Miss Brill

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD

Katherine Mansfield was born in New Zealand to a socially prominent family and moved to England at the age of 19 to attend University, in her case Queen's College. Though originally thinking she would be a cellist, she contributed to the school newspaper, eventually becoming its editor, and began writing fiction seriously in 1906, shortly after returning to New Zealand following a tour of continental Europe. She quickly grew tired of the provincialism of New Zealand, however, and returned to London in 1908. Her most famous work, a collection of short stories called *The Garden Party* – which includes "Miss Brill" – was published just one year before she died of tuberculosis in 1923.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Miss Brill" takes place after the First World War in France. The ravages of the war had turned to a growing prosperity, as reflected by the boisterous band. But the toll had been heavy, and though the story brims with new love and young children, the older people in the story seem fatigued, possibly partially because of the difficult effects of the war.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The novels of the Russian Fyodor Dostoevsky, the English D. H. Lawrence, and especially the short stories of the Russian Anton Chekhov influenced Mansfield greatly. These writers all worked in the realist mode, which, while trying to portray the world as it is, also particularly values the idea that plot should arise from situation and character. The short, realistic, and lyrical short stories of the Irishman James Joyce in his 1914 volume *Dubliners* was probably also an influence, though Mansfield did not believe his work reached greatness.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Miss Brill
- **When Written:** 1920
- **Where Written:** France
- **When Published:** November 26, 1920
- **Literary Period:** Realism, modernism
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Unspecified town, Jardins Publique, France
- **Climax:** A boy calls Miss Brill a "fried whiting"
- **Antagonist:** The boy and girl, or society at large
- **Point of View:** Third-person limited (Miss Brill)

EXTRA CREDIT

Her own editor. Katherine Mansfield was an editor of the magazine in which "Miss Brill" story was first published, *The Athenaeum*.

New Zealand, with an emphasis on new. Katherine Mansfield called her place of birth, New Zealand, "a little land with no history."

PLOT SUMMARY

Miss Brill is a middle-aged woman who spends her days as a teacher for children and as a reader for an old man who hardly recognizes her existence. Every Sunday she wears her shabby **fur coat** to the French public park called Jardins Publiques. She speaks to the coat as if speaking to another person—an act that becomes the reader's first indication of her true loneliness and alienation. Miss Brill sits in the stands watching and listening to the band and to the people who sit around her in the stands and play on the grass nearby. All the things she sees and overhears fascinate her, and she is so curious as to eavesdrop on people without their knowing. This week however, a fine old man and a big old woman sitting near her do not speak, and she notices how the people in the stands with her all look kind of the same, all of them "odd, silent, nearly all old."

Continuing to eavesdrop on people nonetheless, she sees a gentleman in grey and a woman who is identified by her clothing: an **ermine torque**. This couple makes small talk while Miss Brill thinks of what they might say, what might happen, even as she realizes the woman's hat is "shabby". However, the couple does not satisfy her, because they part ways before anything meaningfully interesting can be said. Immediately she notices an old man who nearly gets knocked down by a group of young girls. At this point Miss Brill marvels at how "fascinating" her eavesdropping is, and she begins to develop a theory that encompasses everyone in front of her. She thinks that everyone is "all on the stage", and that everyone here is an actor. She believes that she herself also plays a role in this play, an important role that would be missed were she not there to play it. She thinks about telling the old man to whom she reads: "Yes, I have been an actress for a long time."

A boy and a girl take a seat in the stands, replacing the fine old man and big old woman. The boy and the girl look wealthy and in love, but are in the middle of an argument. Soon the two of them notice Miss Brill and wonder aloud why anyone would desire her presence in the park, call her a "stupid old thing",

make fun of her old fur coat, and compare it to a "fried whiting" (a cooked fish). Miss Brill leaves soon after, not buying her usual slice of honey-cake on the way. When she arrives home, she puts her fur coat into its box "without looking," but "when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Miss Brill – The protagonist of the story, which is named after her. She is an unmarried woman – a spinster according to the time and culture the story depicts – who works as a teacher as well as a newspaper reader for an old man. In both of these aspects of her life she feels bereft of meaning and connection: the children don't listen to her and the man doesn't seem to care whether she reads to him or not. For this reason she comes to the park every Sunday to watch both the band perform and the people playing as they listen to the band. Over the course of the story she imagines herself as part of an elaborate stage production in which she herself plays a vital role, but an encounter with a boy and girl who dismiss both her and the **fur coat** she cherishes – but that is actually quite shabby – forces her to reassess her place in the world and makes her retreat back home to her renewed loneliness and alienation.

