensively in this paragraph. The paragraph consists of eight sentences. “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.”^[6] What readers hear seems no longer to be the voice of the narrator, but a shivering cry straight from Miss Brill’s heart. But then she feels ‘a faint chill’ and is unable to say what this chill is, so she searches her brain to find the answer. Here, the repetition of the expression ‘a something’ vividly reproduces the search, as if Brill were standing in front of readers, excited, stammering and intermittently telling you about her overflowing exuberance. The two ‘not sadness’ in succession, which are stronger, indicate that Brill is eager to deny the negative associations of this coolness and refuses to face the harsh reality. In the fourth sentence, the two ‘lifted’ in a row refer to the rising tune, which is also a classic rhetorical pattern of repetition. And Miss Brill’s mood rises with the rising tune. The melody is beautiful, rousing and soaring, symbolizing Brill’s desire for genuine human connection. The two ‘we understand’ in the last sentence suggest that Brill’s emotions have finally

reached the zenith. In Brill's imaginary world, the other people in the park are now in touch with her, pushing Brill to the peak of her desire and longing to participate in social life.

Reading *Miss Brill* is like enjoying a soft and delightful music. Mansfield's use of numerous alliteration and rhyme create a rhythmic effect that makes the text read like a flowing stream.

The short story opens with a description of the sunny weather, using two alliteration --- "gold and great", "white wine". It suggests that Brill is in a very happy mood at this time. In the second paragraph, the author depicts that the audience does not buy into the energetic conductor of the band, who "sat on the benches, still as statues". The three consecutive /s/ portray their rigid posture. "part of the performance", "quite a queer", "feeling at telling", "hero and heroine", "still soundlessly singing", [6]and etc. The many rhythmic patterns produce a variety of rhythmic effects, making the rhythm of the whole text stronger and stronger. The readers can feel that the protagonist's emotions are also rising like the music. And her excitement has reached an uncontrollable level. But with the arrival of the young couple, Miss Brill's dream is shattered, and the imagination comes to an abrupt end. The narrative thereafter is so flat. The main character's heart is cut to pieces by reality. Her enthusiasm is then frozen, unable to make a single movement.

Mansfield uses a variety of rhetorical devices in this work. A series of ingenious and imaginative similes and metaphors are noteworthy.

There is a simile that occupies a pivotal place in this text: "But today she passed the baker's by, climbed the stairs, went into the little dark room—her room like a cupboard."^[6] Maybe the simile is kind of exaggerated. But this vivid simile reminds us of Brill's living environment: a small, dark room, probably without even a window. So, it is no wonder that she went to the park every Friday to pass the time, and that park became an outlet for her soul to find sunlight.

"Although it was so brilliantly fine—the blue sky powdered with gold and great spots of light like white wine splashed over the Jardins Publiques—Miss Brill was glad that she had decided on her fur. The air was motionless, but when you opened your mouth there was just 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."^[6] The two similes in this quotation are fresh and interesting. The comparison of the sunlight scattered on the ground in the park to the white wine speaks to the splendid state of mind of the protagonist. The comparison of a faint chill in the air to the chill before sipping from a glass of iced water is even more well-conceived, because the coldness brought by the iced water itself is strong and penetrating, but the coolness before sipping. The coldness of the ice water itself is strong and penetrating. It highlights the 'faint' feature of the chill.

The little girls are compared to 'French dolls', and the mother whose kid falls down is compared to 'a young hen', 'rushed scolding to its rescue'. The child's innocence and the mother's eagerness to protect her child are evident. The characters are so vivid and lively. And this is a reflection of the main character's strong desire to loving life and participate in it. Another typical example is the author's comparison of the "a little 'flutey' bit" to the "a little chain of bright drops". At first glance, this metaphor may seem inappropriate: one is auditory and the other one is tactual. The two are very incomparable. But on reflection, readers will see the commonalities between the two: they both evoke fresh and pleasant sensory associations in the mind.

The fur that Miss Brill cherished so much became "a fried whiting" in the eyes of that young couple. It was this cruel simile that brought Miss Brill back to reality: she was just a dumb, silly, funny, eccentric, senile and poor "stupid old thing".

5. Conclusion

The short story *Miss Brill* demonstrates Mansfield's maturity in writing. She seems to be an observer, wandering in the thoughts of her characters and recording their joys and sorrows in a calm and objective manner. With her feminine delicacy and sensitivity, she has created a poetic, gentle, and humanistic writing style. Through a literary stylistic analysis of Katherine Mansfield's classic *Miss Brill*, this paper examines the language of the short story from three perspectives: lexical features, grammatical features, and rhetorical devices, and explores how the writer expresses and enhances the thematic meaning and aesthetic effect of the work.

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