

Nell essay

Linguistics



My first reaction to the movie "Nell" after having seen it was that it brought up some very interesting problematics.

It is very clear in this movie how difficult it is to be different, how difficult it is to live after another set of norms than the people surrounding you. And especially how difficult it is being the only one speaking one's language, not only the spoken language but also the body language. Already at the first meeting with Nell we get confronted with a general point of view - if it does not speak a known language or does not behave a certain way that we know, it simply cannot be a sane human being. The officer asks what that thing inside is. It was easy to see it was a human young woman. But because she behaved so different and used so different sounds that he is used to, he did not see her as a "normal" human being. And of course she was not a "normal" woman.

At least not the way we understand the word normal. In her own tiny society with her mother and her sister she was perfectly normal. She just has a different set of norms and different sounds system. The police officer again speaks of her as a creature even after being certain that they are dealing with a woman who just grew up on very different terms than what is considered "normal" in their part of the world. The immediate diagnose for Nell is that she is Mentally retarded - she uses her mouth in ways that has been seen with mentally sick people and she seems to be speaking to herself or to have an imaginary friend. We, as viewers know, that she is in fact speaking to her dead sister with whom she created and spoke the language she now speaks. This language is as good as any. It has its roots in English but

evolved since her mother had a disorder in her face making her speak differently.

Having never heard standard English the two girls created another variety of English that is so different to the one heard in America that one simply could not understand her before having studied her and her language. Towards the end there is a trial to decide whether Nell should go in an institution or if she can handle herself on her own in the woods. It is here that people get to see that she is a human being who is in fact well in her head.

It is only then everyone, including the police officer and the doctors who want to put her in a mental institution, understand that her being different not necessarily means not capable of taking care of herself. It is not an unknown phenomenon, people evolving their own language. Children, and especially twins are known to develop their own language. This phenomenon is called idioglossia or cryptophasia and is often referred to as the private or secret language. One's twin is the most constant person in one's life and the life of twins is linked together in the closest possible ways.

The twins understand each other through common activity, which gives an intense feeling of complicity, a common universe and common associations to communicate from. It is in this common universe that the so-called twin talk is developed from a prattle to a definite language that others recognize. A mutual twin language is completely harmless and very exciting, mind you, if the twins' common language development runs parallel and normal. If the twins are much left to themselves in the early years of development, and thus have the "twin language" as the main communication, it may be

retarding for to the normal language development, and their intellectual development in general. Nowadays, where children come out among many other children and adults in day care, day nursery and kindergartens and thus not isolated in their twin situation, it is not a problem, as they constantly forced to relate to others than each other. In the case of Nell it is obvious that she had no chance to “ get out of her twin situation”.

She too was born a twin, but having no other children to play with and no other people to speak to but her mother, made her stay in her early language stadium. This was not a problem of course because the ones who needed to understand her understood her perfectly until the day she was forced to speak with others with a different language. My reaction to the movie was therefore a critique of the society we will in who might not always be as tolerant to “ different” as it should be.