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Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. The narrator can be a major or minor character. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into the telling of the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel using “I.” A distanced narrator (often not a character) does not participate in the events of the story and uses third person (he, she, they) to narrate the story. The distanced narrator can be omniscient, able to read the minds of all characters within the book. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The Shawl employs a third-person narrative voice that does not participate in the story or novella’s action, but has access to Rosa’s private thoughts and feelings. Further, the narrator uses descriptive language and imagery that evoke Rosa’s thoughts and moods. For instance, at the beginning of the novella, the narrator describes a “shrieking pulley,” “squads of dying flies,” and streets like a “furnace.” Ozick uses these images in the narration to underscore how deeply memories of the Holocaust affect Rosa, even more than thirty years after the war’s end.



Discussion Activities

Share the images mentioned above with your students. Ask them to find other instances where the narrator describes people, places, or things as if looking through Rosa’s eyes with her unique personal history. Ask your students why Rosa feels that “even after the worst, there’s still more.” How does her perception of her surroundings feed into her despair?

Sometimes the narration is so closely aligned with Rosa’s perspective it seems as if the book could have been written first-person. Why might Ozick have chosen to use such a close third-person point of view rather than writing in first-person from Rosa’s viewpoint? Does third person offer any objectivity that might be lost if Rosa told her own story? Why or why not?



Writing Exercise

Ask your students to choose one character other than Rosa that has appeared so far. Have students rewrite a short scene of their choice from the first-person point of view of that character. Have volunteers read their scenes aloud to the class.

What equips their character to tell the story? What does this character’s point of view add to the story? What is lost?



Homework

Read from the break on page 39 to the break on page 53. Ask your students to pay close attention to the letter Stella sends Rosa. What do we learn about Stella?