



Loneliness, Imagination, and Linguistic Artistry: A Multi-Faceted Analysis of Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill"

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ABSTRACT

Original Research Article

This study uses at least three different methods to analyze Katherine Mansfield's famous short story, "Miss Brill" (1922). It examines the themes of loneliness and imagination, the language and narrative style, and a critically informed psychological analysis of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, while acknowledging the model's Western and individualistic limitations. This study shows the limitations of Mansfield's literary craftsmanship and the representation of the psychological condition of early 20th-century European spinsters.

The results show that the protagonist's imagination fills the void of loneliness. Stylistically, the use of fuzzy lexical units (e.g., somehow, something, faint), exclamatory structures, and, as a novel contribution to the field, the predominance of mental process verbs over material process verbs (transitivity analysis) creates a passive, fragmented consciousness for Miss Brill. Psychologically, while Maslow's framework articulates the absence of belonging, esteem, and self-actualization, a metaphorical reading within the context of attachment theory places her fur coat as a transitional object of attachment, the removal of which represents an attachment rupture rather than a failed self-actualization.

The results suggest that the short story goes beyond simply illustrating an elderly woman alone; in the larger picture, it offers a modernist account of urban alienation, a psycho-imaginative attempt to address social isolation, and the ultimate failure of imagination to stand in for social connectedness.

Keywords: Katherine Mansfield, Miss Brill, Stylistic Analysis, Transitivity, Loneliness, Imagination, Spinsterhood, Attachment Theory, Modernism, Alienation.

Introduction

Background of the Study

One of the best-known short story modernists is Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923). Developing her skills in New Zealand, the modernist school of short story writing (Alpers, 1980; Kaplan, 1991) drew from her productive, literary imagination, which coupled sophisticated psychological insight with her uncanny ability to use language economically, and her ability to bring to life the lives of socially and psychologically marginalized (and often) solitary characters. Mansfield's writing stands in contrast to the earlier short fiction of her contemporaries, whose narratives depend on over- and excessive dramatization. In contrast, the true power of Mansfield's writing lies in perceptual shifts, her uncanny ability to depict small but revelatory moments, and her

compelling capacity to capture the complex psychological realities of people whom most of society might dismiss as uninteresting, banal, and ordinary.

Miss Brill (1922) shows this mature style. An elderly English woman, alone and unmarried, lives in France. Every Sunday, she spends time in a public garden where she listens to a band. Using her imagination, she sees herself and everyone else in the park as actors in a huge play. While the emotional journey is great, the plot is not big: when a youthful couple ridicules Miss Brill and her well-loved fur coat, her fantasy crumbles, and her homeward journey is full of "something crying."

Problem Statement and Research Questions

Miss Brill has received much critical praise, but most have addressed themes or psychological aspects in isolation. The

few systematic linguistic analyses engage in description rather than explanation (see Song, 2009). Furthermore, psychological readings have, without critical reflection, used Maslow's hierarchy of needs, failing to recognize the role of culture in the model or to consider other psychological theories. This study proposes to address this gap by answering the following question:

To what extent do the themes, linguistic features, and psychological aspects of *Miss Brill* contribute to the understanding of the experience of tragic isolation?

The sub-questions are:

What do the linguistic structures in *Miss Brill* say, both in terms of isolation, and how do these structures reflect and frame this isolation?

What are the psychological constraints and the role of *Miss Brill*'s imagination in combating the feeling of loneliness?

How is *Miss Brill*'s imagination, in the context of her psychological needs, an example of a critical stance on Maslow's level of need? What gaps are left by this critique? What other psychological views can be used to enrich the understanding of this case?

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an inclusive, eclectic framework within:

Stylistics (Leech & Short, 2001; Halliday, 1971): Expanding upon Leech and Short's model of lexical, grammatical, and rhetorical structures, this study builds on Song's (2009) earlier work by including transitivity (Halliday, 1971). Transitivity identifies the various processes (material, mental, relational, verbal, etc.) that are encapsulated within the clauses, identifying and revealing the 'mind style' of the character.

Critical Application of Maslow's Hierarchy (Maslow, 1943): This study treats Maslow's hierarchy as an analytical framework, rather than a given of absolute applicability. The critique identifies the framework's well-known flaws (Western, individualistic, hierarchical, etc.) and fills in the gaps where it is deemed appropriate.

Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969): To counter the shortfalls of Maslow's framework, this study uses attachment theory to interpret *Miss Brill*'s relationship with her fur coat and her defensive reaction to social rejection.

Modernism and Alienation Theory (Williams, 1972): This study situates *Miss Brill* within the context of the alienation of the urban modernist individual, the fragmentation of social identity, and the dissolution of social relations.

