

Katherine mansfields miss brill: the mask over loneliness

Literature



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Miss Brill: The Mask over Loneliness “ Miss Brill” is one of Katherine Mansfield’s most acclaimed short stories. In the middle of a bright picture of a park, with its lively band music and milling crowd of pleasure seekers, the author paints a picture of loneliness. The protagonist’s character is delineated with great subtlety and, at the same time, in a wealth of detail. Miss Brill is essentially an old woman who is seated on a park bench on a Sunday afternoon. Mansfield builds her characterization of Miss Brill by using her reaction to her surroundings, and to the other people in the park. As the story unfolds, it is evident that Miss Brill is using her romanticized perception of her surroundings to mask the sad reality of her life. Mansfield evokes the readers’ sympathy for the lonely Miss Brill who bravely hides her isolation under a facade of gaiety. Miss Brill is an old woman whose attempt to mask her loneliness fails in the face of rude reality. Miss Brill is a lonely old woman, whose life is dull and isolated. She lives by herself in a “ little dark room” (Mansfield, p 18). Her life is mundane and dictated by monotonous routine: she leaves for her visit to the park on Sunday “ at just the same time each week” (p 9). She is obviously not well off. She cherishes her shabby fur stole. She is an English teacher who is shy even in her interaction with her pupils: “ she had quite a queer, shy feeling at telling her English pupils how she spent her Sunday afternoons” (p 9). She spends four afternoons a week reading the newspaper to an invalid gentleman who remains asleep and totally unresponsive to her presence. Her confession that the presence of an almond in the slice of honey cake which is her Sunday treat, “ made a great difference” (p 18), reveals a life of very modest means, bereft of company and joy. Miss Brill’s character demonstrates a touch of snobbishness in her

attitude to the people in the park. She approves of the old man in a velvet coat, but looks down on the English couple for wearing “ a dreadful Panama hat and button boots” (p 4). Indeed, she goes so far as to say that she “ wanted to shake” the woman. But she hesitates to outrightly condemn the rudeness of the beautiful woman with the violets. She has no qualms in being an avid eavesdropper: “ She had become really quite expert, --- at listening” to other peoples’ conversations (p 3). It is evident that Miss Brill attempts to mask the reality of her life by assuming a romanticized perception. The day is brilliant, her old fur stole is a “ dear little thing” (p 1), the band “ sounded louder and gayer” (p 2), the people in the park are brightly dressed and cheerful. She imagines all the people in the park to be on the stage, actors in a play, including herself: “ Even she had a part and came every Sunday” (p 9). She attempts to don the costume of an enthusiastic participant in the drama of life, and assumes a role of importance for herself. She tries to convince herself that she is not just an onlooker and that “ No doubt somebody would have noticed if she hadn't been there; she was part of the performance after all” (p 9). However, a closer reading of the story indicates that Miss Brill is assuming a mask and is only too well aware of the sad reality of her life. There is a world of truth in her declaration, “ Yes, I have been an actress for a long time” (p 9). Her true perception of reality underlies and contradicts the romanticism of her tone throughout the narrative. In her idealized description of the day, she admits that “ there was just a faint chill” (p 1). Her shabby fur stole has “ sad little eyes,” and wonders, “ What has been happening to me” (p 1). There is a tingling in her hands and arms, and “ something light and sad” (p 1) in her

breath. Her empathy with the woman in the ermine toque indicates that she is familiar with the pain of rejection. Like the woman who “ smiled more brightly than ever” (p 8) it is evident that Miss Brill also puts a brave facade on her life. In spite of her apparent refusal to identify herself with the other old people seated in the park, she is definitely aware that “ she too” is one of “ the others on the benches” (p 10). The young couple, to whom Miss Brill assigns the part of the hero and heroine in her play, rudely rip apart her mask. Her costume is stripped away to show her as “ a stupid old thing” (p 13). Her fur stole, a symbol of her identity, is cruelly mocked. The fact of her loneliness and rejection is unequivocally stated: “ Who wants her?” (p13). The curtain comes down on Miss Brill’s fantasy world and she is left exposed. The truth stares her in the face: she is only an unwanted onlooker in the drama of life. Her “ little dark room - the room like a cupboard” (p 18), makes her a part of the “ odd, silent, nearly all old” (p 5) group of people who sit on the park benches. As she unclasps her fur stole and puts it aside, Miss Brill finally lays aside her assumed facade and gives in to her loneliness. The character of Miss Brill evokes sympathy in the reader. Even when she indulges in idealized fantasy, the sadness below the surface is evident. Her courageous attempt to put a bold front on the emptiness of her life, and her refusal to surrender to self-pity, are admirable traits. She makes her own way in life, enjoys her little pleasures and is content. It is difficult to grudge her the happiness of an imagined participation in the drama of life. When she is forced to openly confront the fact that she has no part to play in the world, her sorrow is shared by the reader. Works Cited. Mansfield, Katherine. “ Miss Brill.” Name of your book in italics. Name of editor. Name of Publisher. Date

of publication. Place of publication. Page numbers of the book in Which the story “ Miss Brill” appears.