Ermine toque and Gentleman in grey – Ermine is a type of white fur and a toque is a type of woman's hat. Miss Brill identifies the woman by nothing more than her clothes, thus placing utmost importance on this aspect because she understands clothes as a mark of one's importance in and engagement with society. Though the ermine toque and gentleman in grey speak pleasantly with one another, Miss Brill notices how the woman's hair is faded into the same color as her hat, which is also worn-out.

Fine old man and big old woman – This pair sits near Miss Brill on the stands, though they do not talk to each other and so Miss Brill has no one to listen to. They are dressed nicely and elegantly, but, just like everyone else in the stands, they seem tired and aged. After they leave, the boy and girl sit in their spot.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Boy and Girl – Two young adults. They are a well-dressed couple that sit near Miss Brill and quickly and loudly state that they wish Miss Brill wasn't there. They then make fun of Miss Brill's **fur coat**, and call her a "**fried whiting**."

Old Man – Miss Brill reads to this man four days a week from the newspaper, but he hardly notices her presence, and does not seem to be listening.

Englishman and his wife – A couple on whom Miss Brill eavesdropped the week before. They argued over spectacles (i.e. eyeglasses), because the wife refused every option available to her. Miss Brill was so frustrated by the wife's ridiculous behavior that she wished to shake her.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

LONELINESS AND ALIENATION

Miss Brill, the protagonist of the story, is a spinster – a word used, at the time of the publication of the story, to refer to an unmarried woman – who spends her days teaching schoolchildren and reading the newspaper to a half-dead man who cares little for her presence. Miss Brill yearns for conversation, yet both the students and the old man don't listen to her.

Her weekly visits to the park are a result of her loneliness and alienation and her desire to exist and interact with a wider world. At the park, she watches and listens to the people and goings on around her and in that way feels like a part of the community. And though she is essentially alone in the stands—an old man and old woman sit next to her, but don't speak—she finds a way to include herself in what she watches. She sees all of the people, in their separate interactions, as being part of an elaborate stage production. And she thinks of the people in the stands, including herself, not as audience members but rather as performers too. She thinks of herself as being such a part of the production that if she were missing someone would be bound to notice. Indeed, she thinks that she might tell the old man who cares little for her presence that "I have been an actress for a long time."

Yet the only conversation Miss Brill holds in the entire story is with her fur coat. She is not a part of the community, and the reader understands this with the same pang of pain that Miss Brill feels when she overhears the boy and the girl mock her fur coat as old and shabby and speak about her as if she has no right to sit next to them. In this way, the community she thinks she belongs to rejects her, and Miss Brill retreats back to her apartment and lonely life. Her curiosity and desire to connect makes her vulnerable and ends up leading her to realize her alienation from the people she saw as a source of life's excitement.

DELUSION AND REALITY

"Miss Brill" alerts us to the title character's tendency towards delusion and fantasy from the very start, when she starts speaking fondly to her fur coat. Miss Brill is not actually out of her mind, but she is desperate for communication with others. In order to feel a part of something, she goes to the park each week, where she enjoys watching all the people who come to enjoy the band and play on the field. Though Miss Brill is not delusional about what she sees, nor does she speculate much about what she hears—she takes things as she they come—she does begin to feel how connected everyone is to one another, that everyone is a player on a stage, and that she herself is part of the play. Indeed, she thinks that people would miss her if she were not to be there.

