

The Forced Awakening Road of a Marginalized Woman in Society: On the Virtual World of Miss Brill by Katherine Mansfield

Xiaotong Zhang*

Faculty of Foreign Studies, Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing, China

Abstract

Katherine Mansfield is a famous British short story writer whose novels focus on the psychological activities of the characters. In *Miss Brill*, Mansfield portrays the image of a lonely social marginalized woman with a unique narrative technique. This paper discusses its exquisite narrative art of modern novels, shows the virtual world constructed by *Miss Brill*, and presents her forced awakening road on the edge of society through the analysis of narrative techniques.

Keywords

Miss Brill; Artistic Ideas; Narrative Art; Awakening.

1. Introduction

Katherine Mansfield is a famous British short story writer, who presents women's delicate inner world with her unique novel narrative art. According to the critic Edward Wagenknecht, "Mansfield is a great artist. She pushed the art of short stories to the highest perfect level" (19). Mansfield's novels are characterized by no plot—neither the ups and downs of the plot development, nor the structural layout of traditional novels such as the beginning, development and climax of the story, but focus on the detailed description of characters' psychological activities and the true disclosure of emotions to reveal the theme. Through the artistic depiction of the simple daily life of the British middle class and ordinary working people, Mansfield skillfully reflects the life of the British people in the early 20th century. "British literary works during World War I often showed the characteristics of weakness and affectation, but Mansfield successfully promoted the public's interest in reading with her unparalleled short stories like prose poetry" (Magalaner 131). Coupled with the open ending, readers can get endless reverie and thinking from her stories.

In this short story without plot, Mansfield shows us the image of a lonely marginalized woman with her unique technique. Miss Brill lives a simple and monotonous life in a foreign land. Her only leisure activity is to sit in the park for a while on Sundays. She likes to observe passers-by, "eavesdrop" on other people's dialogue, and actively express herself in this way to comfort her inner loneliness. On a bright autumn day, Miss Brill goes to the park as scheduled to perform her "performance", but she is ruthlessly despised by a pair of young lovers. Miss Brill had to accept the fact that she is not accepted by the society. At the end of the novel, she locks herself in a narrow room, showing deep sadness and loss.

This paper will discuss Mansfield's exquisite modern novel narrative art to present the image of Miss Brill, a marginalized person in society, and to show how her virtual world was established and then overthrown step by step. By analyzing the narrative techniques, we can better understand the inner flow of the protagonist, so as to reveal the theme connotation of the novel and explore the deep cultural mentality in the author's creation.

2. Preparation of the Virtual World

Miss Brill is one of Mansfield's non-plot novels, which does not introduce the image, identity and background of the protagonist in detail, nor does it describe the location of the accident clearly. Only in the first paragraph does she reveal the park "Jardins Publiques". This French word is actually to highlight that Miss Brill is in a foreign country. In combination with the ending when Miss Brill returns to the "small and dark" cupboard like room, we can infer that Miss Brill lives alone in a foreign land and reads newspapers for the elderly every week to make a living. She is a poor woman of lower class with no one to rely on. At the beginning of the novel, Mansfield begins to pave the way for Miss Brill's identity as a misfit in society.

The first paragraph describes Miss Brill's preparations for going to the park in the afternoon. It was a sunny day with a faint chill and the leaves began to fall. Then there is the first transformation of narrative perspective.

(1)Dear little thing! It was nice to feel it again. (184) [1]

(2)Little rogue! Yes, she really felt like that about it. (184)

The former part of each sentence is Miss Brill's inner monologue, and the latter part is the narrator's description. The two perspectives are smoothly connected. Mansfield uses free direct speech to express the flow of Miss Brill's consciousness, along with Miss Brill's inner thoughts to intuitively show Miss Brill's love and doting on the scarf. Free direct speech is "a form with the lightest narrative intervention and the closest narrative distance. Without the pressure of narrative context, it enables author to freely express the connotation, style and tone of characters' discourse, and enables readers to directly contact the characters' original words"(Shen 299). Miss Brill's love for her fur can be seen from the nickname obviously.

(3)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. "What has been happening to me?" said the sad little eyes. (184)

The first paragraph is also full of action descriptions and Mansfield gives the scarf life with personification techniques. The fur is Miss Brill's object of communication and close friend. Nearly half of the first paragraph shows the intimate relationship between Miss Brill and the fur scarf. It is not only a warm tool, but also her spiritual comfort and companionship. Moreover, Miss Brill can only interact and communicate with this fur scarf, which strengthens Miss Brill's sense of loneliness and also paves the way for the following young lovers' attack. It makes the reversal of the ending more pathetic, so as to show the estrangement and indifference between people.

