**English 3201 - Short Story Unit**

**Ms. Brill Notes**

**Summary:**

A lonely older woman enjoys her weekly visit to the park where she sits, listens to the orchestra, and people-watches. She feels a part of something bigger than herself; she feels connected. That is until she overhears a young couple make disparaging remarks about her, and she feels she has been deluding herself. This is a sad and poignant snapshot of a lonely life.

**The Character of Ms. Brill:**

* An aging, lonely woman living in Paris and maintaining herself by teaching English.
* In the beginning of this story, Miss Brill seems to be a part of the upper class and enjoys her Sunday afternoons in the Jardins Publiques.
* However Miss Brill enjoys her time in the gardens for reasons that go beyond the casual conversation and social aspects of the Sunday gatherings. Miss Brill looks forward to the conversations of other people in the garden because she feels as though she is sitting in on their lives for just a moment.
* She lives through the lives of other people. She feels as if her own life is disappointing so she tries to be a part of someone else’s life for a moment.
* Miss Brill wants her life to be more exciting so she imagines that the scene in the garden is really a huge play and that she is an actress. Miss Brill’s imagination shows that she is isolated from the real world and wants to make her life seem like it has more value.
* Miss Brill’s life is one of shabby gentility and pretense. (An attempt to make something appear true that is not. To claim a false or ambitious reality. She wants to be of high class and status.)
* Looks forward to the new Season, she is, however, distracted by a peculiarly ominous feeling that seems to be in the air and for which she does not know how to account.
* Miss Brill is abruptly forced to confront the reality that her imagination seeks to escape: She is growing old and lonely in her exile, and the world is an unfriendly place for such people.
* Occupying her “special seat,” Miss Brill gives only partial attention to the band music, for it is obvious that her main interest in coming to the park each week is to participate in the lives of people around her.
* She prides herself on her ability to eavesdrop on the conversations of those nearby without seeming to do so. This is her escape from a dreary existence.
* Through Mansfield’s description of Miss Brill’s actions the reader empathises with Miss Brill.
* On her way home Miss Brill does not treat herself to her usual slice of honey-cake. Miss Brill ‘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.’
* The fact that Miss Brill doesn’t follow her usual routine may be important as it could suggest that Miss Brill, through over hearing the young man’s comments, has now fully realised how lonely her life is.
* She cannot escape into the alternate world she has created rather she is forced to face the harsher realities of her own life (and face her loneliness). How overpowering this feeling (or awareness of her situation) is for Miss Brill is noticeable by the fact that after she puts the fur back into its box, Miss Brill ‘thought she heard something crying.’ It is quite possible that Mansfield at the end of the story is suggesting that it is Miss Brill who is crying, now that she is aware of how lonely her life is.
* **The people she sees in the Jardins Publique on Sunday**

As Miss Brill observes the people in the gardens she makes the assumption that some of them were odd, silent, nearly all old, and looked like they were from little dark rooms or even cupboards. When she makes this observation she is really describing herself.

* Elderly couple share her seat but prove uninteresting.
* Raucous children
* An old beggar who sells flowers from a tray
* Laughing young girls in bright colors who pair off with soldiers
* A woman wearing a shabby ermine toque approach a dignified, elderly gentleman
* A young, well-dressed couple

Miss Brill says “Oh, how fascinating it was! How she enjoyed it! How she loved sitting here, watching it all!” She conceives of life as all theater and playacting, and she herself as a participant—one of life’s actresses, no longer a mere eavesdropper and spectator.

The premonitions that tugged at her spirits at the beginning of the story are dispelled by this vision; she even imagines a future dialogue with the old man to whom she reads, in which she pronounces herself an actress.

A young, well-dressed couple appear nearby; inescapably, Miss Brill prepares to overhear, first having assigned them their romantic roles as hero and heroine fresh from his father’s yacht. Their dialogue overwhelms Miss Brill with its blatant cruelty: “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?”

The youth continues to importune her, but the girl breaks off in a fit of giggling, derisive laughter—at Miss Brill’s fur, which to the girl looks like “a fried whiting.”

Miss Brill returns home. She bypasses her usual stop at the baker’s for a slice of honeycake.

