

The Concept of Bergsonian Time in Mansfield's 'Miss Brill'

Mansfield'in 'Miss Brill' Öyküsünde Bergsoncu Zaman Kavramı

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Abstract: Katherine Mansfield is a well-known writer in short fiction genre in English. Miss Brill is one of her most widely discussed stories which explores the concepts of alienation, loneliness, isolation and consciousness through the characterization of the protagonist. Like those of many modernist writers, Mansfield's literary style was influenced by Henri Bergson whose philosophy is grounded on the concept of time. Both the form and content of her stories are reflections of Bergsonian time. Specifically, this study deals with Mansfield's story entitled Miss Brill and analyses it in terms of the concept of duration as proposed by Bergson.

Keywords: Katherine Mansfield, Bergson, Miss Brill, Bergsonian time, duration.

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Introduction

In the literary circle, the French philosopher Henri Bergson is widely associated with Virginia Woolf and James Joyce who are successful representatives of stream of consciousness technique. However, Katherine Mansfield's innovations in the short fiction genre, her focus on the psychological moment and her use of stream of consciousness technique were ignored in the literary world of modernism. Today, Mansfield's stories read, studied and appreciated. However, still, there are few studies that question the link between Mansfield's stories and the philosophy of Bergson. Therefore, this study is important to enhance the literature about how literary criticism can approach Mansfield and Bergson with regard to the concept of time and consciousness.

Mansfield was born in New Zealand, educated in London and spent her life in various geographies like New Zealand, London and France. As a New Zealander living in different places in Europe, she is associated with feminism, post colonialism, modernism and she deals with the issues of nationality, gender and class differences in her short fiction. She had much influence on the development of the short story as a new genre to which she dedicated herself. The characters in her stories have psychological conflicts narrated through thoughts about themselves or others.

Although Mansfield was not read in connection with Bergson by most of the literary critics, her interest in the philosophy of Bergson can be recognized in her attachment to the Bergsonian magazine *Rhythm*. Mansfield's early works were published in the magazine *Rhythm* which displayed Bergsonian notion of the balance between intuition and intellect. "Rhythm aimed to be a Bergsonian magazine and her collaboration on it in 1912 and 1913 was especially formative in the development of Bergsonian traits in her writing" (Nakano, 2011, 30). As mentioned here, there are some critics who are able to trace the Bergsonian effects in Mansfield's fiction.

Today many critics relate Mansfield to Literary Modernism which was a radical break with the past and the concurrent search for new forms of expression, from the late 19th to the mid-20th century. Modernism is a result of cross-cultural and international interactions among the writers



and artists between Britain, Europe and America. The exchanges that took place due to these journeys reflect what we now understand to be modernism. Modernism represents a charming but frightening confrontation with the other and enabled the contacts among distinct cultures. Mansfield lived, studied and wrote within a colonial geography and her art is a reflection of a New Zealand-born modernist traveller. "... it is Mansfield who demonstrates par excellence how aspects of what we now term modernism crystallized around certain colonial experiences (in particular, of exile and cultural alienation), and colonial and nascent national energies (especially of making new)" (Boehmer, 2011, 59).

The Russian writer Anton Chekhov's writings were also sources of inspiration for many modernist writers in England including Mansfield. Conventionalism of the English fiction was shaken by a note of interrogation at the end. The open-endedness of the short story or novel allows the readers to comprehend on their own. Mansfield used the term "question put" in order to describe the interrogative, open-ended style of Chekhov which she believed to "clear a space for the self beyond the confines of an inauthentic, mass-mediated, commodity-saturated modern culture" (Hunter, 2007, 46).

