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TEACHING "MISS BRILL"

PETER THORPE

I have had some success—and a great deal of pleasure—teaching Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill" to freshmen. It's a good story with which to answer the objection that "nothing happens"; and it's a good one with which to demonstrate the use of irony and symbolism.

On the surface, nothing does happen to Miss Brill. She goes to the Jardins Publiques, is insulted, and returns home. But not very far under the surface, Mansfield makes Miss Brill's mind ascend through a hierarchy of unrealities, beginning with the heroine's imagining her shoddy fur-piece a "rogue," and ending with the English teacher (unfortunately the occupation has a connotation of plodding dullness) envisioning herself as an important actress in a grand play. What happens in the story is that with each main event Miss Brill's mind moves higher and higher up the hierarchy of unrealities, until she has reached a point from which she can only fall with a thump back to the hard ground of the real world of her humdrum life.

Mansfield's chief problem was to elevate Miss Brill so that she could fall. The writer had to start near the bottom, close to reality. Had the heroine been *introduced* with her mind too far from the actual, she wouldn't have been as credible or as human as she is, and the story wouldn't have had its poignancy.

As I said, the first stage in the hierarchy of unrealities is the bit about the fur. This is innocent enough, a lonely lady having a fondness for a garment. There is just enough divorce from objectivity in her personifying the fur as a "rogue" to make us realize that here is a character who is not averse to wandering in the realms of fancy.

But her imaginative coloring of what she sees next is a little more preposterous. She views the park band as if she were a child at a circus; it is not a group of hired musicians, but rather a single, responsive, and very sensitive creature: "it didn't care how it played if there weren't any strangers present." Miss Brill is ignorant of music; she doesn't know whether the " 'flutey' bit" will be repeated, and the "bit" to her is "a little chain of bright drops," not music. The band, the music and the rooster-like conductor are merely raw materials for the dramatizations of Miss Brill's mind. In a public park she can glorify the entire experience of listening to band music as easily as she glorified, in the privacy of her room, a piece of fur.

The next stage in the hierarchy of unrealities is that of the "ermine toque." The stretch of entrances and exits between the park band and the ermine is not really an imaginative flight of Miss Brill, but rather a series of short, sharp observations which the writer has inserted to set the trafficking atmosphere of the park and to delineate the snooping, eavesdropping, and cavilling nature of this lonely spinster.

The episode of the "ermine toque and a gentleman in grey," as it is interpreted by Miss Brill, is considerably more preposterous than her coloring of her fur and the orchestra. The woman in the ermine hat is obviously a prostitute who is propositioning the gentleman; but to the heroine she is merely a nice lady whose attempt to be friendly is rebuffed by a not-nice man. Miss Brill is sympathetic with the prostitute, but it is an unreal sympathy for she has not seen the woman for what she is. The falseness of this sympathy is accented by Miss Brill's use of the orchestra as an instrument of sentimentality:

> But even the band seemed to know what she [the prostitute] was feeling and played more softly, played tenderly, and the drum beat, "The Brute! The Brute!" over and over.

And now Miss Brill reaches the top of the hierarchy of unrealities. She literally believes she is an actress, a not unimportant one, in a splendid play:

> They were all on the stage. . . . They were acting. . . . She was on the stage.

These flat statements leave little doubt that for the spinster the drama of the park is

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a fact. She feels that all the strangers, herself included, will sing harmoniously, and that through their singing a sympathetic communication will be established. But once more the sympathy is divorced from reality:

> Yes, we understand, we understand, she thought
> —though what they understood she didn't know.

After the preparatory "singing," enter the hero and heroine. Miss Brill has elevated herself to such a high scaffold of imagination that it takes only a few remarks from these young people to topple her to the reality of her dull little life. And since trivialities are paramount with Miss Brill, the fact that she skips her Sunday "slice of honey-cake" is enough to tell us that the plunge to reality has shattered her.

Now each of these stages in the hierarchy of unrealities has its irony, and the irony always arises out of the contradiction between the actual and Miss Brill's imagination. The fur is a "rogue" to Miss Brill; a rogue is an adventurer, and adventure is the very thing that lacks in the life of this English teacher. Less piercing is the irony in the way she sees the band; the hired park musicians, mechanically performing their duties, probably preferring not to work on Sundays, are rolled into a single, sensitive personality. As for the "ermine toque," we might even surmise that that piece of fur is in better condition than the "rogue" on Miss Brill's shoulders. And the ermine is a *real* adventurer. It is ironic that Miss Brill sees the ermine hat and its wearer as something far less adventuresome than her own dull fur and her own dull life.