Back in her room, mortified like the woman in the shabby toque, she hurriedly replaces her fur in its box without looking at it; as the full shock of her rejection strikes, the narrator concludes the story in a manner reminiscent of the opening: “But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying.”

**Symbolism**

**Fox**

She lovingly takes an old-fashioned fox fur out of its box for her usual Sunday outing to the gardens.

It represents Miss Brill: it is worse for wear, old, and kept in a cupboard (as she lives in a small, dark room) the fox asking “What has been happening to me?” is representative of Miss Brill’s disconnect from herself

Easily one of her most treasured items in her wardrobe, the fox symbolizes both Miss Brill's physical and mental states. The fox is said to be old, dusty, and badly in need of a "good brush". It is as if like the old people in the park (and as we later learn Miss Brill herself), it had been kept away in a cupboard.

Beyond her physical state, the fox also represents her metal state. The fox is personified to reflect her disconnection from her emotions. The fox's eyes for example seem to ask "What is happening to me?", and like an animal lacking self-awareness it "bites its own tail".

We later learn that these feelings of despair are actually Miss Brill's, as she struggles with identifying and confronting her pitiful state. Although she is clearly hurt from the incident involving the young couple, she refuses to acknowledge it,and instead believes she "heard something crying". She is unable to truly accept her status in life, and therefore projects all her negative emotions onto the fox fur.

**The bench:** Represents Miss Brill’s place in the world; it is a spot from which to watch others live their lives while convincing herself that she is actually part of the “play”

**The park:** Represents society at large and its view of youth and seniors, with young people lively and fully engaged passing by older people

**The ermine hat:** Represents Miss Brill’s inability to see herself in relation to others; the toque is probably the same vintage as her own fox but she sees the shabbiness only of the other woman’s fur, not her own

**The honey-cake:** Represents a bit of happiness, a “Sunday treat” in an otherwise lonely, empty life; skipping it at the end could be seen as Miss Brill not feeling deserving of it, possibly because she has seen herself through the young couple’s eyes.

**Narrated in the third person by an unnamed narrator**

**The theme is of paralysis, loneliness, connection and escape.**

- “the air was motionless.” This line may be important as the lack of movement (of the air) suggests a paralysis in Miss Brill’s environment.

Miss Brill appears to go to the same park (and the same bench) every Sunday and every Sunday she listens to the same band playing. This reveals a lack of movement within Miss Brill’s life. Everything stays the same or is static.

It may also be significant that Mansfield describes the two old people who sit beside Miss Brill on the bench as statues.

It is also interesting that Miss Brill looks upon some of the people in the park as ‘nearly all odd and from the way they stared they looked as though they’d just come from dark little rooms or even – even cupboards.’ This line may be important as later Mansfield describes Miss Brill’s own lodgings as being similar to a cupboard, but rather than connect or link herself to others (in the park) Miss Brill appears to escape into a fantasy world in whereby she views her surroundings, as she is sitting on the bench, as being part of a stage (or a play). It is possible that Miss Brill is escaping from the world around her (or the realities that she sees and doesn’t want to face). Rather than accept the reality of her own life (of being lonely) Miss Brill creates an alternate world in which she is not lonely, rather she is an actress and part of a play. If anything Miss Brill is escaping from the boredom or loneliness of her own life.

What is also interesting in the story is that Miss Brill doesn’t engage in conversation with any of the other characters (she just observes her surroundings). However despite this lack of engagement with the other characters Miss Brill does appear to be attempting, to make some type of connection with others (by formulating an opinion on what she sees around her). However how distant she is from the other characters in the story can be seen when the young couple sit next to her on the bench. As Miss Brill is eaves dropping she can hear the young man talking about her. The fact that the man’s comments are unfavourable may also be significant as it could suggest that there is a distance between the young and the old. As far as the young man is concerned Miss Brill is a ‘stupid old thing.’ This line could be important as it suggests that there is no commonality between Miss Brill and the young couple sitting beside her, if anything there is a lack of connection. The young man’s comments (though harsh) are also significant for another reason as they allow for the reader to empathise with Miss Brill.