Like other modernist writers, Mansfield experimented new forms in short fiction triggered by the new ideas in psychology, philosophy, and political theory. Her reputation as a major modernist lies in her themes pointing her discomfort with the negative sides of modernity and in her experimentation of stream of consciousness technique in narrating her story. The fiction written with stream of consciousness technique captures and evinces the flow of the characters' mental processes by the use of long and disorderly sentence structures. As pointed out by Hunter "Mansfield set out to eliminate the personal intrusion in the narrative, to remove traces of the author's voice, in effect, by bringing the narration closer to a specific character's consciousness and away from interpretation by an omniscient narrator" (2007, 75). In order to represent the richness of the working mind, the writers do not hesitate to combine incoherent thoughts represented with ungrammatical constructions. The technique offers the reader to go through new insights into the constructions of inner voice and self. As a result Mansfield's stories can be appre-



ciated as reflections of modernist experimentation and examples of plotless short story which run against the readers' precepts and expectations.

Bergsonian Concept of Time

Henri Bergson is a French philosopher, the first to elaborate the process philosophy and he had mastery in literary criticism which brought him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1927. Besides his fame for philosophy, he was a philosopher who had powerful influence on modernist writers, including Mansfield in the early 20th Century. Although Mansfield is not a writer popularly associated with Bergson, her role in introducing Bergsonian concepts to British literary society cannot be underestimated. The relation between Mansfield and Bergson can be depicted from Mansfield's devotion to the Bergsonian magazine *Rhythm*. Additionally, her short stories mirror the core concept of time in Bergson's philosophy. In order to depict and analyse the Bergsonian reflections on Mansfield's short story *Miss Brill*, it is necessary to touch on the concepts of time, duration, intellect, intuition and self.

In his *Time and Free Will*, which was published in 1889, Bergson attempted to establish the concept of duration, which led to a classification between lived time and spatialized time. Gündoğan argues that the ideas put forward about time will provide answers for what reality is. According to Gündoğan time is a continuous flow of states of consciousness and mind. It is a concrete reality and a state of existence. The flow of the states of consciousness represents the real time which Bergson calls duration. Duration and motion are synthesis of the mind, but not a relation of objects or materials to one another. Mathematics, physics and geometry are mistaken for spatializing time (Gündoğan, 2013, 73, 74). The distinction between place and consciousness and time and duration are made clear by Bergson in his *Time and Free Will*. Later in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, which was published in 1903, Bergson proposed that one can have the knowledge of something either with intellect or with intuition. The two ways of knowing leads to two kinds of things that can be known. The intellect can know the material because the nature of the intellect is in conformity with the nature of material. The area of material is that of



objects and geometry. The intellect spatializes time and so misses the reality of the creative time. Bergson developed and explored the concept of intuition in *Introduction to Metaphysics* and argued that the real time can directly be presented to us through intuition (Bergson, 1999, 28). Science is analytic, spatializing and conceptualising time. On the other hand a second way of knowing things is intuition which is immediate and which reaches into the core of things. Intuition knows vital impulse *élan vital*, a concept he proposed in his *Creative Evolution* which was published in 1907. The intuition knows the spirit, life, creation, becoming, and duration by directing diffusing in the object.

Bergson argues that metaphysics can complete the sciences by clarifying the real meanings of duration, becoming and evolution via intuition. That's why his philosophy focuses on the concept of duration. The concrete duration is the real time. However, the scientific time is not real because it ignores the mobility of time and explains time in terms of immobility and inactivity. The real time, duration is what we experience immediately. Duration leaves no room for measurement. Duration is the irreversible succession of states of consciousness interpenetrating in order to form an indivisible process. The duration can best be experienced during sleep when the consciousness does not measure time but feels it. The consciousness conceives duration via intuition.

Bergson exemplifies the comprehension of the reality by interpenetrating in the object with the illustration of a novel which describes the external things about a character. The reader can get a picture of the character in terms of the physical things provided for him. However, such a description would not give the real successive and indivisible sense of the character in the novel. The features of the character expressed in the novel are representations of him through a number of symbols. The appearances and symbols leave me external to the character and I cannot conceive the true nature of the character because it is internal to the self. But, what happens when I interpenetrate in him and find a correspondence between myself and the character is intuition.