But the irony is more complex, almost convoluted, at the top of the hierarchy of unrealities. Miss Brill is *not* an actress in two senses: she is literally not an actress, and she is ultimately not an actress in the drama in her mind, for the remarks of the young couple deprive her of her part: " 'Why does she come here at all—who wants her?' " The young man's second question is entirely rhetorical; nobody wants Miss Brill. She has no part in any drama, no part in the drama of real life and, at this climactic point in the story, no part even in the drama of her fancy, for she has fallen back to reality.

Yet in two other senses Miss Brill *is* an actress. To the people who frequent the park she probably appears a bit hammy. She thinks she listens without appearing to listen, but the young people who insult her know that she is an eavesdropper: " 'Why doesn't she keep her silly old mug at home?' " As she lifts her head and smiles or as her eyes fill with tears in response to the distorted cues of her imagination, she must indeed be a curious sight. We can be pretty sure she is being watched as much as she is watching.

Miss Brill is also an actress in the sense that she performs before the audience of herself. She looks on with fascination as she sees herself modestly confiding to "the old invalid gentleman" that she has been "an actress for a long time."

Along with the irony in each stage of the hierarchy of unrealities there is an element of symbolism which helps to support not only the stage in which it occurs but the whole story. The most important of these elements of course is the heroine's fur. It has virtually a one-to-one correspondence to all that Miss Brill aspires to, for it is male, it is adventuresome, and it provides some sort of sensual, if not sexual, satisfaction: "She could have taken it off and laid it in her lap and stroked it." But more important, the fur is a substitute for the society, the love, sympathy, and understanding which are absent from Miss Brill's life. The fur actually parallels her experience; it comes out of a dark little box just as she comes out of a dark little "cupboard" of a room. It has taken a knock on the nose just as she is to take a knock on the nose at the climax: " 'Why doesn't she keep her silly old *mug* at home?' " (Readers who don't think it would be pushing it too far to point out that a brill and a whiting are both types of European fish may look at James W. Gargano's note in item ten of *The Explicator*, volume XIX, November 1960.) When the fur and the heroine return to their respective boxes, the "something" that she hears crying is herself and the fur. "Something" is perhaps the only possible word here, for it is both definite and indefinite enough to apply simultaneously to the damaged fur-piece and the damaged

soul of Miss Brill. One might say that symbol and referent become one in this last sentence of the story.

The symbol of the orchestra is much less specific than that of the fur, but we can be pretty sure that it functions as an objectification of Miss Brill's emotions. As seen through her mind, it trumpets her gaiety, her pity and her elation. It hardly needs to be said that the band plays consistently and that it is Miss Brill who ranges through the scale of passions.

The "ermine toque" is easier. On the one hand it suggests the process of decay in which many of the park visitors, the prostitute, and Miss Brill find themselves; the originally fine fur is now "shabby." On the other hand ermine was a material commonly used in Europe as trimming on judges' robes, and as such was a symbol of honor and purity. Here the irony is obvious.

Finally the symbol of the theater, although it isn't explicitly stated until near the end, is implicit throughout most of the story. From at least as early as the second paragraph, in which we learn of her response to the park orchestra as she sits in her " 'special' seat," it is apparent that Miss Brill considers herself a spectator of a pageant. Although she doesn't make the transition from audience to actress until near the climax, there is a hint in the beginning that she aspires to act as she costumes herself with the fur-piece in preparation for her entrance into the park.

There's the story the way I see it, a beautifully structured thing with a fine harmony of irony and symbolism. Needless to say, my students don't catch all these subtleties right away. But they all *respond* to the story, even though at first they are unaware of what they are responding to. And when they have discovered some of the elements that make the story work, they have had a worthwhile literary experience. They have Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill" in hand as a letter of introduction to some of the more aloof *Dubliners.*

VARIATION ON A THEME BY ROBINSON

EDWARD STONE

Miniver lately maunders, nips
Bottles he once spun—
Age's sad retreat from lips
To private Helicon.

FATHERS AND SONS

I gaze at them, think thoughts that lie
Far too deep for tears;
And me in turn they deify:
"Daddy can wiggle his ears!"

Chairman of the English Department at Ohio University (Athens), Professor Stone has published verse in College English, Christian Century, *and* Colorado Quarterly.