Crispin Thys

09/22/2020

ENG1121

Prof. Street

The Other Man, by Denis Johnson, is a short story about a man who encounters a series of people throughout his day. Each of these people are people he finds interesting, people whom he gets to know throughout their encounters. 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. This was a particularly confusing passage for me, and I will discuss that as I continue. 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. This was a second passage in this story which, alone would also confuse me, but in combination with the first passage, provided me with a sense of clarity.

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, Denis Johnson writes, “He bought me a beer, and explained that he was from Poland, over here on business” (Johnson, pg. 87). It was this initial sentence that formally introduced the character, providing information which the narrator used to help him make natural assumptions about the man. Assumptions that, “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’” (Johnson, Pg. 88). The connection continued to develop between the two people. Johnson writes, “He was driving around in a rented car, with an expense account: a youthful international person doing all right” (Johnson, pg. 88). These phrases, while each different, each introduce the man as the narrator first perceived him. They pain the picture of an international businessman, in the area for a short time, and these assumptions 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” (Johnson, pg. 88). This phrase here clearly reveals the allure of the person’s story, and the narrator’s assumptions 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.’” (Johnson, Pg. 89). It was at this moment that both the narrator and the reader realize that things were not as they seem. It was at this moment that I became very confused as to what the passage was communicating. 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? In order to answer these questions, I will compare this passage to a passage which appears later in the text. I will also compare this passage to outside literary works.

It was not until comparing this encounter to an encounter further down the line that the author’s purpose and the theme started to come together for me. In the second encounter, Johnson writes, “There was one woman in the place. She was drunker than I was” (Johnson, 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. Much like we assumed that the man was a Polish businessman in the first encounter. 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” (Johnson, 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.’” (Johnson, pg. 92). It was at this point that we realize that the woman is not 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. Even though a connection was established between both characters, the passion described in this second passage appears to be more intense than the passion between the narrator and the man from Cleveland. 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” (Johnson, 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.

After reading the story in its entirety, the combination of each of these passages helped me understand the author’s purpose in writing about the encounter between the narrator and the man from Cleveland. 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.

After comparing these two similar passages, Denis Jonson’s intent of having the Polish man actually be a man from Cleveland became evident. This story helped communicate Johnson’s message that people are not always who they seem. While this became evident to me, questions still remain. Was Johnson’s use of broken English purposeful when we thought the Polish man was speaking? What was the Polish man’s reason for lying about where he was from? After doing some research, I was able to develop an answer the first of these questions. When James Ledbetter told the story of P.D. Viner, a British crime writer, he focused on Viner’s attempt to include American characters in his stories. In these attempts, Viner makes conscious decisions to alter the text in stylistic ways when an American is speaking. For instance, he makes sure to use the letter z instead of s where it fits in the American English language, and he is sure to use American idioms and phrases (Ledbetter, 2017). While Denis Johnson and P.D. Viner are entirely different authors with entirely different styles, this piece in *The New Yorker* sheds light on the stylistic changes authors make when trying to convey the language of a foreign-born character. I think that it is fairly plausible to assume that Denis Johnson purposefully had the man speak in broken English, as he was trying to portray that he was not from the country.

After analyzing this passage from Denis Johnson’s “The Other Man” as it relates to another passage in the same text, and an outside source, it became evident to me that the purpose behind the man from Cleveland’s false identity was to convey one of the themes of the story that people are not always who we believe them to be. It also became clear to me that Johnson planned for this through his use of broken English when he used dialogue. A question that still remains for me is what the man’s reason for lying about where he was from was, but I suppose that Johnson purposefully excluded that from the story.

Works Cited

Johnson, Denis. *The Other Man*. 87-93.

Ledbetter, James. *When British Authors Write American Dialogue, or Try To.* The New Yorker. Oct 24, 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/when-british-authors-write-american-dialogue-or-try-to>.