According to Bergson there are two types of time: the time that is used to describe and live in the external world, which Bergson calls homogeneous time and the time that is internal to the individual's self and



consciousness which Bergson calls duration or heterogeneous time. The former type can be divided into equal sections, measured and counted. Homogeneous time is time that is spatialized and it is the sum of the points on a straight line. The latter is duration which Bergson regards as the real time, cannot be measured and described via the terminology of space. The two types of time in Bergson's philosophy lead him to investigate the relation between duration and space. He asserts that when duration is independent of space and the measurement of duration is spatializing time and reducing it to the state of homogeneity. The measurement of duration will just provide a symbolic representation of real heterogeneous time which is the direct successive life.

In this manner, Bergson proposes that there are two ways of knowing time; one is with the intellect, while the other is with intuition. Intellectual time is recognized through a chronological order. The intellect divides time into artificial units like moments, hours, days etc. Intellectually, time is associated with quantity. The condition that similar actions are repeated by same people at the same time every day is related to the intellectual sense of time. Intellectual time is that which has already passed, can no longer be lived. We can think of the time that has passed or represent it in certain ways but cannot act in it. In terms of intuition, time is experienced psychologically and as a process. Intuitive time is what Bergson calls duration. Intuition connects time as a flow of consciousness and associates it with quality. Regarding to the intuitive sense of time, it is impossible to repeat the same action since the same moment cannot be experienced again once it has flown. Intuition which Bergson believes to be a way of the knowing the absolute being and which Bergson asserts to be the method of metaphysics can be differentiated from all the previous arguments about the concept (Topçu, 2006, 75).

Bergson insists on the quality of duration, existing as consciousness and never remaining the same. Duration which is essentially of a purely qualitative nature changes and transforms continuously. The moments of duration blend and interpenetrate in an organic whole. Bergson illustrates the quality successive of duration with the flowing of a melody, in which the notes are blended. "At this level, therefore, time comes to be conceived as a succession of qualitative states of consciousness, all different



but intimately connected" (di Bernardo, 2016, 39). Life flows incessantly and duration is a continuous living process in which each moment resolves in itself and flows incessantly to the next and creates that which is to come.

Time and Free Will is believed to be an attack on Kant's idea of freedom in which freedom is a realm outside of space and time. Bergson proposed the differentiation between space and time in order to define freedom which he also calls consciousness. He defines duration as the immediate data of consciousness which he argues to be temporal. The experience of freedom can only be thought in terms of duration which is a qualitative multiplicity. Bergson proposes that qualitative multiplicity is composed of temporal heterogeneity, which he differentiates from quantitative multiplicity. The homogeneous multiplicity is exemplified in *Time and Free Will* with a flock of sheep (Bergson, 2001, 77). Each sheep in the flock looks alike and we notice not qualitative feature when we look over them all. However, as each sheep is spatially separated from the others, it is possible to count them which give us the quantitative multiplicity.

Qualitative multiplicity is defined as duration which Bergson tries to clarify with the example of the feeling of sympathy. The experience of sympathy begins with putting ourselves in the place of others. The root of sympathy is the feeling of horror: we feel that if we do not help, it is probable that no one will help us when we are in need. The help for the suffering emerges from a need. These are the phases of inferior forms of pity, heterogeneity of feelings (Bergson, 2001, 19). "... the feelings are continuous with one another; they interpenetrate one another, and there is even an opposition between inferior needs and superior needs. A qualitative multiplicity is therefore heterogeneous (or singularized), continuous (or interpenetrating), oppositional (or dualistic) at the extremes, and progressive (or temporal, an irreversible flow, which is not given all at once)" (Lawlor and Moulard, 2016). The qualitative multiplicity cannot be expressed by symbols and is even inexpressible.

Duration is internal time, the time of active living and cannot be applied to the world outside the self. Inner time or experienced time resists spatializing. Real time is qualitative, not a quantitative in nature. No state can remain permanent nor can recur. Human beings need to construct an



external reality which is the only way for them to have an existence outside their inner world. The real experience of life, duration has to be spatialized, broken into segments so that it can be measured and reconstructed. For Bergson both internal world of duration and external, spatialized world are necessary for human existence. “To remain always in duration would result in an isolated existence bordering on madness, for humans need the society of others. Yet to live always in external time is equally destructive, for this would prevent genuine growth and self-knowledge” (Gillies, 1996, 13).

