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The Other Man, by Denis Johnson, is a short story about a man who encounters a series of individuals. Each of these people, whom he gets to know throughout their encounters, are people he finds interesting. However, during each encounter, there is a recurring theme that each of these people turns out to be someone other than the person he thought he was getting to know. This story shines light on the concept that things are not always as they seem, and people are not always who we think. In his first encounter, he meets a man on a ferry, a man who he comes to know as a Polish businessman. They get to know each other to a degree over some beers. The Polish man told the narrator of his experience riding a motor scooter after dark in a park, local to his residence in Poland. The Polish man continues on to describe the police response to those riding their motor scooters in the park at night, which is against the rules. This is a compelling story, and warrants no reason to question the story. After the Polish man gets up from the table, however, he returns and admits that he is, in fact, not Polish at all. Later on in the story, the very same narrator meets a woman. The narrator comes to know the woman to be someone who is lively, a member of the army, and they develop a real connection. He views the woman as a love interest, describing her as, “The perfect size,” and describing the makeup around her eyes as being outlined in black in a manner which he adored. It is only when he asks that she take him home with her that he, once again, discovers that this woman is not who he thought. She has a husband, and in her drunken state, she is willing to cheat on her husband. It is these two examples which differentiate “The Other Man” from many other texts. “The Other Man” is a unique text because it plays with the human characteristic to judge things as we view them, rather than getting to know the deeper truth behind a situation. What makes Johnson's text particularly unique is the way he uses deception in multiple ways to trick us into assuming certain parts of his story are true whereas by the end of the story we are made to question such matters. One of the ways he does this is through using an unreliable first-person narrator who is fooled into believing certain assumed truths about first the Polish man he meets on a ferry and then later the woman he meets at a bar.

If we analyze each of these encounters, I think that it becomes evident that there are similarities that connect each of these passages together. I believe that these are purposeful similarities that Johnson includes to draw a parallel between each of the passages in the story. Describing the first encounter, the encounter with who the narrator believes is a Polish businessman, Dennis writes, “He bought me a beer, and explained that he was from Poland, over here on business” (The Other Man, pg. 87). It was this initial sentence that formally introduced the character, providing information which the narrator used to help him make natural assumptions, or judgements, about the man, based upon the surface presentation of the individual. Judgements such as, “His jacket was lightweight and yellow. He might have been wearing it for the first time. It was the kind of jacket a foreigner would buy in a store while saying to himself, ‘I am buying an American jacket’” (The Other Man, Pg. 88). This description allows the reader to identify a specific instance where Johnson uses a deceptive description to paint an alternate reality for the narrator and the reader. Through this quote we are able to identify that the narrator is making judgements about “the other man” that are false. The connection continued to develop between the two people. Dennis Johnson writes, “He was driving around in a rented car, with an expense account: a youthful international person doing all right” (The Other Man, pg. 88). These phrases, while each different, each introduce the man as the narrator first perceived him. They paint the picture of an international businessman, in the area for a short time, and the unreliable first-person descriptions attracted the narrator to the man. Johnson even writes of this attraction when he says, “A certain yearning attached itself between us. I wanted to participate in what was happening to him. It was just a careless, instinctive thing. There was nothing of his I wanted in particular. I wanted it all” (The Other Man, pg. 88). This phrase here clearly reveals the allure of the person’s story, and the narrator’s judgements about the man. There was a draw to be together. Each of these quotations force the reader into making the same assumptions about the man as the narrator made. There is no reason for the reader to question the degree of genuineness of the man, just as there was no reason for the narrator to question the man’s story. It is not until Johnson writes, “He came back with the pitcher and poured my glass full and sat down. ‘Ah hell,’ he said. ‘I’m not Polish. I’m from Cleveland.’” (The Other Man, Pg. 89). It was at this moment that both the narrator and the reader realize that things were not as they seem. The man is not who we expected, and the story up to this point was based on falsities. This is the theme which repeats itself multiple times throughout the story, as I will discuss in just a little bit. A question about this first passage that I have was whether Johnson purposely wrote in a manner which would encourage the reader to believe that the man was Polish. Was it purposeful that Johnson described the man as saying, “Do you like some beers?” in broken English, much as someone not native to the states might say? This really sold the man’s story to the reader because it allows the reader to read the passage with a foreign accent in their head. For this reason, I was just as shocked as the narrator, when the man revealed that he was actually from Cleveland. At this point of the reading, I was left questioning what Johnson’s point in doing this was. What was the purpose of the man being someone who he is, in fact, not?

It was not until an encounter further down the line that the author’s purpose and the theme started to come together for me. Johnson writes, “There was one woman in the place. She was drunker than I was” (The Other Man, pg. 92). This first quotation introduces the woman to us. I believe that this phrase was written in a way which led the reader to assume that the woman was single, drunk, and having a good time. This was purposeful deception used by Johnson to control the narrator’s, and subsequently the reader’s, perception of the situation. Things further developed between the narrator and the woman, and a connection, similar to the connection that occurred during the narrator’s encounter with the first man developed. Johnson writes, “I held her close. She was short, just the right size for me. I drew her closer.” Johnson continues, “’Let me kiss you,’ I pleaded. Her lips tasted cheap. ‘Let me go home with you.’ I said. She kissed me sweetly” (The Other Man, pg. 92). This phrase here shows a mutual connection between the two people. I noticed that the feelings were mutual as Johnson wrote that the woman kissed the narrator sweetly. Just like the first encounter with the man from Cleveland, the assumptions made by both the narrator and the reader, turned out to be misleading. Johnson breaks this to the reader by writing, “She’d outlined her eyes in black. I loved her eyes. ‘My husband’s at home,’ she said. ‘We can’t go there.’” (The Other Man, pg. 92). It was at this point that we realize that the woman is no single as we first assumed, and that the connection between the two might not be all that it appears to be. Although nobody can deny that this was in fact a genuine connection between the narrator and the woman. The language that the writer uses to describe the woman, reveals a genuine connection. Johnson writes about her makeup, her size, and the passion that exists between the two which makes this passage unique, and allows the reader to appreciate, and almost feel in a way, the passion between the narrator and the woman. Johnson ends the piece by describing the passion the two had for each other as he writes, “It was there. It was. The long walk down the hall. The door opening. The beautiful stranger. The torn moon mended. Our fingers touching away the tears. It was there” (The Other Man, pg. 93). This quotation in particular shows that there was a deep connection between the two, even after the bombshell was dropped on us that the woman was married. This quote, however, does lead me to question what actually ended up happening between the narrator and the woman.

Both of these passages, while different in content, and different in ultimate ending, represent the consistent theme of “The Other Man”; The theme which is based on the reality that people are not always who they seem to be. The first man in the story, turned out to quite literally be a different man than who we first got to know, “The Other Man” if you will. The woman at the end of the story, while not the single woman we assumed at first, turned out to have a husband, who you could also refer to as “The Other Man”. Both of these passages utilize the innate human trait of assumption to lead the reader into believing one thing in the beginning, which ultimately turns out to be false. It is Johnson’s clever use of deception in his descriptions that lead to these false judgements, and it is this use of deceptive description that makes “The Other Man” unique.

Works Cited

Denis Johnson; Book title Jesus’s Son p. 87-93. Short Story title: “*The Other Man*”