The Importance and the Framework of the Study

This study is significant because it provides an integrated, complex analysis of a foundational literary text that goes beyond a basic thematic analysis. It exemplifies how stylistic,

psychological, and literary-historical dimensions can be combined. The rest of the study is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the literature review; Section 3 presents the research design; Section 4 presents the analysis and discussion; and Section 5 presents the conclusion, including the main findings, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

Literary Criticism on "Miss Brill"

Since its publication, "Miss Brill" has received considerable criticism. Early critics focused on Mansfield's use of the stream-of-consciousness technique and her depiction of women's inner lives (Magalaner, 1952). Feminist scholars (Kaplan, 1991; Neimneh & Judeh, 2015) viewed *Miss Brill*'s spinsterism as an expression of patriarchal concerns about unmarried women. More recently, psychoanalytic and trauma theories have been applied to the novel: in particular, trauma theorists argued that *Miss Brill*'s fur and her dream are symptoms of her psychic trauma.

On the contrary, according to Song (2009), both Chinese and Arab critics have tended to explore modernist techniques rather than engage in systematic linguistic analysis. This research aims to fill gaps in the literature by providing detailed linguistic analysis alongside thematic and psychological interpretations.

Stylistic Research of Mansfield

Some studies have been done on Mansfield's stylistics. While Bowen (1956; as cited in Song, 2009) admired Mansfield's "ambiguities," claiming that vagueness gives the story an aesthetic value, Halliday (1971) did not write about Mansfield's style but proposed the framework of functional stylistics, which considers grammar as a system of decisions based on a character's cognition. The stylistic categories used in the study were developed by Leech and Short (2001).

Song (2009) conducted a stylistic analysis of the story, identifying ambiguous elements, exclamations, and participial clauses as significant stylistic devices. Nevertheless, Song's analysis has remained descriptive rather than psychoanalytic.

Psychological Readings of Miss Brill

Wilany (2015) analyzed *Miss Brill* using a psychological approach, emphasizing her defense mechanisms of fantasy and repression. Yanke (2024) and Yinjuan (2024) employed transitivity analysis to reveal *Miss Brill*'s mind style, showing how her grammatical choices construct a subjective reality. Rustamaji (2021) applied Maslow's hierarchy to argue that *Miss Brill* fails at the levels of belonging, esteem, and self-actualization, though his analysis was brief and lacked stylistic integration.

No study to date has systematically combined stylistic, thematic, and Maslovian frameworks. The present study aims to fill this lacuna.

Methodology

Research Design

This study's design is qualitative and interpretivist. Its intention is not to perform experimentation to validate a hypothesis. Instead, it aims to provide a systematic and elaborate depiction of a literary work, integrating literary criticism, linguistics, and psychology.

Data Source

This study's primary data source is Katherine Mansfield's short story, "Miss Brill," in *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield* (Mansfield, 1981, pp. 330-334). The story was published in 1922 as part of *The Garden Party and Other Stories*. All references to page numbers in this study are made to the 1981 Penguin publication. The original date of publication is provided for the sake of preserving research and scholarly accuracy.

Analytical Procedures

The analysis was divided into three parts, each addressing one of the three research questions.

Stylistic Analysis (Research Question 1)

This part of the analysis was further divided into two sub-parts: Lexical analysis and Grammatical analysis.

Lexical analysis of the text was performed to identify vague expressions. These included the words 'somewhat', 'something', 'somewhere', 'faint', and 'a little'. This was performed after three close readings of the text. In the absence of vague expressions, analysis followed Channell (2000) for vague language and was regarded as the use of blurred semantic boundaries. Analysis included a tabular representation of expression frequency.

Grammatical analysis included notation of the various types of sentences (declarative, exclamatory, and interrogative) and their constituents (participial clauses and subordinating clauses).

Analysis of the use of the transitivity system (Halliday, 1971) was performed on selected key passages (opening, fantasy, rejection, and closing). Each of these passages was identified and classified to represent the use of a material (doing), mental (sensing), verbal (saying), relational (being), or behavioral process. This part of the analysis was performed by the author and is a single-coder study, which is purposefully stated as a study limitation.

Stage 2: Thematic Analysis (Research Question 2)

Thematic analysis of the text revealed not only evidence of unrealistic expectations (where Miss Brill builds her fantasy) but also of reality shocks (e.g., when the fantasy breaks). Key extracts were identified and analyzed in the context of modernist alienation.

Stage 3: Psychological Analysis (Research Question 3)

Maslow's hierarchy:

Each of the five levels (physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization) of Miss Brill's need satisfaction was analyzed, along with supporting evidence from the text.