However, Mansfield shows Miss Brill to be rather self-deluded about her place in the community when a boy and girl dismiss her, saying, "Who wants her?" The couple's exchange forces Miss Brill to face the reality of her alienation, and the illusion that Miss Brill builds around herself to feel connected to others comes apart. Through the cruelty of others, Miss Brill begins to understand her own self-delusion. And yet, as the story ends with Miss Brill sadly packing away her fur coat, the story asks the reader to think about how important it is to be realistic about one's own life, and whether some delusion is necessary for happiness.

CONNECTEDNESS

Miss Brill, during the time she spends in the park, constantly looks for connections between people. She notices how two young girls and two soldiers meet each other and laugh. She sees a boy picking up a bunch of flowers a woman has dropped. She notices a woman in an ermine torque and a gentleman speaking to each other and imagines what they are saying to one another. These are not Miss Brill's imaginings; they are real interactions between separate and different individuals who nonetheless mean something to one another. The theory that Miss Brill develops, that everyone belongs to part of a tremendous stage production, remains a valid way to understand and visualize how everyone together makes up a community or a society.

Miss Brill has a strong desire for people not only to be connected to one another, but also for these connections to be positive. The week before an Englishman and his wife were arguing about something so silly that Miss Brill wanted to shake the woman. What happens within the connections Miss Brill observes has a visceral effect on her. Put another way, even though Miss Brill deludes herself about her own importance in the scene around her, Miss Brill herself feels connected to the people she watches. That feeling of connectedness also isn't a delusion: she *feels* connected, which makes it real. To some extent, that the other characters don't feel as connected to her doesn't matter, doesn't lessen the reality of the connection *she* feels. Of course, once the cruelty and rudeness of the boy and girl makes Miss Brill view herself through the eyes of others and get the sense that those others don't feel connected to her, she retreats in pain from what to her now seem like unrequited connections. The pain Miss Brill feels, then, asserts both the importance of feeling connection to human beings and how trying to forge such connections makes one vulnerable. At the same time, it is worth noting how much more noble and exciting Miss Brill's sense of a universe of connections is to the callous cruelty of the boy and the girl. The story's power comes not just from the tragedy of Miss Brill's pain after realizing how others see her and then shutting herself away, but also from the ruin of the beauty of her vision of the connectedness of all people.

YOUTH AND AGE

Miss Brill's strange behavior of talking to her fur coat can be seen as her nostalgia for a lost youth, when her coat was new and she was at the hopeful age of marriageability (in Mansfield's time women were married at quite a young age, and not getting married was so looked down upon that spinsters were pitied and shut out of a great deal of social life). As Miss Brill sits in the stands she notices that everyone sitting around her looks just about the same: "odd, silent, nearly all old." These are people who have been relegated to the sidelines, marginalized and ignored by society, and the story connects that marginalization with being old.

Though Miss Brill's description of these people could just as well be applied to herself, through much of the story she does not recognize this. The story can be seen as Miss Brill's awakening toward her understanding of her irrelevance and marginalization in society – her oldness. The silent old woman and old man next to her leave and, in their stead, come a young girl and boy who dismiss Miss Brill, call her a "fried whiting" – a cooked fish. This brushoff represents the way generations succeed each other, and how the young often disdain the old. At the end of the story, when she places her fur coat back in the box, the action suggests a kind of retirement for the coat, which Miss Brill finally sees as old and worn—just like her.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

FUR COAT AND GARMENTS

At the start of the story, Miss Brill speaks fondly to her coat as if it is alive. This strange behavior can be seen as reflecting her nostalgia for a lost youth, when her coat

was new and she was at the hopeful age of marriageability At the end of the story, she puts it back into its box, "without looking", and "she thought she heard something crying". This arc from fond engagement with her **fur coat** to her final rejection of it mirrors how she feels about her own place in society over the course of the story: at first she thinks she is part of the community, a participant in the scene she sees around her, but at the end of the story, after she is rejected by the boy, she concludes that she is not important to anyone else at all. The fur coat in which she delights, she sees in that moment, is actually rather shabby and old, and Miss Brill puts away her coat with the same callousness exhibited by the boy, while its "crying" reflects her own despair. Garments in general in the story – such as the ermine toque, the conductor's coat, or the boy and girl's beautiful clothes – serve as a marker of class and importance in the story: if you are not well-dressed, you are not well-regarded either.