In this way, Miss Brill tidied up and dressed neatly and was ready to step on the stage on time and solemnly with her unique fur. She presents herself as much as possible to complete this very important feast, as evidenced by her great efforts to clean up the fur scarf. This demonstrates the loveliness of Miss Brill's personality and the sadness of being alone, and strengthens the ironic effect of the ending on the indifferent society.

3. Performance of the Virtual World

The process of watching others in the park actually reveals that Miss Brill wants to participate in society and even thinks she is already a member of this stage. In her consciousness, she is an indispensable part. For example: "She was sure it would be repeated. It was; she lifted her head

and smiled”(185). She has always paralyzed herself by creating a fact that she is the protagonist of life, and is proud and excited that she can accurately grasp the ups and downs of music. This undoubtedly implies Miss Brill’s strong sense of belonging and identity, which is Miss Brill’s idealized world.

(4)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. (186-187)

As a bystander, Miss Brill observes other old people in the park and has a sense of superiority. She believes that she is not one of them, but actually it is only Miss Brill’s wishful thinking. This fluency of writing on the one hand shows that Miss Brill is so immersed in her thoughts that she doesn’t even realize that she is one of those lonely and eccentric old people. On the other hand, it may also imply that marginalized people like Miss Brill are pouring into every corner of the city like water, waiting for people to pierce the tragic fact. Like the old people sitting on the park bench, they are all similar to Miss Brill.

Shen Dan divides narrative perspectives into four categories: “zero perspective or unlimited perspective, that is, the traditional omniscient perspective, internal perspective, first person external perspective and third person external perspective”(218). In *Miss Brill*, Mansfield combines the internal perspective with the third person external perspective to form the blending of external behavior and inner thoughts. At the same time, through the use of free indirect speech, readers can naturally touch Miss Brill’s inner psychological movements.

The article describes what she sees and thinks from Miss Brill’s perspective. But the narrator betrayed her unintentionally and slowly unveiled the real world. “Mansfield’s narrator is unique because she often shuttles between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, and always appears in front of other characters and readers as ‘other’ or ‘alternative’”(Jiang 9). There are many overlaps between inner monologue and third person external perspective in the article:

(5)Dear me! Miss Brill didn’t know whether to admire that or not! (187)

(6)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. (188)

(7)No wonder! Miss Brill nearly laughed out loud. She was on the stage. (189)

This is Mansfield’s unique stream of consciousness, that is, the stream of consciousness with feminine temperament. “Mansfield uses the stream of consciousness to express the separation between the individual and the external environment. This separation appears in almost every Mansfield novel”(Fullbrook 17). With Mansfield’s ingenious handling, the inner distance between readers and Miss Brill is getting closer, and readers can really participate in her inner thoughts, which breaks the traditional narrative structure. The article mixes the narrator’s voice with the protagonist’s inner voice, and presents Miss Brill’s inner fluidity with a brisk pace. Not even a word is superfluous, which manifests a sense of nature and reality.

4. Collapse of the Virtual World

Miss Brill’s sense of social identity is false. The young lovers broke the beautiful situation of Miss Brill’s self construction in an extremely cruel way. Her dramatic important identity only exists in her conception. The appearance of young lovers implies an influx of contradictory forces, one is Miss Brill’s pleasant and enjoyable reverie, the other is the ruthless and cruel reality.

“The change from fantasy to reality and the resulting sense of disillusionment constitute a major feature of the narrative mode of *Miss Brill*” (Zhao 120). In the ending, which is different from the previous text, Mansfield switches to the direct speech without Miss Brill’s inner thoughts, giving readers great imagination space. Mansfield only presents in an objective and calm tone the way that Miss Brill used to relax and reward herself—to buy a slice of honey-cake. If there were almonds, she would be very lucky. This simple ordinary daily behavior shows us the image of a lovely lady who lives a simple life but is extremely easy to be satisfied.

Then through a series of action descriptions, from passing the baker’s by, climbing the stairs, entering her small and dark room to sitting down on the red eiderdown and closing the box, it can be said that it is done in one smooth motion, as if hiding in an unknown corner in order to cover up their own shame and chagrin. Miss Brill put the scarf in the box “quickly” “without looking” at it. Finally, she “heard something crying”, which fully demonstrates Miss Brill’s strong sense of shame after her beautiful fantasy was exposed. At the same time, the scarf has changed from a soul companion to a meaningless old thing, and Miss Brill’s loneliness and disillusionment extend indefinitely with the closure of the box.