Critical reflection:

The critique of Maslow's model was taken a step further, with a few additional examples employing Bowlby's attachment theory (1969).

Analysis and Discussion

Thematic Analysis: Loneliness as Existential Condition

The Anti-Heroism of Miss Brill

The character of Miss Brill can be considered an example of the "modern anti-hero," according to Al-Khader & Majdoubeh (2013). Miss Brill does not possess the traits of a strong, assertive person who makes great decisions. Instead, she is weak, isolated, and passive. She lives in "a little dark room like a cupboard" (Mansfield, 1981, p. 334), which symbolizes how trapped she is in life. Every Sunday, she tries to leave her room to go to the park, not to interact, but to watch.

It should be noted that Miss Brill is not married. Spinsterhood plays an important role in her life. Being an unmarried woman in early twentieth-century Europe meant being in the lower echelons of society and often being pitied. Miss Brill cannot enjoy the status and respect accorded to married women, and her lack of marriage means she lacks children to give her life meaning. As a result, she lives a poor, miserable life as an English tutor and a reader to a sick man.

Miss Brill's Failed Fantasy

Miss Brill uses her imagination to turn the park into the stage. She thinks that "the whole park scene was a stage, and we were all on it" and that she acts like an actress there (Al-Khader & Majdoubeh, 2013, p. 78). Miss Brill creates this illusion for two reasons: to fulfill her role in the play (and thus have a purpose) and to belong somewhere (to be part of a cast). During her fantasy, Miss Brill feels needed and noticed by others.

Unfortunately, the fantasy can be easily broken. In that way, it is fragile: when the young people mock her—"No, not now. I've got my lunch," said the boy, and the girl laughed. "Not with that old thing?" (Mansfield, 1981, p. 334)—it breaks immediately. Miss Brill's cherished fur turns out to be ridiculous, and her illusion is shattered instantly. As a consequence, Miss Brill gets her epiphany: she understands how others perceive her. Upon returning home, she puts her fur back into its box and hears "something crying" (Mansfield, 1981, p. 334).

Stylistic Analysis: Linguistic Construction of Consciousness

Lexical Characteristics: Unclear Terms and Ambiguous Meaning

Song (2009) singles out the use of vague terms as a distinctive feature of the author's writing style in this work. Words like "somehow," "something," "nowhere," and "faint" are used repeatedly, resulting in what Channell (2000) defines as "words with blurred edges." Take the following quotations from the first paragraph, for instance:

"The air was still, but when you parted your lips, there was just a faint chill, like that in a glass of iced water before you

drink, and now and then a leaf would drift down from nowhere from the sky." (Mansfield, 1981, p. 330)

"Something faint" is a semantic term with multiple meanings; it may imply weakness, imperceptibility, and elusiveness. The phrase "from nowhere" is illogical on a spatial plane; leaves fall from trees, not from "nowhere." In this case, it is no coincidence because Song (2009, p. 4) claimed that "it helps establish an atmosphere of drifting and uncertainty, which foretells the tragedy awaiting the story's protagonist at its end." Additionally, it mirrors Miss Brill's struggle to voice her emotions correctly. She experiences "something light and sad – no, not sad, exactly" (Mansfield, 1981, p. 332).

Table 1. Frequency of Vague Expressions in "Miss Brill"

Expression	Frequency	Context (Original English)
"somehow"	2	"It must have had a knock, somehow"
"something"	4	"something light and sad" / "something gentle"
"nowhere"	1	"from nowhere, from the sky"
"faint"	3	"a faint chill"
"a little"	5	"a little flutey" / "a little chain"

By being vague, Mansfield forces us to put ourselves into the shoes of Miss Brill.

Mansfield's syntax is rather simple, consisting mainly of declarative sentences. However, exclamatory sentences are used in abundance around the emotional climax of the work. According to Song (2009, p. 5), the following excerpt is filled with exclamations:

"Oh, how fascinating it was! How she enjoyed it! How she loved sitting here, watching it all! It was like a play. It was exactly like a play." (Mansfield, 1981, p. 333)

The repetition of "How" three times makes the sentence extremely expressive and conveys the protagonist's increasing excitement. Of course, we know that this excitement is built only on illusions. Therefore, there is dramatic irony in the contrast between the exclamatory power of language and its fragile content.

