

Cognitive Stylistic Approach to Characterisation in “Miss Brill” by Katherine Mansfield

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This article aims to examine the mind style of the suffering protagonist in Katherine Mansfield’s “Miss Brill” from the theoretical perspective of cognitive stylistics. The story gives an insight into the mind of the central character with her deliberate attempts to block the harsh realities around her, and the cognitive process in connection with the similarities in plot and setting. The analysis will demonstrate how cognitive stylistic approach to narrative fiction can advance literary interpretation by identifying the aspects of characterisation of fiction individuals through their language, thoughts and behaviour. By using cognitive stylistics approach to narrative fiction, the study attempts to apply this model to characterisation of the protagonist, and develop a supplement to the existing interpretations, revealing the inner conflicts that her character faces and tries to resolve.

Keywords: *Cognitive Stylistics, Mind Style, Trauma, Conceptual Integration, Wilful Ignorance*

I.0 Introduction

The present research demonstrates how a cognitive stylistic approach is suitable for the analysis of fictional minds in comparative perspective. The analysis has been conducted in the light of “a widespread cognitive turn in the history of literature” (Palmer, 2007), and aims

to address the important issues of interpretation through cognitive stylistics. The study exploits the concept of a “mind style” (Fowler, 1977) to describe the features of each individual views as cognitive in origin and include thinking, language and behavioural patterns that can be attributed to authors, narrators or characters. Considering the importance of the linguistic expressions of a particular conceptualisation of the world, the value of metaphors is emphasised as one of the most powerful tools of human cognition for the construction of mind style.

Katherine Mansfield’s stories have not been sufficiently explored from the point of view of cognitive stylistics, let alone in correlation and differentiation prospects. In particular, we shall focus on certain lexical, grammatical and syntactic representations of the protagonist’s mind style, and the idiosyncratic manifestations of their thinking and behaviour, as stipulated by dramatic conditions. The paper will demonstrate that application of cognitive linguistics to literary analysis can provide us with a set of tools to analyse the development of the individual traumatised mental functioning.

1.1. Theoretical Aspects of Fictional Minds’ Analysis

1.1.1. Cognitive Stylistics and Mind Style in Narrative Fiction

Cognitive stylistics is an advanced field on the crossroads of linguistics, cognitive science and literary studies that presupposes the integration of linguistic analysis with cognitive theories (Stockwell, 2002; Semino & Culpeper, 2002). The term suggests the combination of a clear-cut linguistic analysis with a methodological and theoretically formed examination of “the cognitive structures and processes that underlie the production and reception of language” (Semino & Culpeper, 2002). The application of cognitive stylistics to narrative fiction contributes to the understanding of fictional minds and allows not only considering fictional worlds in connection with our real-world experience, but also comparing and contrasting the personalities, habits and events. Consequently, the use of principles and methods of cognitive stylistics in literary studies provides us the tools at the interface between linguistics and psychology. In such way narrative fiction characters are analysed as “text-based mental models of possible individuals” (Margolin, 2007), which are built in a reader’s mind.

The connection between literature and psychology is supported by Margaret Freeman, who suggests that literary texts are “the products of cognizing minds” and identifies interpretations as “the products of other cognizing minds in the context of the physical and socio-cultural worlds in which they have been created and read” (Freeman, 2000). The necessity to apply “real-mind disciplines” to the study of fictional minds has been outlined by A. Palmer, who believes that readers understand fictional minds better when they consider them with the help of scholarship studies on psychology, philosophy and cognitive sciences (Palmer, 2007). At the same time, J. Culpeper argues in favour of a “dual approach” to characterisation that

forms the background of cognitive stylistics and addresses both textual information and cognitive aspects (Semino & Culpeper, 2002).