Although Bergson makes a striking differentiation between intuitive and intellectual senses of time, he also asserts that they are inseparable in human consciousness because they are caused by the degree of tension of consciousness. “Time is not only internally and intuitively perceived but also intellectually externalized and spatialized” (Nakano, 2011, 31). However, Bergson focuses on duration as a multiplicity which is both continuous and heterogeneous. His idea of time as intuition and as flow of moments can be associated with the stream of consciousness technique, popularly used as a narration technique by modernist writers like Woolf, Joyce and Mansfield.

Mansfield’s “Miss Brill” of Modernity

Miss Brill is one of Mansfield’s well-known short stories and was published in her collection entitled *The Garden Party and Other Stories*. The story focuses on one character’s state of consciousness as she experiences an ordinary Sunday in a park. The protagonist is named as Miss Brill all through the story; the reader is not informed about the first name of the main character because there is no one around her and in her environment to call her with her first name. Through her thoughts the reader understands how she lives, what she usually does and how she feels. It is possible to consider the story as plotless because the character is not engaged in considerable activities.

The story begins with an ordinary Sunday of a middle-aged lady who regularly goes to a park to watch and think over the people in the park. Therefore, the setting of the story is *Jardins Publiques*, a park close to Miss Brill’s flat. The reader is informed about the profession of Miss



Brill; she is an Englishwoman who lives in France and teaches English to her French pupils. It is implied that she hasn't made meaningful relationships with her pupils or their families. She has difficulty in relating to her students because "she had a queer, shy feeling at telling her English pupils how she spent her Sunday afternoons" (Mansfield, 1922, 187). Her displacement and the lack of connection with the people in the town are basis for her loneliness. In the exposition, the story's focus is on her fur which has long stayed in its box and waited for the cold weather in order to be used by its best friend. The fur is personified when Miss Brill talks to it and cares for it like a dear mate. "Little rogue" she calls it as if a dear but absent friend has just arrived from a trip (Mansfield, 1922, 18). It is as if Miss Brill tries to cope with her loneliness by personification of the fur.

We have pointed that Miss Brill's relation to the people in her neighbourhood is almost none. Yet, she tries to make a contact with others through eavesdropping, her favourite activity in the park. She tries to interpenetrate to the lives of other people by observing them and listening to their conversations secretly, without an attempt to take part in them. Her routine is such that she strolls through the *Jardins Publiques*, listens to the band, watches the actions and appearances of people, eavesdrops and returns home after buying almond cakes on her way. Eavesdropping gives her a chance to go into the lives of other people, learn about their relationships, feelings and quarrels. Eavesdropping can be regarded as another way to cope with her loneliness.

It is clear that every Sunday the park is visited by the same people and all visitors are familiar with Miss Brill and she even knows the benches they usually sit on or the clothes they wore the week before. It is as if they are her relatives, family or friends. She observes the members of the band, focusing on the conductor and remembering what they played before. She views an old couple in fine clothes but not speaking with each other. Miss Brill is disappointed by the silence of the old couple for two reasons: one is that she cannot eavesdrop if they sit in silence and the other is that their silence echoes her own silent existence in the park. Later, she goes on observation of an English husband and wife, the man being very patient and doing his best to please her and the woman being persistent and dissatisfied. Miss Brill criticizes the lady for her discontent



and is annoyed because they are unable to appreciate the value of a family. Then, Miss Brill looks back at the old couple and sees that they are still silent while the little boys, girls and all children are running, laughing and speaking. What Miss Brill concludes about most of the people sitting on the benches or green chairs is that they are always the same. She sees them as “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!” (Mansfield, 1922, 185). Miss Brill’s humiliation of most of the locals in the park gives the reader the idea that she is not sharing any characteristics with these people, something which turns out to be the opposite at the end of the story. The irony of situation occurs when the reader realizes that all the negative features which Miss Brill adopts for others are reflections of her own features. Similarly, she scorns for a middle-aged woman who is wearing an ermine toque which she finds old fashioned and shabby. Later, the reader discovers that Miss Brill’s own fur is old and shabby.

