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Adapting Katherine Mansfield's 'Miss Brill' into Short Film: Similarities and Differences

Abstract

This research paper focuses on the adaptation of Katherine Mansfield's short story 'Miss Brill' into a short film by Simon Lewis. Published in 1920, 'Miss Brill' has never gone out of print and still manages to capture people's interests and imaginations. With the passage of time and increased advancement in technology, this short story has transitioned from paper to audio files and finally into film. As such, there are a lot of differences and deviations from the main text in the film version. The film adaptation keeps itself true to the soul of the short story but there are alterations in the setting, point of view, technique, characterization and even the ending of the film. It is these similarities and differences that I intend to dwell upon in my study.

Keywords: film adaptation, monologue, point of view, setting, technique.

First published in November 1920, 'Miss Brill' is one of the most popular short stories of Katherine Mansfield, so much so that it has never been out of print and still manages to capture people's interests and imaginations. In this world of increased advances in technology and intermediality this short story has taken a leap from text to audio to the genre of short films. It is

interesting to note that a story with hardly any action and only in depth character analysis has managed to grab a director's attention. The focus of this research paper will be on the similarities and differences that have occurred during this transition of 'Miss Brill' from paper to screen.

Directed by Simon Lewis and starring Claire Vincent, this film adaptation of 'Miss Brill' has remained to the plot but has taken liberties with the setting, point of view, technique and characterization. The textual version of Katherine Mansfield's 'Miss Brill' centers on a lonely English teacher who lives in a French town. The story opens with Miss Brill delighting in her decision to wear her fur around her neck. Thus adorned, she spends her Sunday afternoon lounging in her favourite seat in a park, reveling in eavesdropping and catching snippets of the people's lives around her. The snatches of conversation, the sights and the sounds that enclose upon her allow her to create a world of her own where she imagines herself to be an actress taking part in the grand play of existence. She imagines all the other passers-by to be her fellow actors and actresses, each enacting their roles on this world's stage.

Observing others in this manner, she feels happy and content in her performance. However, her smugness, bliss and illusion are shattered when a young couple shares Miss Brill's bench. Miss Brill, floating in her romantic mood assigns them the role of "hero and the heroine" (271) of the play. Her bubble is burst when the *hero* calls "Miss Brill a stupid old thing" (Mansfield 271). The *heroine* too mocks her precious fur calling it a cooked fish.

"No, not now," said the girl. "Not here, I can't." "But why? Because of that stupid old thing at the end there?" asked the boy. "Why does she come here at all – who wants her? Why doesn't she keep her silly old mug at home?" "It's her fu-ur which is so funny", giggled the girl. "It's exactly like a fried whiting." "Ah, be off with you!" said the boy in an angry whisper. (271)

Miss Brill, shattered and heartbroken, old, unwanted and alone cries her heart out and foregoes all the simple pleasures of her solitary existence at this brutal indignity.

The film version more or less follows the same narrative. Some of the characters such as the old lady and her husband sitting on the seat besides Miss Brill are described exactly as in the text. Two young girls and their admirers who laugh and flirt in front of her, the “ermine toque” lady and the “gentleman in grey”, (Mansfield 270), the young couple making scathing remarks on her *necklet* are all delineated exactly as they are.

Despite these similarities, major differences crop up when both the text and the film are juxtaposed. There are changes in the setting and locale. The short story takes place in a French town, in the “*Jardins Publiques*” (Mansfield 268) whereas in the film Simon Lewis has entirely shifted to an unknown city. Miss Brill’s favourite seat in the film is not situated in a public garden, rather in a gazebo upon a wharf, overlooking the sea.

Another major difference in the film is that the fur which is so integral to the action of the story is replaced by a scarf. Instead of the focus on the “dear little thing” (268), with all its description of being brought to life by the brushing and the stroking, the director decides to eschew it altogether. For the sake of practical presentation purposes, Lewis has shifted the attention to a reddish brown scarf. He also deviates from the original text by not dwelling on the importance of the fur and its care and concentrating more on the inner workings of Miss Brill’s mind.

This beautiful shift from the inane to the internal is reflected again in another glaring difference. While adapting the story for screen, Lewis eliminates the presence of the band altogether. It is a major symbol in Katherine Mansfield’s story, creating an atmosphere and colouring the park into life. The loud, gay music, the “conductor wearing a new coat” (268)

invoke gaiety and mirth into the protagonist. When the band played “a little ‘flutey’ bit” it was very pretty to hear the bright, happy sounds casting a jovial air around Miss Brill. She also shares a special secret rapport with the band. Being tuned to the same frequency “she was sure it would be repeated. It was; she lifted her head and smiled” (268).