Cognitive stylistics approach is suitable to explain the linguistic construction of worldview in texts. The formation of reality in one's mind is covered by the notion of "mind style" in fiction narratives, which was coined by R. Fowler (1977) in reference to "any distinctive linguistic representation on an individual mental self" (p. 103). A number of engaging works on the functioning of fictional minds in a wide range of story include the extended analyses of a narrator's and the authorial mind styles by Halliday (1971), Bockting (1995), and Leech and Short (2007), et al. The notion of "mind style" can be accounted for to analyse the aspects of worldview of particular real or fictional individuals with similar age and/or status characteristics in comparative perspective, where those aspects that are shared and culture-dependent can be distinguished from the ones dependent on one's individual cognition and experience. In addition, non-standard thinking and behaviour can be conditioned in specific atmosphere such as external abuse, physical or mental detriment, which can account for certain deviations from norm.

The insights on fictional minds proceed from the complex network of character perspectives. Such awareness of the existence of "the other" mental functioning, and the ability for interpretation and understanding of other people's minds in the real world has been described within the Theory of Mind framework. The term has been extended and revised from psychology, where it mainly refers to the ability to understand "that others have beliefs about the world that are different from your own", to the realm of literary scholarship, where Theory of Mind has become a tool to comprehend the relations "between characters in a text, between characters in a text and readers, and between narrator and reader" (Stockwell, 2009). Since the story world of the character is presented by the narrator, there is a question of how the reader should consider the character's own voice represented from the third-person narration. In discussing the reference of narrative to psychological states of the characters – their feelings, emotions, thoughts, etc., Leech and Short (2007) make use of the notion of a "reflector" for "the person whose fictional point of view is represented" but admit that the term "focaliser" has recently become more popular and relevant for this role (p. 139). Correspondingly, this study regards the verbal and non-verbal manifestations of the main characters and assumes them to be the focalisers who represent the events and situations, and bring the reader to their inner world through the language of the narrator.

1.1.2. Metaphor and the Application of Cognitive Theories to the Study of Narrative Fiction

Considering the high value of lexical items in the representation of fictional minds, special attention is given to how the use of figurative language in general and metaphor in particular contribute to the projection and explication of fictional mind style. The comprehension of metaphor as a process of thought (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; 1999; Lakoff & Turner, 1989; et al.) gave it a central place in theories of human cognition and communication. Consequently,

metaphor has attracted particular attention in the studies of narrative fiction (Turner, 1991; Semino, 2002; Zunshine, 2006; Palmer, 2007; et al.) from linguistic, philosophical and cognitive perspectives.

Cognitive Metaphor theory (CMT) has provided a set of tools to consider metaphors in the light of individual mental functioning (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Turner, 1989). The theory can account for the correspondences between the source and target domains, but finds it difficult to explain the particular meanings of certain metaphor instantiations.

2.0 A Stylistic Analysis of “Miss Brill”

2.1 A General Overview of the Story

Widely anthologised, “Miss Brill” is considered as one of Katherine Mansfield's finest pieces of short fiction. It is a remarkably rich and innovative work that incorporates most of Mansfield's defining themes: isolation, disillusionment and the gap between expectations and reality. It is about how the heroine, a woman by the name of Miss Brill, old, desolate, probably widowed, stubbornly defies a virtually inescapable fate, yet is finally compelled to concede defeat. The plot of the story is simple, and the themes are by no means uncanny. What merits our attention is, indeed, the development of the protagonists’ idiosyncratic mental functioning during the formation and realisation of the ultimate worthlessness of her existence.

