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Miss Brill vs Identities: The Effects of Marginalization on the Human Psyche

Literary researchers cannot explain everything with universal structures, but one cannot deny they seem to exist. As long as there is a human condition, with universal characteristics, why shouldn't they? Most of the time, meaning or the "universal truths" that power literature don't significantly change with time. Significance, however, does change. Universality in literature goes far beyond blatantly obvious lessons found in children’s books; “Listen to your parents.” “Eat your vegetables.” With the style of interpretive fiction, it can be used to offer simplified versions of otherwise monumental lessons. Lessons on life, morals, and finding one’s own identity. Interpretive fiction is important because it forces us to reflect on our understanding of the world as we know it. In the case of Miss Brill and the protagonist of Identities-- two characters in completely different stories and settings-- they both undergo a period of emotional growth that we, as readers, can empathize with. At first glance, the two protagonists have nearly nothing in common. One is a woman from another time, seeming happily stuck in her own world, while the other is an affluent man trying to figure out how to use this identity that he did not want. **Both stories utilize thematic/ literary devices to reveal that how people view others is often not based on knowledge, or experiences had, but more often based on how an individual has been taught to perceive certain people by the hierarchical socio-economic structure of society.**

With marginalization, people are thrust to the outskirts of society. How people cope with the feelings of isolation that come along with it is personal. In Miss Brill, her creating a companion out of the fox fur reveals an insight into her imagination and gives a hint as to how lonely she really is. “She had become really an expert, she thought, at listening as though she didn’t listen, at sitting in on other people’s lives just for a minute while they talked round her.” (Mansfield) The difference between Miss Brill and the protagonist of Identities is that while she placed herself in the “centre stage” in order to feel significant, he voluntarily shied away from it as an attempt to learn something about himself. “That is part of the beauty of all literature. You discover that your longings are universal longings, that you're not lonely and isolated from anyone. You belong.” (F. Scott Fitzgerald)

At, one point or another, people want to try being someone they’re not, usually to achieve a feeling of belonging. This is a natural concept for human beings; think back to “playing pretend” as a young child. It’s a common belief that this period of desire to escape is limited to the teenage years, but these short stories absolve said idea. The stark contrast of the beginning versus the ending of Miss Brill and Identities further prove that once people have a taste of emotional growth, it is difficult to go back to one’s own old self, even for moments at one’s innermost convenience. “When he turns part way round and recognizes the uniform, he does not feel fear but relief.” (Valgardson) A good example would be that of a crab, shedding its shell. It can try many times, but once a shell has been outgrown; it is eventually abandoned, no matter how long it takes.

Identities, like shells, are always growing and changing. Both authors use irony as a device to reveal how each protagonist is oblivious to the source of their problems/ lack of perception. In French, “briller” means shine. Miss Brill’s name is heavily ironic because of her utter lack of sparkle in the eyes of others, such as the young lady who was pointing out her shabby furs. “So intent is he upon the future that he dangerously ignores the present...” (Valgardson) The unlucky protagonist featured in Identities remained so preoccupied with his internal perceptions that he failed to notice how others were viewing him—leading to his eventual demise.

Despite having both characters go through intense situations, one theme consistently rings true; being willing to adapt and cooperate is valuable. Valgardson takes on a hazy, dream-like approach when dealing with the protagonist’s internal conflicts, while Mansfield has a view geared towards aesthetics. The stylistic writing choices only add to the idea of how people’s opinions are easily influenced by others—more often than one would want to think. Internal biases and prejudices play a big role in affecting how individuals make assumptions about others in society.