FRIED WHITING

The "**fried whiting**" – or a cooked fish – does not actually appear in the story as a physical entity, but the boy uses the image as a way to swiftly describe and dismiss Miss Brill. Thus, the fried whiting is invisible just as Miss Brill is in her society. The deadness of the fish (for it is cooked), in turn, expresses the irrelevance and nonexistence of Miss Brill for those around her – no one will miss her if she is not there. Additionally, a whiting fish is rather unattractive and, because it is common, unremarkable; this suggests how Miss Brill blends into her society: she is at once unseen and also undesirable.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Garden Party and Other Stories* published in 1991.

Miss Brill Quotes

❝ And when she breathed, something light and sad—no, not sad, exactly—something gentle seemed to move in her bosom.

Related Characters: Miss Brill

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 298

Explanation and Analysis

As Miss Brill sets out for her weekly outing to Jardins Publique, she considers the fur she has chosen to wear, and here reflects the emotions involved in taking it out of its box earlier in the afternoon.

Miss Brill's "light and sad" feeling here indicates the harsh reality that, like Miss Brill herself, the fur has aged past its prime, and what once might have been beautiful has withered away. Also like Miss Brill, who lives unmarried and alone, the fur has been long stored away and isolated. The harsh reality is that both Miss Brill and the fur have grown old and lonely.

Despite her feelings of sadness and nostalgia over this reality, Miss Brill is quick and purposeful in pretending that her feelings of sadness are in fact, something else, something "gentle." By denying herself the truth, she resists feeling the brunt of the reality that surrounds her and is able to go the gardens and feel content in her fur. Thus, we learn early on that it takes some level of pretending, some level of fantasy, for Miss Brill to process the world around her without despairing.

❝ She had become really quite expert, she thought, at listening as though she didn't listen, at sitting in other people's lives just for a minute while they talked round her.

Related Characters: Miss Brill

Related Themes:

Page Number: 299

Explanation and Analysis

Though eavesdropping is often associated with nosiness and gossipy behavior, Miss Brill's expertise with it is a means to cope with her own loneliness and alienation from the people around her.

In Miss Brill's constant play between delusion and reality, the fact is that she is almost entirely excluded from the people around her. To feel at all connected to them, she must "sit in" for a minute on their conversations, which circle "round her" but never include her.

Miss Brill's eavesdropping gives her the comfort of human contact without having to risk social rejection. As a perpetual eavesdropper, never setting out to make conversation herself, she can delude herself into thinking herself connected to other people without confronting the truth, which betrays otherwise.

> Often people sat on the benches and green chairs, but they were nearly always the same, Sunday after Sunday, and—Miss Brill had often noticed—there was something funny about nearly all of them. 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!

Related Characters: Fine old man and big old woman

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 300

Explanation and Analysis

Miss Brill's perception of the city's elders is ironic in its condescension: every measured observation she makes about this "odd, silent...old" group of people who frequent the gardens every Sunday is equally applicable to her. Like the other old people, she lives alone in a "dark little room", and her criticism of them as having "something funny" about them is exactly how the young couple demeans her at the story's end.

No matter the apparent irony, there is a sense that Miss Brill's criticism is deliberately harsh, for although she is really among people she criticizes, the act of criticizing itself is a means of distance and dissociation from this group. By adopting the attitude of younger people, Miss Brill is deluding herself into thinking herself among them, effectively denying the own oddness, silence, and elderliness that they perceive in her.

> The ermine toque was alone; she smiled more brightly than ever. But even the band seemed to know what she was feeling and played more softly...What would she do? What was going to happen now?