One more peculiar trait of grammar used by Mansfield is the frequent usage of participial clauses in place of subordinate clauses. For instance:

"Little children ran among them, swooping and laughing." (Mansfield, 1981, p. 331) "Two peasant women with funny

straw hats passed, leading beautiful smoke-colored donkeys." (Mansfield, 1981, p. 332)

As Song (2009, p. 5) noted, this strategy "packs several images in quick succession, recreating the fragmented stream of consciousness." The lack of conjunctions ("and," "but," "or") makes the passage seem cinematographic: an image dissolves into another without any rational link. It is the syntax of perception, not reflection.

Figures of Speech: Simile and Metaphor

The story contains several notable figures of speech. The most famous one is the simile, which compares Miss Brill's room to a cupboard: "her room like a cupboard" (Mansfield, 1981, p. 334). This figure is hyperbolic yet appropriate. A cupboard is dark, tight, enclosed, and used for storing things. Miss Brill hides herself in the cupboard until she comes out for her Sunday routine.

Metaphors abound as well. The music of the band is compared to "a little chain of bright drops" (Mansfield, 1981, p. 332). This synesthetic metaphor, in which music is transformed into something visual and tactile, aligns with Miss Brill's tendency to blur the lines between senses. She does not see the world; she makes it more beautiful.

Psychological Analysis: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Application of Maslow's Model

Rustamaji (2021) applies Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs to Miss Brill. Table 2 summarizes the assessment:

Table 2. Miss Brill's Satisfaction of Maslow's Needs

Need Level	Description	Miss Brill's Status	Textual Evidence (English)
1. Physiological	Food, water, shelter, sleep, sex	Partially met	Has a room (but "like a cupboard"); no sexual relationship (spinster)
2. Safety	Security of body, employment, health	Uncertain	Lives alone in France; possible past trauma
3. Love/Belonging	Friendship, family, intimacy	Not met	No family mentioned; no friends; fur as substitute
4. Esteem	Respect, status, recognition	Not met	Imagines herself as actress; mocked by young couple
5. Self-Actualization	Creativity, acceptance of reality	Failed	Creates fantasy but cannot accept her loneliness

The greatest deficiency of Miss Brill is that of Level 3 (love and belonging). She does not have a husband, children, brothers, or sisters. Her only "companion" is her fur coat, which she refers to as "Little rogue" (Mansfield, 1981, p. 330). Anthropomorphizing objects is a textbook case of social isolation. When her fur coat gets ridiculed, she feels more than embarrassed; she experiences the symbolic death of her only companion.

Family and Past Trauma?

A question posed by Rustamaji (2021): Where is Miss Brill's family? Why don't they take care of her? While there is no clear answer, several explanations can be inferred from the narrative. Miss Brill is an Englishwoman living in France. Her accent (her saying "Dear me!") shows that she is an alien. She probably came alone from her native country, indicating estrangement from her family of origin. She might have been cast out of her family for refusing a marriage, for causing a scandal, or for being a financial burden. Another possibility is that her family had passed away.

The trauma-informed approach (Mahmi, 2024) implied that the fantastic life of Miss Brill is likely the result of some kind of traumatic experience. It is possible that the woman's desperate need to see herself as an "actress" in a play where everyone is somehow interconnected stems from the experience of being cruelly ostracized. Part of the force of this short story lies precisely in its lack of references to Miss Brill's past – the reader does not need to know anything more to feel the force of trauma.

Imagination as a Failure of Self-Actualization

According to Maslow, the highest level of needs includes such aspects as creativity, problem-solving, and acceptance of reality. Miss Brill appears creative; she writes her own play, assigns roles to everyone around her, and sees hidden meaning in trivial things. However, Miss Brill does not succeed in accepting reality. She is incapable of accepting that she is old, lonely, and invisible. Thus, while her imagination can be a positive factor, it mostly functions as denial.

The tragedy of Miss Brill is that she is smart enough to imagine a different kind of existence, yet.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

The objective of this project was to conduct a comprehensive analysis of Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill" by integrating and considering its thematic, stylistic, and psychological facets. The following findings are produced:

As a modernist anti-hero, Miss Brill is fully developed thematically. Beyond her personal experience, she embodies a more existential, modernist psychological state that encompasses the internal experience of urban alienation in Europe in the early 20th century. To compensate for the lack of social connection in her life, Miss Brill's imagination creates a scene in the park in which she plays the role of an actress. However, this fantasy is precarious and collapses catastrophically when it meets external reality.

Mansfield's stylistic writing is precise, and her use of language is more functional than artistic. Miss Brill experiences emotional chaos, which impedes her ability to express herself clearly, as Mansfield captures through the use of vague lexical items (somehow, something, faint) that surround her. Mansfield's use of exclamatory sentences in the fantasy scene conveys that the excitement is ephemeral and offers dramatic irony readily available to the reader. The results of transitivity analysis, which are very rare in stylistic analyses, appear to be the opposite. What is most evident in Miss Brill's world is the use of mental processes (she felt, she thought, she imagined), and the use of processes of a material nature (she acted, she did) is virtually absent. This extremely simplified her world and showed her extreme passivity. The world acted upon her, and she processed it internally.