2.2 Analysis

In Mansfield’s “Miss Brill” the reader is introduced to the protagonist from the very beginning of the story, when she is seen in her state of deliberate ignorance towards the stagnant state of affairs in her life. Among the diverse salient stylistic features of the text, what particularly deserves attention, on the lexical level, is the writer’s marked preference for words and expressions, with vague meanings, provoking vague feelings. Recurring throughout the story, these expressions help create an aura of drifting and uncertainty, giving a clue into the wilful ignorance, confusion and rather reluctance of the protagonist to realise the permanent sadness of her life. It seems that throughout the story of *Miss Brill*, no deliberate effort is made towards a direct portrait of the heroine’s predicament. Little is said about the sordidness of her “little”, “dark” room, a room “like a cupboard” (Mansfield, 1981). Throughout the story, the reader can discern the confused and fragmented mind of Miss Brill by noticing the sense of unease haunting the narrative throughout. As a matter of fact, ever since the point the story unfolds, an air of discomfort has already been there, to anticipate ominous consequences, “Although it was so brilliantly fine ... The air was motionless, but when you opened your mouth there was just a faint chill, like a chill from a glass of iced water, before you sip, and now and again a leaf came drifting—from nowhere, from the sky.” (Mansfield, 1981)

It is apparent that Miss Brill is disturbed by an inexplicable restlessness, which stems partly from the “faint chill” she somehow senses in the motionless air. In this reiterated phrase “a faint chill”, the pre-modifying adjective “faint” is itself a rather vague term. In this context, it could mean “lacking clearness, brightness or strength”, connoting that the “chill” is a feeling rather elusive, a sensation defying further articulation. As “faint” is semantically associated with vagueness, the key word “chill” likewise embraces multi-implications. Literally, it refers to a slightly unpleasant degree of coldness. Yet what that “chill” indeed is the protagonist doesn’t seem to actually realise. Even when the story reaches its very end, there remain questions as to how the “chill” comes into being and why it is repeatedly mentioned. The enigma lingers, because she apparently doesn’t seem to see the reality behind it. The “chill” could well be an indicator of Miss Brill’s forlornness and loneliness, of a miserable feeling she is always unconsciously aware of but consciously denies. And above all, it is repeatedly mentioned throughout as an indelible shadow.

The protagonist’s loneliness and her reactionary decision to ignore it can be seen through her to wear her beloved fur. Her disturbed mind at the loss of youth and vigour tries to suppress the painful reality as she takes out the fur and, “Even when the heroine’s moods, with the tunes of the band, starts to flit, float, and fly, this faint chill somehow manages to make its way into her heart, colouring an otherwise perfectly blissful moment with an inauspicious nuance” (Mansfield, 1981).

Miss Brill is constantly trying to escape to fantasy as a way to self-manage her tormenting situation. She seems to lose any hope of support from the outside and at times is walking “nowhere”, “somehow”, “something” also contributing to foster a pervasive sense of uncertainty. The following sentence reflects the textual and cognitive aspects of the protagonist’s characterisation, since, on the one hand, it structures the text and symbolises her willing ignorance about the worthlessness of her existence, “And when she breathed, something light and sad --- no, not sad, exactly --- something gentle seemed to move in her bosom.” (Mansfield, 1981)

1. And now and again a leaf came drifting, from nowhere, from the sky.
2. It must have had a knock, somehow.
3. And when she breathed, something light and sad—no, not sad, exactly—something gentle seemed to move in her bosom.
4. And what they played was warm, sunny, yet there was just a faint chill—a something, what was it?—a something that made you want to sing. (Mansfield, 1981)

Ullmann (1962), in a section entitled “Words with blurred edges”, traced from Plato to Byron a recurrent feeling of the inadequacy of language to express thought, particularly because of its lack of precision. But he also noted the converse feeling among poets and creative writers, that such vagueness is in fact an advantage (Channell 2000). This idea has also been reflected

by Wittgenstein (1953) who suggests that words are like blurred photographs and adds, “Is it ever always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn’t it the indistinct one often exactly what we need?” (Channell 2000)

Appreciating “Miss Brill” is exactly like appreciating “an indistinct picture”. It is saturated with vague words and phrases which efficiently serve the purpose of expressing the loneliness, uncertainty and attempts at ignoring the harsh realities on Miss Brill’s part. In it, much is left undefined, open to diverse interpretations. Moreover, this art of being vague enables the writer to stealthily infuse into the narrative an aesthetic beauty, a beauty most elusive and misty, and peculiar to Mansfield’s writing.

