

A Spiritual Exploration of Exotic Wandering Female —On the Acoustic Narrative Strategy of "Miss Brill"

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Abstract

The medium of sound is often found in the narratives of modernist writers, and Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill" is an excellent modernist masterpiece, rich in sound elements: the conversations of the neighbors, the crowd noise in the park, the varied orchestra music ... sounds in the novel plays an important role in the development and advancement of the narrative. From the perspective of acoustic narrative, this essay explores how Mansfield transforms the protagonist's inner consciousness and external environment through the construction of auscultation and soundscapes, thus enabling the reader to deeply experience the richness of an exotic wandering woman's heart in the dynamic world of the novel. The soundscapes not only add to the poetic beauty of the novel, bringing a vivid sensory experience to the reader, but also more relevantly express the subjectivity of the female characters who struggle and struggle in the face of existential adversity.

Keywords: acoustic narrative, "Miss Brill", auscultation, soundscape

1. Introduction

Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923), a famous British short story writer whose works leave behind the traditional narrative mode and focus on the daily lives of ordinary people, delicately portraying the trials and tribulations of ordinary people and their psychological feelings during the social upheaval of the early 20th century. Unlike other modernist writers, her works have musical qualities in their content, narration, and language expression and can be described as the art of light and music. Mansfield learned music at an early age, and her whole life had an indissoluble relationship with music, which was like the nourishment of her life, providing constant inspiration and a great deal of subject matter for her writing. She is not only able to express the beauty of language and rhythm, but she also intersperses many auditory elements in her novels, which drive the narrative process and reveal the rich and delicate inner world of her characters in multiple dimensions. As a woman exiled from both her motherland and her family, she is meticulous in her portrayal of the loneliness and disillusionment of the marginalized women in her works under the oppression of capitalist society. In most of her works, the richness of the roaming women's souls is dyed in the changing tones of sound, and readers can feel their own unique personalities between the rhythms of the text notes.

"Miss Brill" is a classic representative work of Katherine Mansfield. The story depicts an spinsterish English teacher's experiences during an afternoon spent in a French park. The article focuses on the portrayal of the protagonist's sensory impressions, closely intertwined with her psychological activities, allowing readers to follow the protagonist's consciousness as she jumps between the past, present, and future. When writing "Miss Brill", Mansfield mentioned that she wanted her words to correspond with reality and remain harmonious with the characters' situations. After completing the work, she read it aloud repeatedly, just like playing a piece of music. She tried to imbue the text with the rhythm and melody of music, with the pronunciation and sound effects of the words being widely used as expressive tools. Therefore, it can be seen that the writer draws heavily on the sense of hearing in the creative process and attach great importance to the acoustic effect of the work. Mansfield's imitation of sound events and objects cleverly matches the ups and downs of Miss Brill's mood, thus smoothly transforming the external environment and the character's consciousness, and the orchestra music expressed by onomatopoeia also serves as the background of the main tone throughout the novel, so that readers can follow the rhythmic ups and downs of the sound and explore the protagonist's journey of spiritual epiphany.

2. The Auditory Dimension in Narrative

In today's technologically advanced society, the proliferation of visual media has led to a heightened emphasis on visual culture in our daily lives, often overshadowing the importance of our other senses, particularly our sense of hearing. In the humanities and social sciences, there has long been an imbalance towards ocularcentrism, with many intellectuals offering criticism of this bias. One such individual is Marshall McLuhan, who creatively introduced the concept of "acoustic space". Another Canadian scholar, R. Murray Schafer, wrote extensively on the subject of sound, with his book "The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World" widely regarded as a foundational work in the field. In it, Schafer systematically elaborates on the classification, formation, evolution, and perception of soundscapes. As Schafer pointed out, "all visual projections of sounds are arbitrary and fictitious," whereas literature has the ability to open up "fictional worlds at a geographical and temporal remove," affords it a prosthetic function as "a highly refined, and highly effective, extension of our senses." (Hertel, 2016). Sound has an important and rich narrative function in literary works. Novelists are often "reliable hearers," and their works serve as the "best guide for reconstructing past soundscapes" (Schafer, 1994).