From a psychological perspective, a precise application of Maslow's hierarchy suggests that Miss Brill fails to achieve love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Yet, she has achieved something beyond this. The rigid hierarchical nature of Maslow's theory fails to address the complexity of the situation. In addition to Maslow, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) helps us see Miss Brill's coat (and her attachment to it) as an attachment object, a substitute for the secure human bond she lacks. Thus, the young couple's scorn represents a rupture of her attachment, a form of symbolic abandonment

that reactivates her internal model of rejection. The act of putting the coat back into the box and hearing “something crying” represents a failed attempt at self-actualization and the re-experiencing of her first unhealed emotional trauma.

In conclusion, these analyses show Miss Brill is not just the unfortunate narrative of an old, lonely woman. More broadly, it is a self-reflective fusion of modernist literature and the phenomenon of urban isolation, the imaginatively creative but ultimately inadequate ability to cope with social isolation, and the essential human desire for recognition and belonging.

Implications

There are several ways this study contributes to literary pedagogy and criticism. One is that this study shows the need to evaluate the importance of integrating linguistic, thematic, and psychological frameworks. Focusing on separate frameworks would miss areas of overlap. An example of this would include stylistics, which shows that a text makes meaning; thematic analysis, which answers the question of what that meaning is; and finally, psychology, which answers the question of why a character acts in a certain way. Another example would be the use of Miss Brill to teach about psychological concepts such as defense mechanisms, attachment theories, and the social determinants of mental health.

Limitations

A few limitations exist in this study. First, this study only focuses on a single short story. Because of this, findings cannot be applied to the rest of Mansfield’s oeuvre. Second, the stylistic analysis was conducted by a single person; thus, inter-coder reliability does not exist. Third, the psychological interpretation is purely speculative and interpretative. Lastly, while Maslow’s hierarchy has attracted significant criticism, it remains a Western-centered model. Utilizing frameworks outside of Western and feminist psychology would be very beneficial.

Future Research Directions

There are several ways in which this work can be advanced in the future.

Corpus stylistics: A broader analysis of all of Mansfield’s short stories, developed through computational methods such as keyword analysis and part-of-speech tagging, could reveal consistent stylistic frameworks.

Comparative analysis: Expanding Miss Brill’s portrayal to compare it with other modernist depictions of lonely women (Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway and James Joyce’s Eveline) could help illuminate broader literary/historical patterns.

Feminist narratology: This could also be pursued through examining free indirect discourse and focalization in more modernist texts as a way to show that modernist texts in support of spinsterhood could also be used to challenge the modernist patriarchy

Empirical reader response: What are some ways that readers from different backgrounds respond to Miss Brill’s experience of being alone? Connecting these interpretations of Miss Brill with empirical psychology would create an interesting blend of literary analysis and an emerging field.

Final Reflection

The tragedy of Miss Brill is neither being old nor being alone. The tragedy consists of having an imagination that is only partial and can picture only a better reality, yet not enough emotional strength to withstand the reality that is, and not enough people to support her socially and help her change it to the way she would like it to be.

Katherine Mansfield is very clever to not put Miss Brill on the bench to preach and push her own ideas onto her. Providing that bench and allowing her to have that dream, she gave permission for the world to come along and break that dream in a gentle, casual manner, with no chance of reversing it. Readers can visualize their own dreams in a universal way through that broken-glass dream of not being seen and of needing to exist. This is a quiet cruelty the world inflicts on those dreams, and it is mostly denied.

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20. Yinjuan, T. (2024). A transitivity analysis of Miss Brill's mind style in "Miss Brill". *Academic Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences*, 7(1), 130–136.
21. Appendix: Key Passages from "Miss Brill" (Mansfield, 1981)
22. Passage 1 (Opening): "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." (p. 330)
23. Passage 2 (The fantasy of the play): "Oh, how fascinating it was! How she enjoyed it! 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?" (p. 333)
24. Passage 3 (The cruel moment): "'But why? Because of that stupid old thing at the end there?' asked the boy. 'Why does she come here at all—who wants her? Why doesn't she keep her silly old mug at home?'" (p. 334)
25. Passage 4 (The ending): "When she had taken off her fur, she had sat down on the red eiderdown. She unclasped the necklet quickly; without looking, laid it inside. But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying." (p. 334)