Related Characters: Ermine toque and Gentleman in grey

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 300

Explanation and Analysis

Like eavesdropping, Miss Brill's intense people-watching in the park is one of the ways she attempts to connect with others and counter her loneliness. Here, she watches a woman, reduced by Miss Brill to the ermine toque (small hat) she wears, solicit a gentleman who immediately rejects her.

Following the rejection, Miss Brill romanticizes the scene, dramatically wondering what the girl will do next or what will happen next, as if what she has witnessed is part of an entertaining play. Her observation that the band is playing to musical score to reflect the woman's rejection further hints at Miss Brill's fantasized theatricality.

In the bustle of the garden and its many people, it is important to note that Miss Brill noticed this moment in particular. It is likely she identifies with the ermine toque, who not only also wears fur, but experiences social rejection--the very thing Miss Brill avoids through her self-delusions and is forced to confront at the story's end, when she too is rejected.

> Oh, how fascinating it was...It was exactly like a play.

Related Characters: Miss Brill (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 301

Explanation and Analysis

Following the recent entertainment of the ermine toque's rejection, Miss Brill immerses herself deeper and deeper in the pleasures of people-watching and eavesdropping. Whether the interactions she sees between people are pleasant or not, she romanticizes the "fascinating" goings-on of the garden as a play.

By transforming the garden into a play, Miss Brill not only envelopes the world around her into her gentler fantasy--fantasy being her only means of coping with reality--but also attempts to solidify her place in the community around her. If the whole garden is a play, she is not just an outsider or spectator, but a true part of the "performance" around her, a more special, more theatrical design than the reality could hope to be.

> They were all on the stage. They weren't only the audience, not only looking on; they were acting. Even she had a part and came every Sunday.

Related Characters: Miss Brill, Ermine toque and Gentleman in grey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 301

Explanation and Analysis

By reworking the reality of the garden and its people into the fantasy of a play, Miss Brill is able to discard her sense of loneliness, casting herself as one of many in a community of "actors." Miss Brill's perception of herself as having a part in the scene around her--a recurring part at that--not only connects her with others, but also gives her a sense of importance among them.

Just as all parts in a play, however small, serve some integral function to the whole show, so too has Miss Brill reinvented herself as essential to the lives of the people around her. Under the guise of a play and actors, Miss Brill is able to perceive herself as necessary and special to the community, when in reality, seemingly no one else perceives her in this light.

"Yes, I have been an actress for a long time."

Related Characters: Miss Brill (speaker), Old Man

Related Themes:

Page Number: 301

Explanation and Analysis

Apart from her Sunday outings to the gardens, Miss Brill's only venues of interaction with other people are through her job as a teacher and in her volunteering to read the newspaper four times a week to an elderly invalid gentleman who, for the most part, disregards her presence.

Delighted in her transformation of the Jardins Publique into a play and herself into an actress, Miss Brill fantasizes about the pleasure she will take in revealing to her pupils and the gentleman that, all this time they have failed to notice her, she has been an actress. To the invalid gentleman, who, due to his sickness, particularly treats Miss Brill as if she is invisible, she here imagines him being deeply impressed, if not amazed, by her status as an actress.

At their core, these fantasies have little to do with any desire to be an actress, but rather to be appreciated, to be noticed as special by others, two things Miss Brill does not experience in her everyday life.

"Why does she come here at all—who wants her? Why doesn't she keep her silly old mug at home?"
"It's her fu-ur which is so funny," giggled the girl. "It's exactly like a fried whiting."

Related Characters: Boy and Girl (speaker), Miss Brill

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 302

Explanation and Analysis

Contented by the lull of the band, her imagined connection and mutual understanding with the other "actors", a peaceful Miss Brill admires the young couple, whom she calls the "hero and heroine" of her fantasized play, as they sit down near her to listen to the music.

When the young woman playfully rebuffs the boy's advances, the boy concludes that it's the presence of Miss Brill, whom he calls "that stupid old thing," that makes his partner uncomfortable, and the two joke crudely about her age. The young woman likens Miss Brill's fur, which had hence served as a source of happiness and pride, to "a fried whiting," pointing out the reality of age and ugliness Miss Brill had tried to counter with fantasy.