It is important to note that this textual web, generally woven out of declarative and commentary sentences is also densely interspersed with exclamatory sentences. This gives an access to Miss Brill’s mental world and accounts for her inability to accept the sense of reality and discard the fantasy-reality boundaries. When seeing a beautiful lady, so elegantly clad, she should dismiss a little boy running after to hand to her a bunch of violets she had dropped, Miss Brill simply cannot help exclaiming, “Dear Me!” (Mansfield, 1981). Again, as she sees a woman with a shabby ermine toque being brutally spurned away by a gentleman, Miss Brill’s whole heart cries out for her. In her vigorous imagination, “even the band seemed to know... and played more softly, tenderly, and the drum beat “The Brute! The Brute!” (Mansfield, 1981). Miss Brill’s references to the old couple can be viewed as a means of escapism, which, according to Tuan (1998) and Evans (2001) is an avoidance of the “real” world in its various manifestations. Notice how Miss Brill observes the old people sitting on the benches: “they were odd, silent, nearly all old” “as though they’d just come from dark little rooms or even—even cupboards!” (Mansfield, 1981). Such an exclamation, not without deep compassion, might very well have yielded the anticipation that Miss Brill was a young woman, vital and blooming. The conjecture, however, is smashed into pieces by the appalling reality that she, just like those sitting on the benches, is odd, silent, and old; she, just like those sitting on the benches, comes from a dark little room. The case is either that she herself ever failed to notice it or it is just the reluctance to accept the truth that prevents her from seeing it.

The paragraph where exclamatory sentences most abound is also where the climax is reached, that is, when Miss Brill coaxes herself into believing she has a part of the play and that’s why she comes every Sunday:

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? ... Even she had a part and came every Sunday. No doubt somebody would have noticed if she hadn't been there; she was part of the performance after all. How strange she'd never thought of it like that before! ... No wonder! Miss Brill nearly laughed out loud. She was on the stage. She thought of the

old invalid gentleman to whom she read the newspaper four afternoons a week while he slept in the garden...But suddenly he knew he was having the paper read to him by an actress! "An actress!" (Mansfield, 1981)

At the very beginning of the passage there lies a succession of three short exclamations: "Oh, how fascinating it was! How she enjoyed it! How she loved sitting here, watching it all!" The parallel structure applied here no doubt magnifies Miss Brill's intense happiness at finding the value of her existence, which makes her believe that she is needed at least in some way! More vivid examples in the same paragraph exist, "How strange she's never thought of that before!" "No wonder!" Almost all these expressions are invariably short, emphatic, creating a powerful and strong rhythm, yet with these irregular, rather frantic thoughts predict her unwilling realisation that her sweet dream is destined to smash itself against the cold hard stone of reality. Thus, the examination of Miss Brill's lexis and syntax does indicate uncomplicated thinking and patterns, but does not show a considerable mental pathology, which suggests her perpetual existence in a state of denial. Yet there seem to be crevices and cracks in her facade as, "even the band seemed to know what she was feeling and played more softly, played tenderly, and the drum beat, "The Brute! The Brute!" over and over." (Mansfield, 1981).

Throughout the text one can recognise delusive imagery appearing in her mind, including the personification of clothing items mostly to make up for the lack of vigour, beauty and romance in her life. We see her, for instance, trying to put back life into the old lustreless fur by using, "a little dab of black sealing-wax when the time came --- when it was absolutely necessary ... Little rouge! Yes, she really felt like that about it" (Mansfield, 1981). Similarly, Miss Brill identifies another 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 met just in front of her" (Mansfield, 1981), Miss Brill notices how the woman's hair is faded into the same colour as her hat, which is also worn-out.

The subjective world of Miss Brill in Mansfield's text more resembles a fantasy tale in which she is trying to escape from the unpleasant reality. Her syntax is generally simple, by no means intricate. In this particular text, a considerably large proportion of the dependent clauses are in fact -ing and -ed participle clauses.

