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Perception Isn’t Always Reality

Because of human nature, what we perceive is often not reality. The stories “Miss Brill”*,* by Katherine Mansfield, and “Identities”*,* by W.D. Valgardson, demonstrate this idea. These authors reveal this theme through the use of contrast, irony, and through the protagonists’ journey in these two stories. The stories demonstrate that one’s self-perception differs from reality. Often, one only learns this reality through the collective perceptions of the world with which we interact. Unfortunately, these collective perceptions can be guided by stereotypes or judgement.

Although the motivation of the protagonists in these two stories is different, they both contribute to the understanding of a similar theme. In *Miss Brill*, our protagonist, Miss Brill, seeks companionship and connection with others. She finds this connection by going to the park and sitting in on other people’s lives in an unobtrusive way. She wears her fur coat, which to a point, is an extension of herself. It is the item that she wears every Sunday to feel like she has a companion, or a ‘husband’ of sorts. The protagonist in *Identities* finds himself to be exhausted of his ‘perfect’ life in his pleasant neighborhood. He seeks adventure, just as Miss Brill does. He does this not for the reason of finding connection and companionship, however, but because he is not content with his current life, where he supposedly has everything that ‘success’ entails. He goes to a poorer neighborhood where he thinks that he will find this adventure and tries to blend in through his clothes and his beard. Through Miss Brill’s Sunday rituals, she feels connected and content, despite her social status. Through her fur coat, she feels connected; in reality, she is alone. The man in *Identities*, thinking he could blend in with his surroundings, is perceived as a dangerous thief, who gets shot because of the way he is perceived. The main difference between Miss Brill and the man in *Identities* is that Miss Brill is poor but happy, whereas the man is ‘successful’ but discontent. They both, however, come to a similar downfall.

The authors of these two short stories demonstrate the use of contrast, in the progression from light to dark, to reveal that the protagonists’ self-perceptions are different from the perceptions of themselves by those around them. In the beginning of “Miss Brill”, Miss Brill describes “the blue sky powdered with gold and great spots of light like white wine splashed over the Jardins Publiques.” Mansfield’s description of the sky illustrates Miss Brill’s joyous mood as she goes through her Sunday rituals. Later in the story, a young couple mocks Miss Brill and the story progresses into darkness as Miss Brill returns to her “little dark room – her room like a cupboard.” In “Identities”, our protagonist starts off in the pleasant neighborhood mentioning that “the houses all face the sun.” This is symbolic of the peacefulness and happiness of the neighborhood he lives in. As *Identities* reaches its climax, however, the story ends in darkness. This darkness is both metaphorical, as the cop kills our protagonist, and literal in the way the story ends at night or “on the edge of light”. The closer the protagonists in these two stories approach darkness, the closer they arrive at the climax of the story. Reaching the climax, the protagonists also reach their downfall. The difference between these two stories is that Miss Brill is made fully aware of her downfall, making her a dynamic and tragic character. The protagonist in *Identities*, however, dies before he can experience his downfall.

Both Mansfield and Valgardson use irony to reveal to the reader that anyone can be the perpetrator or victim of biased perception. In *Miss Brill*, dramatic irony us used to depict Miss Brill’s tragic flaw. She is revealed to be not only a victim of stereotyped perception, but also a perpetrator of it too. Miss Brill begins the story describing others as old and lonely, as if “they’d just come from dark little rooms or even – even cupboards.” She, however, is later judged in the same way by the young couple that she initially admires. She too, returns to her “little dark room – her room like a cupboard.” In *Identities*, the protagonist “hopes his day-old beard… will, when combined with his clothes, provide immunity.” What he thinks is providing him immunity, is ironically what leads to the downfall of his death. He judges others based on their appearances, associating them with characteristics of danger and poverty, but faces the ultimate judgement when the cop shoots him. Both Miss Brill and the man in *Identities* face a situational irony where their ‘hero’ is revealed to be the antagonist in the story that reveals their downfall. The young couple that Miss Brill believes to be the hero and heroine of her “play”, end up being the ones that mock her fur coat and crush her joyous spirit. The young couple make her aware that she is being hypocritical in the way she calls others old and lonely. The police officer in *Identitie*s, who the man believes to be his safety, ends up being the one person that is the most dangerous as the cop shoots him. This event reveals to the reader that the man was not only a perpetrator of stereotyped misperception, but also a victim of it too. Both Miss Brill and our protagonist in *Identities* face the similar ironies of judging others, then being judged and also being attacked by the people they perceive to be their “heroes”.

Although the motivation of the protagonists in *Miss Brill* and *Identities* are different, they reveal a similar theme of how self-perception is often different from the perception of others. This theme is revealed through the use of contrast between light and dark. The authors also use dramatic and situational irony to depict the flaws of our protagonists. Through the use of these literary tools, Mansfield and Valgardson are able to illustrate realistic examples of misperception and stereotyping that we, as the reader, can relate to. Perception and reality are two aspects of human behavior that is universal not only through the literature we perceive, but also in the reality we live in.