In this pivotal moment, Miss Brill's carefully constructed fantasy of connectedness and self-importance cracks, and we witness the reality of how harshly people perceive her. Not unlike her earlier description of the elderly people in the garden, others reduce her to a funny, old, and unwanted "thing." The disconnect between how Miss Brill has aggressively portrayed herself versus how others view her suggests that she is aware of her obsolete position in society-- in this city, no one has much value or respect for an old spinster-- and that all her fantasizing has, in fact, been her only way of achieving happiness in a society that painfully excludes her.

If there was an almond it was like carrying home a tiny present—a surprise—something that might very well not have been there.

Related Characters: Miss Brill

Related Themes:

Page Number: 302

Explanation and Analysis

Following the young couple's cruelty, a crestfallen Miss Brill takes off for home, forgoing the baker's where she usually stops after to treat herself to slices of honey-cake, which sometimes contain the unexpected "tiny present" of an almond inside.

The act of treating herself and romanticizing something as everyday as the occasional almond as being a surprise gift to her, we witness another example of Miss Brill's desire to feel her own specialness, to cling to whatever small pleasures are available to her.

The fact that she intentionally skips the baker's indicates that Miss Brill no longer seeks the delusion of specialness or importance, as she has just been forced by the young couple in the garden to confront the reality of her own inconsequentiality. To pursue another fantasy--even the small one of a surprise almond in a honey-cake--now feels like a futile thing to do.

> She unclasped the necklet quickly; quickly, without looking, laid it inside. But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying.

Related Characters: Miss Brill

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 302

Explanation and Analysis

In contrast to the beginning of the story, where Miss Brill slowly and tenderly removes the fur from its box and fantasizes it to have a life and beauty of it's own, here, she stuffs it away in haste without so much as looking at the garment.

The change in Miss Brill's perception of the fur demonstrates her transition from comforting delusions to harsher reality. Like the funny, "fried-whiting" fur in its box, Miss Brill is old and alone in a city that seems to celebrate only its youth.

Whereas in the beginning, Miss Brill chalked down the "light and sad" feeling in her chest to "gentleness," in these final lines, she is truly despairing, unable to turn the harder truths of age into more easily digestible euphemisms.

Despite the fullness of Miss Brill's transition from delusions into reality, the close-third narration suggests that she still is attempting to soften the blow of her sadness via the ambiguity of who is crying. The line in which Miss Brill "thought she heard something crying" suggests she wants to attribute the crying to the fur rather than herself (if she is physically crying, that is). The purpose of this delusion--an inanimate fur cannot cry--is not to brighten the world around her, as were her past delusions, but to deflect her shame and embarrassment over the truths she now has no choice but to confront.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

MISS BRILL

Miss Brill, sitting in the Jardins Publiques (Public Gardens) in a French town on a marvelously fine day, wears a **fur coat**. It is autumn. She touches her coat repeatedly, her "dear little thing", which she had taken out of storage and "rubbed the life back into." She imagines talking to the fur coat and the fur coat talking back to her. There is a band playing, which plays louder and more happily than it had last Sunday, and this is because "the Season" has begun. During this time the band is more daring and less self-conscious about its playing because few people are really listening, but Miss Brill listens and notes that the conductor wears a new coat. She tries to guess which note will come next; she finds that her guess is correct.

The way that Miss Brill talks to her coat – a decidedly odd thing to do – suggests to the reader that she might be crazy. Yet the precision of her observations quickly makes it clear that she isn't really crazy, while the details about bringing her coat out of storage and "rubbing the life into it" clearly refer to Miss Brill herself as well. And so it becomes clear that Miss Brill is someone who has herself been in a kind of "storage" – who is intensely alone and lonely – and these trips to the park are what "rub the life into her." Yet her loneliness seems not entirely evident to her, and she seems to intensely love this trip to the park, and to feel a kind of power in her connection to what's going on. Whether it really is amazing that she can predict the next note, she feels *that it is.*

In her "special" seat in the stands there are only two people, a fine old man and a big old woman. Miss Brill is disappointed that they do not talk and she is unable to eavesdrop on them. Last week there had been an Englishman and his wife and they had had a dull argument about spectacles during which Miss Brill wanted to shake the woman for being silly because no spectacles seemed to please her.