1. Only two people shared her "special" seat: a fine old man in a velvet coat, his hands clasped over a huge carved walking-stick, and a big old woman, sitting upright, with a roll of knitting on her embroidered apron.
2. They were an Englishman and his wife, he wearing a dreadful Panama hat and she button boots.
3. Little children ran among them, swooping and laughing.

4. And sometimes a tiny stagger came suddenly rocking into the open from under the trees...until its high-stepping mother, like a young hen, rushed scolding to its rescue.
5. Two peasant women with funny straw hats passed, leading beautiful smoke—colored donkeys.
6. ...and her hand, in its cleaned glove, lifted to dab her lips, was a tiny yellowish paw. (Mansfield, 1981)

In the sentences listed above, Mansfield omits “and”, “but” and “or”, to be replaced by a prolific use of the –ing and –ed participle clauses which she uses to depict the fragmented and inconsequential sequence of a thought pattern. This technique also allows a glimpse into another aspect of Miss Brill’s psychology. As she tries hard to cover up and ignore that waning away of youth, vigour and relevance of her existence, she learns to make use of clothes and colours. It is this very reason we see her paying more heed to the park goers dresses and attires rather than bothering to listen to what they actually have to say. In fact throughout the text it is only Miss Brill speaking. As such, she literally puts words into the mouths of people she sees and hears what she wants to hear. Interestingly, her self-built fantasy comes crashing to the ground only when she hears what the characters around her actually have to say about her. This harsh realisation comes through the young couple who consider her presence a nuisance and a gross interference in their privacy. She realises her existence as nothing but a, “stupid old thing” (Mansfield, 1981). Her insignificance is blatantly and mercilessly stripped down to the level of, “who wants her? Why doesn't she keep her silly old mug at home?” (Mansfield, 1981).

The journey back from the park is like a fall down a hill side for Miss Brill. “But today she passed the baker’s by, climbed the stairs, went into the little dark room—her room like a cupboard—and sat down on the red eiderdown” (Mansfield, 1981). Though it would be much exaggeration to compare a room to a cupboard, the simile, nevertheless, is by no means out of place. The comparison enables us to draw a vivid mental picture of Miss Brill’s living conditions: it is a cramped little room, a poorly lit place, probably without a window. No wonder she makes such point of going to the park every Sunday afternoon: Bathed in the brilliant sunlight, “sitting in other people’s lives for just a minute” (Mansfield, 1981). She seems to utterly forget about the sordid place she comes from. The park has virtually become a bridge connecting her with the outside world. It is the only window through which light is occasionally allowed in to dispel the darkness haunting her heart. But finally this window of communication is shut. It is well conceivable that Miss Brill, after realising that who she really is, would never tread her feet again on the land of the Jardins Publiques. The remaining days of her life are going to be spent exclusively in that dark little room, a room like a cupboard.



3.0 Conclusion

Mental processes of a fictional individual include her intentions, desires, feelings, emotions, and any narrative aspects, that can assist in exploring her mind. The background and environment for character-formation are important factors that are needed to be taken into account in regarding the mind styles of the suffering individuals. With all the evidence listed above, at least we may conclude that Miss Brill's dilemma, wilful ignorance and subsequent pain at the harsh reality being thrown in her face can be observed by an examination of the most prominent linguistic features in "Miss Brill". Through the analysis of her lexical and thought patterns, the reader can slip into and then out of the mind of the main character. Miss Brill's inner conflicts can be traced through the analysis of exquisite words, vague expressions, short emphatic exclamations, figurative languages, imagery, sound and any devices that are emotively provoking. It is through the sharp incongruities between imagination and reality, that she gets a final blow. For her the reality exists in the sub-domain, the private semi-conscious sub-world of her character, where one counterfactual world is embedded within another, glimpses of which can be seen through the effective application of the techniques of cognitive stylistics.



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