

Tenth-Grade English (World Literature)
“No Witchcraft for Sale” by Doris Lessing

Homework in preparation for this one-period lesson: Read “No Witchcraft for Sale.”

Background for students: Doris Lessing was born in 1919 in Iran to British parents who bought a farm in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and moved there; in 1949 she moved to England. She is still living and still publishing; she published another novel in 2008.

[Summary of the text: "No Witchcraft for Sale" is set in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. Gideon is a native who works as a cook in the home of the Farquars, white farm owners. One day he saves their child, Teddy, from a snake bite that would have caused blindness. A white scientist comes and, together with the Farquars, pressures Gideon to tell them what root he used. Gideon gives them a common weed that grows everywhere after leading them around for a couple of hours. The white scientist leaves, convinced that the legends about native healing are exaggerated. The Farquars do not ever come to understand why Gideon does this.]

In groups of 3-4, think about the following question:

What does Gideon think and feel?

Find evidence in the text and copy a passage onto an index card. Use proper citation mechanics, but do not put your name on it. Give it to me when you are finished.

(Note that they don't need to write what he thinks or feels on the board, just the evidence. Later, they can explain what they believe about his thoughts and feelings, but we need to begin with the precise wording of the evidence for this exercise.)

When they've put what they've found on the card, I collect them, flip through quickly to eliminate duplicates, and redistribute the cards to students who are finished to copy onto the board. Soon (10 minutes or so), we have about ten to fifteen passages from this text written on the board.

Analyze them one by one as a whole class. No one knows who picked what, so no one needs to feel embarrassed. Students will fairly quickly realize that everything we are told Gideon thinks or feels is filtered through the Farquars.

At first glance, the evidence suggests that Gideon believes the Farquars to be wonderful and their son Teddy to be the most important thing in his life. We see him from the outside, we hear him, and we read about what Mrs. Farquar believes about him, but students will see over the course of the lesson that we have to be skeptical about what he really thinks. When the narrator does “tell” rather than “show” what Gideon thinks, there's a “he seemed” or “as if” in front of the thought. When he speaks, he speaks to his bosses. Students can be prodded to see that they, or perhaps someone they know, do something similar when talking to parents or teachers.

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We do know the following facts, many of which contradict the feelings and thoughts expressed:

- * Gideon has a son whom Teddy refers to as a "black boy," not realizing this is Gideon's son, despite the Farquars' belief that Gideon is a close member of their family
- * Gideon is the son of a famous medicine man, but the Farquars are never aware of this

The narrator in this story goes into the head of Gideon just one time, near the end of the story, when it is noted that the whites "seemed to him like a circle of yelping dogs pressing around him" (330). This direct recording of Gideon's thoughts is the exception that proves the rule.

Now – what do the Farquars think and feel? We know a lot about this. The story stages the white suppression of African voices under colonialism.

We can use literary terms such as "limited omniscient narrator" and "free indirect discourse" to lead to the insight noted above. We can then pose a more general question: do the dominated in an unequal relationship have a higher level of consciousness than the dominators?

Works Cited

Lessing, Doris. "No Witchcraft for Sale." *Reading the World: Contemporary Literature from Around the Globe*. Ed. Julie A. Schumacher. Logan, Iowa: Perfection Learning, 2003. 324-332.

Reading Quiz

Name _____

1. What's the name of the Farquars' son? _____
2. What's the name of the Farquars' cook? _____
3. What happens to Teddy that threatens his eyesight? _____
4. Who saves him? _____
5. How does this person save him? _____

6. Who wants to find out about the medicine and why? _____

Does this person find out about the medicine? Why or why not? _____

Do the Farquars understand Gideon? (obviously not!)

Do we? Why won't he share his secrets? (better)

Does Gideon understand the Farquars? (yes)

Does Gideon like the Farquars? (yes and no)

The limited omniscient narrator is a great vehicle for conveying the reality of these relationships.

Hegel's master-slave dialectic.

Wrap up:

- We hear what Gideon says

- We see his body language

- If the narrator tells us what's going on in his head, it's usually (there is one exception) qualified with "seemed" or "as if"

- We see Gideon through the eyes of the Farquars (free indirect discourse)

My thesis: the narrator shows but never tells us what Gideon thinks; we see evidence in the text that he sometimes hides his true thoughts and feelings. This narrative strategy enacts the master-slave narrator; the "slave" understands the "master," but not vice versa.