Direct speech uses quotation marks to record the character’s discourse original and retain its various characteristics. The direct speech directly and strongly breaks the heroine’s dream and resolutely pulls Miss Brill back to the cold and lonely real world. It was a pair of young people who served to expose her beautiful fantasies, in contrast to the aging Miss Brill. The young man blamed Miss Brill for his lover’s rejection for no reason. They used vulgar words such as “stupid old thing” and “silly old mug” to describe the woman who did nothing. The adjectives “old”, “mug” and “silly” sharply and ruthlessly abused Miss Brill from three aspects: age, appearance and mental state.

Of course, it is not only the young man who made a fatal attack on Miss Brill, but also another girl. Her attack on Miss Brill is even more crucial—“It’s her fu-ur which is so funny. It’s exactly like a fried whiting”(190). It is not difficult to see from the word “fried” that the scarf is yellowish and may not be so soft. It is evident that this spiritual consolation with personality is of great importance to Miss Brill, but it is a funny, dirty and cheap thing in the eyes of others. The strong contrast highlights the sadness of Miss Brill as the marginalized person in society.

Miss Brill just sat quietly in the park, enjoying the wonderful world in her eyes and participating in the life script she conceived, but she was disturbed by these two arrogant young people. The young lovers fully showed their prejudice and contempt, which virtually hurt the lady who could have been optimistic in the pursuit of happiness. The dislike attitude of the young couple towards her completely shattered her positive, optimistic and enthusiastic heart, caused ruthless damage to her own world, and finally had to return to the repressive real society. Miss Brill could have been unaware of her sadness and fully participated in the society in her favorite way. The ruthless exposure was the harm of others to her. It is not difficult to see Mansfield’s deep sympathy for Miss Brill. Through the reverse tragic end, Mansfield shows the complex connotation of human nature and the sharp criticism of society.

5. Conclusion

Throughout the full text of *Miss Brill*, it is clear that the novel presents a forced awakening road of a marginalized woman in society. “The protagonist feels her happiness, then an accidental event breaks this happiness, and finally the protagonist is aware of her unhappiness”(Xu 192). The original happiness was shattered. Although the women at the lower social class struggled to survive, they could not escape the shackles of fate. Miss Brill works hard and tries her best to pursue the happiness she longs for, but she was finally excluded by the society, and her meager sense of belonging finally turned into dust. Her heroine’s compromise on fate reflects

Mansfield's profound understanding of the society at that time: this old woman can't integrate into the "other" society at all.

The tragic color in Mansfield's novels is inseparable from her life experience. Her short life is full of ups and downs and provides a lot of materials for her literary creation. At the age of 15, Mansfield left her hometown of New Zealand to study in London and embarked on the road of literature. Choosing to settle in a foreign country not only gradually alienated Mansfield from her family, but also brought her a strong sense of loneliness and wandering. The misfortune of emotional life, the pain of abortion and the torture of disease can all be found in her novels. Meanwhile, her exquisite short stories also reflect the characteristics of the times and condense the meaning of history.

In fact, this novel is also the reflection of Mansfield herself: Mansfield had no choice but to regard herself as an outsider. She has been exploring her identity all her life, drifting and sliding. Her contradictory identity is highlighted in the novel, which is also the source of the infinite charm of her works. Through the overlapping of perspectives, Katherine Mansfield successfully depicts the inner world of a marginalized person, reveals her sympathy and understanding for this group of people, and satirizes the cold society with criticism.

References

- [1] The selected texts in the paper are all from: Mansfield, Katherine. *The Garden Party, and Other Stories*. London: Penguin Classics, 1998. Page 184-191.
- [2] E. Wagenknecht: *Katherine Mansfield: The Critical Responses to Katherine Mansfield* (Greenwood Press, U.S. 1996).
- [3] M. Magalaner: *The Fiction of Katherine Mansfield* (Southern Illinois University Press, U.S.A 1971).
- [4] K. Mansfield: *The Garden Party, and Other Stories* (Penguin Classics, U.S. 1998).
- [5] D. Shen: *Research on Narratology and Novel Stylistics* (Peking University Press, China 2004).
- [6] H. Jiang: *Contradictory Identity in Katherine Mansfield's Works* (China Social Sciences Press, China 2004).
- [7] K. Fullbrook: *Katherine Mansfield* (Indiana University Press, U.S.A 1986).
- [8] W.L. Zhao: *A Study of Katherine Mansfield's Novels* (China Social Sciences Press, China 2013).
- [9] H. Xu: *A Study of English Short Stories: Katherine Mansfield* (Science Press, China 2013).