In literary studies, the first application of the combination of sound and narrative in textual criticism was made by the Canadian scholar Melba Cady Keane, who, in her article "Modernist Soundscapes and the Intelligent Ear: An Approach to Narrative Through Auditory Perception.", established a new narrative vocabulary to explain the impact of modern sound technologies, for example, the term "auscultation" replaced "focalization." When studying noise in American literature, Schweighauser called for "literary acoustics," while Stoeber used the term "aural imagery" in her work on the sonic color line, which encompasses "the literary representations of sound—dialogue, music, screams, cries, laughter, and extra-verbal sound—as well as full range of ambient sounds, all of which can activate the reader's inner hearing." Scholars' use of new terms shows that they are not only concerned with how sound operates in the world, but also with how textual forms create their own specific sound worlds.

In China, Fu Xiuyan introduced a series of concepts and terms closely related to auditory perception into the field of narrative studies in his article "An Initial Exploration of Auditory Narrative." Concepts such as "soundscapes" and "auscultation" are important research tools in the field of auditory narrative. As literary works present rich perceptions of the external world based on life experiences, using only "observation" as a means of capturing information about the novel world can be insufficient. In contrast, "auscultation" is a "comprehensive and continuous monitoring behavior" (Fu X.Y., 2013:222). Therefore, like "visual perspective," "auditory perspective" is closely related to narrative, as what characters hear can influence what they say and think. In addition, hearing is associated with interiority, subjectivity, affect, temporality and passivity, whereas sight is harnessed to distance, reason, spatiality and control (Snaith, 2020). Auscultation is not intuitive and requires people to make inferences and judgments about sound signals, adding a layer of imagination compared to observation and enriching narrative forms.

In the setting where a story takes place, there are both the sights seen by characters, such as scenery, which constitute the "landscapes," and the sounds heard by characters, such as speech and background noise, which constitute the "soundscape" of the setting. In Schafer's study of soundscape, he divides it into keynote sounds, sound signals, and soundmarks based on acoustics, perception (psychoacoustics), function or meaning, and affective quality. The soundscape can construct a specific auditory space, such as the pleasant and relaxing keynote sounds of the French park where middle-aged couples chat, young people laugh, children play, and pedestrians stroll, as well as the soundmark of a band that performs in the park at a fixed time... In the corresponding auditory space, which is the process of listening, readers form a textual reception field dominated by audition and mobilize all perceptions. In this field, emotions and culture can be shared, and readers can interact with authors and texts (Liu B. Z., 2016: 226).

3. Auscultation—A Reflection of The Character's Inner Self

Miss Brill, who lived alone in a foreign land, incorporated herself into society by spending weekends sitting in the park, listening to the band playing and observing the conversations of passersby. She could be described as a professional "auscultator." Her perception of the surrounding environment also revealed her rich inner world. As she listened to the people around her, Miss Brill's inner state underwent countless subtle changes, reflecting her attitude towards society and her life circumstances. For individuals who often find themselves in a lonely state of silence in social situations, only by experiencing what the character hears can we truly understand the character. The narrative style of "auscultating" can also help readers explore the character's hidden true feelings.

The story takes place on a late autumn afternoon, where Miss Brill is sitting on her usual bench in the park. Beside her sits a silent elderly couple. As a person living alone in a foreign country, Miss Brill perceives

listening to others as an important means to experience and enjoy life. She longs to integrate herself into society in this way. However, the silent elderly couple disappoints her. Their silence evokes a deep emotion which enhances the author's narrative communication and allows the narrative recipient to imagine a richer meaning (Tu, 2020: 121). Perhaps the elderly couple only need to quietly accompany each other and enjoy the relaxed atmosphere of the park, or perhaps they do not want to share their lives with strangers, highlighting the strangeness and distance between Miss Brill and those around her. Miss Brill describes the elderly community in the park as "odd, silent, come from duck little room", not realizing that this is also a reflection of herself, who has been alone in a foreign land for many years, but unwilling to admit it. Later, she recalls what she heard last week: an English couple sitting beside her. The English man was patiently giving advice to his wife, but "nothing would please her." Compared to that wife, who has a spouse, Miss Brill, who is unmarried and has no relatives around her, longs for the care and love of her family or lover. However, in reality, she receives nothing and must continue to live alone. In fact, loneliness is a common theme among Mansfield's characters, as she herself was separated from her family for a long time due to illness and war, and the deaths of loved ones made her life a tragedy (Alpers, 1982). By depicting this elderly couple, the author conveys Miss Brill's lonely life situation and her longing for love.