The reader is amazed at her pleasure from sitting in the park and watching around. The reason given for this joy is Miss Brill’s illusion of life as a play. “It was like a play. It was exactly like a play. (...) 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. No doubt somebody would have noticed if she hadn’t been there; she was part of the performance after all” (Mansfield, 1922, 187). She imagines that life is a play in which all people in the environment including herself are actors and actresses. She is part of that performance and believes that her absence will be recognized. This is the third way she tries to cope with her loneliness. She is actually detached from her surroundings and her illusion convinces herself that she is an important figure on the stage. This is her escapist fantasy to ignore her isolation.

The climax of the story is when Miss Brill hears the cruel comments of a beautiful young couple about her. When she sees the couple approaching, she assigns them the roles of the hero and the heroine of the play. Contrarily, she realizes that the couple prefers she weren’t there in the park, with her fur which they compare to a “fried whiting”. 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?" (Mansfield, 1922, 188). This is when Miss Brill realizes that she is not wanted or appreciated in that play, on that stage. The conversation is important for Miss Brill to wake her up to the world of reality. She is so upset in the real world that she passes by the bakery without buying her favourite almond cake, the final activity in her Sunday routine. When Miss Brill goes into her flat, the reader realizes the flat is of one "dark room- her room like a cupboard" (Mansfield, 1922, 189). This is a situational irony because the reader was expecting that others in the park whom she scorned are living in cupboard-like rooms but she was not. She finally puts her fur necklet into its small box and Miss Brill imagines the cries of her best mate. This is another reflection of her feelings on the fur by personification. The fur necklet is a symbol Mansfield used to represent the actual condition of the protagonist. The fur and the protagonist share features like being old, out-of-date, isolated, imprisoned in small housing.

The story is a successful representation of the stream of consciousness technique, where the narrative mode portrays Miss Brill's point of view by giving the written equivalent of the protagonist's thought processes. The reader gets to know the consciousness of the protagonist through the actions of the character and her thoughts about others around. Her consciousness encourages us think that she is young, beautiful, well-dressed, admirable, rich and living in a big house. Yet, all the reality about Miss Brill appears to be the opposite at the end of the story. The stream of consciousness technique helps Mansfield to create a story manifesting a contrast between appearances and reality through the thoughts of the main character.

The contrast between appearance and reality is further expanded to the illustration of the main theme of alienation. The protagonist is estranged from her environment and suffers from loneliness. Miss Brill does not reveal it in her thoughts about herself, but, it is implied with her thoughts about other people in the park. We conclude that she is a lonely woman having no family, which is suggested by her title *Miss Brill* of an isolating formality. The reader is never introduced to her on a personal level because of the absence of her first name. Her illusion of the play on



a stage shows how she imagined a connection with the others in the park. Her suffering from extreme loneliness and alienation hits the top when she imagines that her fur is crying which is a reflection of her own.

Conclusion

As suggested in the introduction of the present paper, Bergson is a philosopher of great influence on modernism and modernist writers including Mansfield. The paper aimed to reassess Mansfield's story entitled *Miss Brill* in connection with Bergson. Mansfield's story manifests how she uses short story genre to deal with Bergsonian concepts of time, intellect, intuition, duration and self.

The use of stream of consciousness narration technique is what makes us link her style to Bergson's idea of consciousness. The plotless story is revealed through the thought processes of the protagonist. Her thoughts about her environment and other people are displays of her consciousness. She is not engaged in any conversation or activity with others, but she goes through a process of contemplation. She is physically immobile, yet mobile in thought. The continuity in her thinking seems to be an everlasting process of characterization. All through the story we get to know the main character via her ideas about other people. The use of similes and metaphors in the story serves for showing how the character links and compares various things in her consciousness. The continuous thought process of Miss Brill echoes Bergson's idea of life's continuity. Life does not stop, rather goes on moving and this evolutionary process is guided by vital impetus. Miss Brill changes and evolves while constantly experiencing and observing new people and eavesdropping their conversations. The stream of consciousness technique implies that there are no breaks within Miss Brill's consciousness. The character moves from one character to another in her observation and thought process without ever thinking about herself. The very long and compound sentences Mansfield uses are presentations of this continuity.

