

In the national gallery

Sociology, Communication



In the short story *In the National Gallery* by Doris Lessing we follow a narrator, whose gender is unknown for the reader. The story line takes place in the National Gallery – therefore the name of the short story. The narrator's intention in the gallery is to find a picture big enough to be able to sit in the middle of the room looking at it, which is succeeded. An old man joins the narrator on the bench together with a younger man, also with the intention of looking at the picture.

The old man lectures the younger man about Stubbs' picture which shows that the old man already familiar with the picture, "How much I would have liked to know as much as he did[...]"(p. 2 ll. 15-16) However it does not interest the younger one, and he walks away while looking, "... a bit rueful, like a pupil chidden by a teacher"(p. 2 ll. 21-22). The narrator makes up a relation between the young and the elderly man, which is shown in the following quote, "... as if saying, "Oh, let's kiss and make up"" (p. 2 ll. 29). It shows how the narrator makes up an abnormal relationship between the two of them.

As if they are boyfriends. It is not abnormal if they are homosexuals but the abnormal thing about the assumable relationship is the big generation gap. Another example of a big generation gap in the short story is when a group of young French girls steps into the gallery. The narrator mentions how the girls' entrance creates a contrast to the normality in the National Gallery. In the group there is a sort of leader "a package to be admired" (p. 3 line 41-42) as the narrator says. The narrator explains to the reader how the old man on the bench is gazing intensely on the leader of the girl group.

Of course the reader is not 100% reliable in the things he/she observes, but the old man's interest in the young girl is patent in a quote, which is when the old man addresses the narrator, "" She's like a girl I was in love with once. (p. 3 ll. 71). He tells the narrator about how the girl from the past walked out on him, and this arouses old, hidden feelings in the old man. Throughout Doris Lessing's In the National Gallery the reader follows the progress in the short story through a 1st person narrator. He/she acts passively and is just observing throughout the whole short story.

The narrator attaches importance to the relationship between the elderly and the young man and also especially the relationship between the elderly man and the young French girl. The only time the narrator acts actively in the short story is when he/she talks to the old man about his first love that the French girl looks like. Because of the 1st person narrator the short story does not necessarily correspond with what is happening in reality. The group of girls and the two men is characters we only hear about through the narrator. It means that what the narrator tells the reader about the characters is not necessarily true.

We experiences them as the narrator do. This is show by this quote, " In the space of a moment the scene had turned ugly. "(p. ll. 24), this is just the way the narrator experiences the situation, but she/he doesn't know how the young man and the old man is used to talk with each other and does not now their body language. It is also shown how the narrator is quick to judge in the beginning when the two men are having a discussion. He/she only hears few parts of the conversation between the two, and yet there is an immediately

judgment, that the relationship between them are student and teacher, “ A son?

A younger brother? Certainly a pupil [...] (p. 1 ll. 12). However some of the comments between the two of them, as earlier mentioned creates some a kind of love affair. A 1st person narrator can never be looked at as a trustworthy narrator. Doris Lessing maybe uses this kind of narrator to make her points more indirect and discreet. The short story would have been told in a whole different way, if she had used a third person omniscient point of view. With a first person narrator the reader is forced to think about what the narrator tells us if we want to get a deeper meaning of what is being told.

An example of this is in the end of the short story. The group of girls is leaving the National Gallery and the narrator assumes that the old man is following them, “ Slowly, he followed. Oh no, I was thinking [...] There was a wildness in the air, unexpressed, and raw, and dangerous. ” (p. 5 ll. 151-154). What the narrator experiences in this quote do not correspond with the environment that usually is in a museum. The narrator gets carried away with his/hers lively imaginations since the narrator has these associations.

On the other hand, a 1st person narrator gives a subjective, detailed description of the characters. In this short story the narrator for instance sympathize with the elderly man but also thinks that it is repulsive that he looks so intensely after the French girl “ The man next to me was staring hard at her (p. 3 ll. 51). Because of the detailed description of the characters, the reader does not need to think about the underlying information about them. But again, a 1st person narrator is unreliable which the reader needs to be attentive about.