Although the elderly couple seemed dull, Miss Brill was also infected by the relaxed and lively soundscape of the park, producing a "fantasy epiphany". In Miss Brill's fantasy, the men, women, and children in the park formed a harmonious theater group, performing beautiful scenes of life together, singing together in harmony, and she herself was also an important female protagonist on the stage. At this moment, a young couple sat down beside Miss Brill, dressed beautifully and appearing to have just returned from playing. The young people were the group that Miss Brill longed to be a part of, which made her eagerly prepare to listen to their conversation. However, what awaited her in this listening was the shattering of her fantasy and the withering of her heart. The boy directly called Miss Brill a "stupid old thing", and the girl made fun of her most beloved fur collar, saying it "is like a fried whiting". She longed for social acceptance, and her emphasis and expectation of social activities almost reached a sacred level. However, her efforts were mercilessly rejected by the outside world, and the acerbic words of the young couple directly expressed Miss Brill's real situation - she was just an edge person who was described as withered, dressed in outdated clothes, and strange and eccentric. No one wanted to communicate with her, and she couldn't blend into this foreign society. This auscultation made Miss Brill's sense of belonging, which she had been desperately seeking, completely shattered, and her feelings of loneliness, loss, and confusion became even stronger.

After being rejected by the world around her with her fox fur scarf, Miss Brill retreated back to the dark attic. She quickly put her fox fur collar back into the box, and at this moment, Miss Brill "heard" the crying of the fox fur scarf. Here, the author cleverly uses auditory hallucinations as a way of perception to reveal the protagonist's subconscious in an illusory auditory sense. At the beginning of the article, the author also makes the fox fur scarf make a sound, "'What has been happening to me?' said the sad little eyes." In fact, the sound expressed by these sad little eyes is precisely Miss Brill's confusion and loneliness, but she still holds on to her desire to explore the colorful world. From the description in the previous text, we can see that the fox fur scarf is her beloved possession, a beautiful decoration that she takes pride in, carrying her youthful and happy past. When the fox fur scarf cries, the only warmth left in her heart and her hope for the beauty of the world disappear. This crying is Miss Brill's internal realization, her desperate acknowledgement of the cruel reality, and solidifies her identity as an outsider beyond the public space (Zhou Ming, 2020). Auditory hallucination is an "unreliable" auditory perception, which is a stroke of genius for constructing an artistic world and exploring the mysteries of the inner self (Fang Cheng, 2019). Putting the fox fur into the box also implies that Miss Brill's spiritual door to the rich and colorful external world has been closed. She realizes her current situation, that she is part of the same group as the strange and silent elderly people in the park, and her efforts to integrate into society are futile. Her beautiful vision is now shattered, and her heart sinks into darkness.

4. Soundscape - Imitation and Advancement of Events

The term "soundscape" can be defined as an integration of a series of sound events that have a causal relationship with each other. Roland Barthes, in "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," categorizes events into two types: nuclei and catalyzes. The former establishes the basic framework of the story, while the latter provides some information or shows some signs to support the former. In "Miss Brill," the author employs a significant number of sound symbols to describe the various events happening around the protagonist. These sounds are interwoven in a "clustered" way, creating a vivid auditory world that sets a unique tone for each stage of the story. They also form the core events that take place on the "grand stage of the park," constituting a lively chorus. Moreover, the depiction of the band's music through onomatopoeia not only serves

as background music throughout the novel but also fits well with the protagonist's emotional journey. Therefore, "soundscape" serves as an important narrative accelerator that not only acts as a background prop but also hints at the progression of the story (Fu, 2013: 226).

Firstly, the band's music sounded louder and gayer, opened the entire park stage play. During this season of entertainment, the overall atmosphere in the park was relaxed and cheerful, and Miss Brill, enjoyed the performance with great interest. The band conductor was fully engaged, too.

“He scraped with his foot and flapped his arms like a rooster about to crow, and the bandsmen sitting in the green rotunda blew out their cheeks and glared at the music.”

In this passage, the author employs a significant amount of synesthetic and onomatopoeic language, where "scraped" means to rub, "flapped" signifies swinging or waving, and "crow" imitates the posture of a rooster crowing, as if one can hear and see the band conductor rubbing his foot on the ground and conducting enthusiastically. "Blew out" with [au] as the wide-open diphthong in "out" depicts the image of the band members puffing their cheeks while playing their instruments. Next, the sound of the flute is heard.

"Now there came a little 'flutey' bit-very pretty!-a little chain of bright drops."