Miss Brill doesn't just sit in a seat. She sits in a particular, "special" seat. On the one hand, this shows how the park-going is a ritual for her. On the other, note her sense of her own specialness. Miss Brill is remarkably curious. She tends to insert herself into the lives of others, as she judges people for what she hears. Her disappointment at the old couple's silence stems from her inability to connect with them in any meaningful way.

But Miss Brill consoles herself by looking at the lively crowd playing on the fields around the bandstand and noticing all its various activities, the little children who run around, then fall, then are helped up by their mothers. Every week Miss Brill also notices the people who are sitting on the benches and green chairs rather than playing or moving in the fields, but she finds them rather identical. "There was something funny about nearly all of them." She describes them as "odd, silent, nearly all old". They look as if "they'd just come from dark little rooms or even—even cupboards!"

Endlessly curious, Miss Brill pays very close attention to the world around her and notices the minute interactions people have with one another. Miss Brill's observation of the people in the stands shows the distinction between those in the stands and those on the field. The people in the field are all differentiated and lively, whereas those in the stands are meek, lonely, old. In one way or another, Miss Brill notices, life has passed these people by. Yet at the same time that Miss Brill makes such acute observations, it is obvious to the reader that she has no such ability to observe herself. She, too, is in the stands. But she sees herself as different from those seated around her.

Miss Brill continues watching people from her seat. There is a general happy commotion. People react to each other pleasantly. A woman drops her bouquet of flowers and a little boy picks them up for her, after which the woman throws them away. Suddenly an ermine toque [which describes a type of white fur hat] and a gentleman in grey meet in front of her and begin making small talk. This woman used to have blonde hair, but now it has turned the same color as the ermine, which Miss Brill notices is "shabby". Miss Brill wonders, "What would she do? What was going to happen now?" But the couple parts ways and Miss Brill notices a man who almost gets knocked over by four girls in their stead.

This part of the story begins to foreshadow the twist that Mansfield throws in the reader's path later on. It turns out that not every human interaction that Miss Brill notices around her is a positive one. The boy's kindness is not acknowledged, and in fact it is rebuffed. A man nearly gets knocked over. Nor are all the people glamorous: the ermine toque—the white hat that is the sole descriptor applied to a woman, as if to indicate the centrality of clothing to one's appearance and even social position—turns out to be shabby. Again note how Miss Brill's observations of others are so precise, while she has no such ability to recognize how she might appear to others.

Miss Brill thinks about how "fascinating" sitting and watching people is, how much she loves it. She compares it to a play and thinks that the sky looks like a stage prop. Then Miss Brill has an exciting idea that all the people around her "were all on the stage". She thinks that everyone around her is not only the audience of the band, but that everyoneis also in fact part of the performance. "Even she had a part and came every Sunday."It occurs to Miss Brill that if she were not there someone would notice.

Miss Brill is imaginative and optimistic about the way she sees the world. Though she has only spoken to her fur coat so far in the story, her idea of a kind of universal play displays her sense of deep connection between all people. And she asserts her own essentialness in this world as well—if all the world is a play, then every actor is important, is critical to the scene.

This theory explains for Miss Brill why she comes to the park at the same time each week – so as not to miss the performance – and why she feels a little shy when her students ask her what she does Sunday afternoons. She thinks of the old man she reads the newspaper to four days a week in the garden, and how he hardly pays attention to her, so much so that if he were dead she wouldn't be able to tell the difference. But now she knows that she is an actress, and she imagines the old man guessing this. She imagines straightening up the newspaper in her hands as if it is her script. She imagines telling him, "Yes, I have been an actress for a long time."