The band has a vital role in the story. Suffice it to say that the band playing music is also a major character in its own right. When it plays “Tum- tum- tum tiddle –um!” two young girls meet two boys and pair off. When the ermine toque lady is deserted by the gentleman “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 270). During Miss Brill’s self-deceiving introspection, the band remains silent. With her coming to a delusional affirmation that she has been an actress for a long time, the tunes start again. The band seems to reciprocate Miss Brill’s delight. As her ecstasy reaches a crescendo, the band’s “tune lifted, lifted, the light shone; and it seemed to Miss Brill that in another moment all of them, all the whole company, would begin singing” (Mansfield 271). The film shows no band whatsoever. Lewis adroitly uses the orchestra as the background music with the monologue of Miss Brill in the foreground, its significance quite reduced as the dialogues and other characters take over. However, the background music like the band in the story, never fails to showcase her feelings. The band stops playing with the arrival of the couple *on stage* but in the film the orchestra continues to play well until the credits, moving from a jovial tune to a crescendo to a tragic tune at the end.

Another remarkable effect has been created by the director by changing the point of view of the film. Katherine Mansfield wrote *Miss Brill* in the third person limited omniscient point of view (Wikipedia). Lewis employs the first person point of view. In the film adaptation, Miss Brill introduces herself, the reasons she chose the scarf and why she is so punctual. Miss Brill

continues her dramatic monologue, giving vent to her quirks and sharing with the audience how she considers herself to be an actress (“Miss Brill”, Panther Films)

A brilliant dramatic device has been used by the director which is nowhere to be found in the original short story. It is shown that as Miss Brill closes her eyes and leans back in her seat to soak in her surroundings, a paper blown by a gust of wind lands on her feet. Miss Brill woken out of her reverie, picks it up, turns it to find her name in bold with the subheading “A Play in One Act” (“Miss Brill”, Panther Films). This dramatic device drills home the realization in her that she is indeed the actress of her play. Nothing in the story is so obvious. In the story, this thought naturally grows upon her as a result of her joyous state of mind.

Simon Lewis also cuts short the appearance and the importance of the other characters. He gives full room to Claire Vincent’s acting to grow and shine in front of the camera. His entire focus is on Miss Brill’s stream of consciousness. Katherine Mansfield stops short of any description involving Brill’s internal feelings when she is hurt. Only two passages are devoted to her after the denouement: one recalling her past routine upon her return from the park and one indicating the change in that routine this present day. The author subtly hints at the shock and dejection faced by Miss Brill in a few words. “She sat there for a long time...she unleashed the necklet quickly; quickly, without looking, laid it inside. But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying” (Mansfield 272).

On the other hand, Lewis dwells a lot on the aftermath of the debacle. Hurt beyond her wildest dreams, Miss Brill is shown running away from everything and everyone that she found fantastic up till now during her performance. Her abrupt exit, her mad dash from the gazebo to the baker’s lane to her apartment sets things in motion. Until now, Miss Brill was a part of the play, her performance; a cog in the entire scene. The couple’s remarks show her that she is

nobody, a repulsive non entity, unwanted and unloved. The illusion she harboured of being indispensable to the grand play is shattered. Lewis, however, deftly uses her dashing away as an excuse to portray that she has a vital role to play. All the occurrences around Miss Brill up till this point are exactly as they are in the original version. Now as the story reaches the end, the other characters also reach their closure, tying all the loose ends together. The director here weaves an element of irony in the film. Just as Miss Brill awakens to rude reality and her role in the plot turns from gay to tragic, all the other characters ironically reach a happy ending. This contrasting device brings into sharp relief the pathos inherent in the plot (“Miss Brill”, Panther Films).

The ending of the film is also a carefully thought out process. Whereas Mansfield brings her story to an abrupt, oblique ending, Lewis gives another dimension to the story’s ending by adding a twist to the tale. Surely Miss Brill cries, but in Mansfield’s version, her tears come to her as a surprise “as if she heard somebody crying” (Mansfield 272). In Lewis’ ending, the initial dismay eventually gives way to acceptance. The film shows the protagonist looking out of the window, wiping the tears from her cheeks and then looking at the camera and smiling. This quiet smile of hers indicates that she has made peace with her reality. The sudden shock of the epiphany has given way to calm reflection and reconciliation of her fate. The character grows and learns to separate illusion from reality, learning also that while illusions are ecstatic, they are always ephemeral. Lewis puts so much gravitas in that last smile, adding a lot to the structure and the emotional ethos of the plot.

‘Miss Brill’ written by Katherine Mansfield has always been regarded as a masterpiece but this short film takes it a notch higher and turns it into a magnificent artistic work, suffusing the plot with many layers of meaning, pushing the superfluous to the background, bringing to the

fore the psychological depth of the central character through superb acting and bringing alive Miss Brill before our eyes for all time to come.

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