In this context, the author uses smooth, flowing vowels such as [ei] and [i], along with soft consonants such as [l], [f], [b], [v], and [p], to imitate the lively rhythm and movement of the music. Additionally, the author employs synaesthetic rhetoric by describing the music in terms of visual imagery, by transferring auditory signals to visual imagery. As "sounds move people, and make them think of shapes," the music played by the band belongs to the auditory signal, while "a little chain of bright drops" belongs to the visual imagery. The author likens the sound of the flute to drops of water, emphasizing the crispness of the flute sound and conveying Miss Brill's refreshing and relaxed mood on a pleasant autumn day.

Next, the author expands the auscultation from Miss Brill's side to the entire band rotunda's space. She listens to the chatter of passersby in the park, the running and laughing of children, the interactions... The author uses a combination of direct onomatopoeia and synesthesia to present a vibrant soundscape.

“Little children ran among them, swooping and laughing”“And sometimes a tiny stagerer came suddenly rocking into the open from under the trees, stopped, stared, as suddenly sat down "flop," until its small high-stepping mother, like a young hen, rushed scolding to its rescue.”

The onomatopoeic word "swooping" vividly describes the dynamic scene of children playing and moving around in the crowd, while "flop" describes the sound and appearance of a child sitting down on the ground. The vivid metaphor of "high-stepping" and "young hen" portrays the mother's hurried actions realistically, as if the silent movement of things has a sound wave and the visual experience has an auditory perception. At the same time, the author uses a series of [s] and [z] sounds to describe the actions in the scene such as "suddenly," "stopped," "stared," "sat," "scolding," and "rescue." [z] and [s] sounds are often considered to symbolize the soft and quiet sounds of wind, water, and rustling leaves. The concentration of these sounds in two sentences reflects the peaceful atmosphere of the park and Miss Brill's comfortable and calm mood immersed in the crowd. In this lively soundscape, the band played a more cheerful tune, "Tum-tum-tum tiddle-um! tiddle-um! tum tiddley-um tum ta! blew the band." In auditory narration, onomatopoeic words are used to represent sounds, which are concrete sources of sound that are more closely related to sensory perception. They can greatly enhance the vividness and imagery of text and are a unique auditory descriptive expression in literature. This fast-paced rhythm creates an atmosphere that portrays Miss Brill's cheerful mood and also echoes her inner voice - she yearns to integrate into society and is full of enthusiasm and longing for life.

Accompanied by joyful music, a colorful crowd passes before Miss Brill's eyes, drawing her attention to the encounter between a woman wearing an ermine toque and a man in gray.

“But he shook his head, lighted a cigarette, slowly breathed a great deep puff into her face, and even while she was still talking and laughing, flicked the match away and walked on.”

Here, the warm greeting of the ermine toque is rudely treated by the arrogant gentleman in gray. The sound effect of the word "puff" conveys an impact through the explosive consonant [p] and a frivolous feeling through the fricative [f]. In "flicked," the "fl" sound suggests a sudden action, while the consonants [k] and [t] are more sharp and convey a sense of rigidity and coarseness. These two onomatopoeic words vividly describe the impolite and arrogant posture of the gentleman in gray.

Then, the band plays a soft melody accompanied by a low drumbeat, repeating "The Brute! The Brute!" over and over. The voiced consonant [b] in "brute" is associated with a deep and unpleasant sound. The gentle melody of

the band seems to sympathize with the experience of the ermine toque, while the heavy drumbeat appears to be roaring in Miss Brill's heart, "heartless person!" From the description in the previous passage, we can find similarities between Miss Brill and the ermine toque: they both long to connect with the outside world and integrate into society, but are outdated and excluded by society, yet still face life with strength. However, when the ermine toque seems to have a new encounter, everything seems to reignite hope. "The band changed again and played more quickly, more gayly than ever." At this moment, the band's music becomes lively and upbeat. The powerful music signifies that the story is gradually reaching its climax, and Miss Brill's heart is now bright and clear. Everything in her eyes is charming and lovely, as if there are many interesting things waiting for her to discover.

During the band's break, Miss Brill engaged in rich inner activity. Surrounded by the harmonious soundscape of the park's "hi-fi" atmosphere, her soul was enlightened by the influence of the wonderful things around her. She felt that social life was a great stage, and that she was an indispensable actor on it. At this moment, the band began playing a lively and upbeat tune, filling the entire flower bed scene and becomes the keynote sound, as if providing an impassioned accompaniment for the actor who was eager to sing high on the stage, creating an exciting and joyful atmosphere.