Miss Brill's theory about the world and everyone in it being part of an elaborate stage production offers a rationalizationfor how she spends her life. She is frustrated by her employment, and her theory gives her a way to imagine that even as she is reading to him while he ignores her, that she is at the same time part of something greater than herself. Miss Brill's self-delusion becomes more evident to the reader as she has these self-justifying, self-protective thoughts, which she does not recognize as self-justifying or self-protective.

The band pauses for a moment before continuing. Miss Brill is again reminded of a faint indescribable coldness or sadness to the music, one that makes her want to sing. It is as if everyone around her, "all the whole company", will begin singing. She thinks of how all these separate people will join the singing together, and the people on the benches will provide "a kind of accompaniment"—something that would be beautiful.

This is the pinnacle of Miss Brill's vision of connectedness. She wishes to express something that is close to her soul and that harmonizes with everyone else. Yet it is noteworthy that it is sadness in the music that makes her want to sing, and that her self-delusion remains on display as she imagines herself as singing in the primary group with the people on the field while the other people in the stands would be the "accompaniment." And, of course, this moment on the brink of everyone singing never actually results in anyone singing.

A boy and girl sit down where the old couple was sitting earlier. Miss Brill notices how well they dress and guesses they are in love. She identifies them as the heroes of the play, and invents the detail that they had just come from the boy's father's yacht. Miss Brill listens to them talking, all the while "still soundlessly singing".

The boy and the girl replace the old couple, indicating the way younger generations replace older. Miss Brill instinctively romanticizes them—she sees them as rich, glamorous heroes of the play, who are in love, because they dress nicely and because they are young, fitting the stereotype of romantic heroes in films and books. Miss Brill is attracted to their conversation and includes them in the all-inclusive theory she holds about humanity.

It turns out the boy and girl are having an argument. The girl complains that she cannot do what the boy wants. "Not here," she says. The boy asks her why she cannot and conjectures that she won't because "of that stupid old thing at the end there". Clearly speaking of Miss Brill, he questions why she might have come. "Who wants her?" he asks. Then the girl makes fun of Miss Brill's **fur coat** and compares it to a "**fried whiting**."

Nonetheless, the boy and the girl, who seem so perfect at first, turn out to be arguing; and there is an implication in their words that perhaps the argument is sexual—the boy wanting something, the girl saying not here—and not Miss Brill's romantic idealization of love. The boy, in anger, then lashes out at Miss Brill, and the two young people then unite against Miss Brill in mockery. It almost seems as if the way for them to resolve their argument is to turn against someone else. Miss Brill herself. Rejecting Miss Brill, they find a way to agree with each other. Yet in doing so they also break the romance of Miss Brill's illusion of people united in a universal play, and of her own important role in that play. Through the eyes of the boy and girl, Miss Brill finds her sense of her own specialness punctured. Her beloved fur coat is actually shabby, not unlike the ermine torque.

Usually Miss Brill will buy a slice of honey-cake on the way home. It makes a big difference to her if there is an almond or not inside because it is "like carrying home a tiny present." It's something "that might very well not have been there." When the "surprise" does come along, she usually walks home faster and feels happy. But today she doesn't buy anything and goes straight to "her room like a cupboard" and sits on her bed. She puts the **fur coat** back into its box, which was left on the bed, and "without looking" puts it inside. "But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying."

The climax of the story, the revelation to Miss Brill of how others see her, changes her. She can no longer delight in the small surprises that she waits for and thus manufactures for herself. The repetition of the "cupboard" image demonstrates that Miss Brill now sees herself as the boy and girl see her: as just another of the people in the stands, as "odd, silent, old." Her fur coat, which before seemed to connect her to a time when it was new and she was younger, now becomes a symbol of her shame and loneliness. When she presses it back into its box she commits the same sort of rejection of which she is herself a victim. No longer can she believe the illusions of inclusiveness and grandeur that always accompanied her on the way back and forth from the park every Sunday. And the sound of crying that she hears suggests that she knows that in shutting away the fur coat she is committing also to shutting herself up in her "room like a cupboard," in her lonely life.

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