Mansfield's protagonist creates an illusion in which the park is a stage and the people including Miss Brill are actors and actresses. She has her own part in that play and her absence will be a loss. This turns out to be the opposite when Miss Brill recognizes the homogenous artificial



sense of time which is spatialized. This is when the character is woken up from her dream into the spatialized time and world. The conversation between the young couple helps the reader to realize the condition of Miss Brill. The same conversation is also a means of realization of the self when the protagonist is in question.

The flow of her consciousness is Miss Brill's intuitive experience of time which Bergson calls duration. Intuition is what makes her connect up the flow of mental experiences. However, Miss Brill is triggered by the conversation of the young couple and finds herself in the artificial sense of time. Miss Brill's experience of knowing time both with the intellect and the intuition is a reflection of Bergson's argument that intuition and intellect are inseparable in human consciousness. Here, Mansfield explores the balance between intuition and intellect, the dynamic and the static. Yet, Mansfield's stream of consciousness technique directs the readers' attention to intuition rather than intellect.

Miss Brill repeatedly compares and contrasts the present and the past of the people she observes. The condition of the conductor of the band that week is contrasted that of the last. The present and the past of the lady with ermine toque is another point of comparison for Miss Brill. The coming-and-going between the present and the past in consciousness recalls Bergson's idea of the present which never exists in an intuitive sense because it is a becoming. Bergson emphasizes the unity of the present and the past, arguing that human consciousness moves freely between them. Both the flowing time and the time that has flown are united.

Bergson's special interest in duration is reflected in the formal features of Mansfield's *Miss Brill*. Bergson asserts that short sentences are symbolical representations and longer sentences represent duration. The use of long sentences in *Miss Brill* helps the reader meet the character in duration. Mansfield's use of various adjectives one after another as modifiers of a noun implies continuity and heterogeneity. One adjective is inefficient to describe the changing self. The intensive use of present participle signals a sense of presence and continuity. The reader is conscious of time which is fleeting right now.

As discussed in this paper in depth, Mansfield is one of the authors



associated with literary modernism. It is also argued that Henri Bergson was a strong influence on the novelists and short story writers as well as the philosophers of his era. His ideas on the concept of time related to the notions of duration, consciousness, heterogeneity have affected the well-known British modernists like Woolf, Joyce and Mansfield. The concern of the present study was Mansfield, specifically her story entitled *Miss Brill*. After an analysis of the story, the connection between Mansfield's style as manifested in *Miss Brill* and Bergson's conceptualization of time. Unlike the many studies in literature, it has been proposed that the story in question reflects Bergsonian concepts by means of stream of consciousness narration technique.

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Öz: Katherine Mansfield İngiliz Edebiyatında kısa öykü türünde öne çıkan yazarlardan birisidir. Miss Brill, yabancılaşma, yalnızlık, tecrit ve bilinç kavramlarının, başkahramanın betimlenmesi yoluyla incelendiği, yazarın en çok tartışılan öykülerinden birisidir. Pek çok yenilikçi yazar gibi, Mansfield'in edebi tarzı da, felsefesini zaman kavramı üzerine temellendirmiş Henri Bergson'dan etkilenerek şekillenmiştir. Öykülerinin gerek biçimsel gerekse içeriksel nitelikleri Bergsoncu zaman kavramının yansımalarıdır. Bu çalışmada, özellikle, Mansfield'in Miss Brill başlıklı öyküsü üzerine yoğunlaşarak, Bergson'un ortaya koyduğu süre kavramı ile bağlantılı bir inceleme yapılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Katherine Mansfield, Bergson, Miss Brill, Bergsoncu zaman, süre.