"The tune lifted, lifted, the light shone." The melody continued to rise, and then men, women, young and old in the park all began to sing: "The young ones, the laughing ones who were moving together," "the men's voices, very resolute and brave," "she too, she too, and the others on the benches--they would come in with a kind of accompaniment--something low, that scarcely rose or fell, something so beautiful--moving."

In this chorus fantasy of the stage, the author used short vowels such as [i] and [ɔ] to convey a gentle and melodious feeling, while using long vowels and diphthongs such as [ɑ:], [u:], [eɪ], and [əʊ] to convey the passionate and grand feeling of the readers singing along. The clever combination of flowing sounds [l], nasal sounds [m], [ŋ], and other consonants that symbolize peaceful and harmonious sound elements more realistically depicted the humming of the song. In this climax part of the symphony, it also reflects the rising mood of Miss Brill. In her eyes, the strangers around her were willing to communicate with her, as if they could feel each other's warmth, and everything was in a harmonious atmosphere. She was looking forward to the progress of the story.

However, the arrival of the imagined protagonist did not bring Miss Brill's world into clarity; instead, it led to the disillusionment of her ideal world. The harsh words of the young man and woman caused her sense of belonging to disappear, and loneliness once again surrounded her. At this point, the background music of the band abruptly stopped. In place of the music, the author described Miss Brill's desolate state upon returning home:

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

In this paragraph, the author repeated the consonant phonemes [k] and [t], which are pronounced with difficulty, to give the reader a sense of the heavy and violent feelings, allowing the reader to feel Miss Brill's heavy mood and difficult steps on her way home. From the happy illusion to the reality, the silence of the band's background music implies the shattering of Miss Brill's illusionary world, and lets the reader hear more clearly the protagonist's inner sadness, a "deep sense of helplessness" emerges. The characters created by Mansfield jointly present a conflicting experience, that is, the "split self" that both desires acceptance from the group and values individual development. They are always in emotional exile under the struggle of conflicting emotions (Martin, 2013). Miss Brill longs to integrate into society but is rejected by the mainstream group, and she eventually locks herself in a cage of emotional alienation, fallen into the gap of ideal disillusionment.

In literary auditory narrative descriptions, the author uses onomatopoeia and synesthesia to depict the dynamic sound environment in the park, allowing readers to experience the lively or tranquil atmosphere in the park, and creating a powerful artistic appeal. The music played by the band serves as background music, and its changes in rhythm and melody imply the progression of events, corresponding to the protagonist's emotional fluctuations and inner world changes. Readers can explore the protagonist's spiritual fluctuations and realizations in the "sound text".

5. Conclusion

In her stories, Mansfield skillfully integrates stream-of-consciousness with characters' perception, feelings, and reactions to the environment, creating a vivid and resonant experience for the reader. The protagonist in her works is adept at creating illusions of group identity for herself, and their social participation often becomes alienated rather than real. Some scholars have criticized Mansfield's works as "full of endless wandering, without center, without fixed identity and status, and without eternal meaning" (Song Xiaoping, 2000). The historic dominance of vision has not only minimized the critical energy devoted to histories and cultures of sound and hearing but has also shaped the understandings of particular sites of modernity, such as the city, which have revolved around spectacle and the gaze (Snaith, 2020). Narrating stories from a traditional visual perspective inevitably places characters under the fixed gaze of social stereotypes. In the auditory dimension, the binary opposition between observer and observed disappears. As a medium, sound is pervasive, ever-present, constantly reverberating, and penetrating, and more flexible. Through the protagonist's "auditory I," readers perceive her interaction with the surrounding world. This not only deepens their understanding of the character's inner consciousness but also quickly switches between narrative events, maintaining a continuous relationship between character and event. In "Miss Brill," the author's description of a series of sound events not only brings poetic beauty to the novel but also portrays the rich inner world of the female protagonist in a state of survival crisis. The new sensory experience breaks the traditional gaze perspective, and the subjectivity of the characters in the novel is fully reflected. Although Miss Brill is a lonely wanderer in the story, even though society lacks care and tolerance for the elderly in strange places, she still bravely pursues her ideal world of harmony and friendship, exploring the beauty in the details of life with a youthful attitude. The auditory dimension of narration not only allows readers to listen deeply to the voice of Miss Brill, but also brings a new fragrance to the interpretation of the classic text.

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