

E. M. Forster – A Room with a View

Corrigé du commentaire

To what extent is this excursion in the Italian countryside a comic reflection on tourism and the English abroad while giving us some insight into Lucy's sentimental education?

I. A journey into Italy and the Italian dream: Lucy's mini grand tour

The Grand tour = the traditional tour of Europe (mainly France, Italy and Greece) undertaken by aristocrats and upper middle class European young men with money. They were going abroad in search of art, culture and the roots of western civilization. Its custom started around 1660, and was democratized about 1840s with the advent of railway transport. A grand tour could last months or even years.

A) A parody of the grand tour: a comic journey across the Italian landscape

A group of English people are on an excursion trip in the Florentine countryside: they are on an "expedition" l. 35 and if not all of them are "tourists", at least Lucy is: "I am here as a tourist" (l. 5).

Yet, interestingly enough and ironically enough, the protagonists refer indeed to multiples cities and places across the country "from Venice to Florence, from Florence to Rome" l. 8-9 but also "Fiesole" l. 31, and the "Settignano road" l. 35, yet on the whole they seem more concerned by the to the lack of comfort of the trip itself as indicated by the "agonizing jolts" l. 35 and the "extra lurch" l. 44. than by their surroundings which are never described and only vaguely hinted by a Mr. Eager who serves as a sort of guide showing off some places to see: a "villa on the left" l. 20, some houses "on the right" and "down the hill" l. 26-27. And in the end, apart from a villa and a hill, no mention of the Florentine countryside is evoked, no description ensues:

This "grand tour" is eventually a very 'mini tour' and Lucy becomes unwittingly one of these "poor tourists" pitied by Mr. Eager who treats Lucy as "a parcel of goods". And funnily enough, they are "doing Fiesole" (l. 31) as fast as the "unintelligent tourists" referred to by Mr. Eager (l. 30-31). In the end, Lucy, just like them, shows evidence in free indirect speech of her muddling the names "Mr. Someone Something" and "Somebody Elses": she has obviously no access to what she is supposed to visit (and note that "seeing" it might even become dangerous: l. 20-21).

B) A journey into arts and literature

In fact, two categories of tourists are represented in the passage: the knowledgeable (Mr. Eager and Miss Lavish) and the ignorant (Lucy), and there is a clear hierarchy that is generated. The "unintelligent tourists" (l. 31) are "nothing less than a menace" l. 15-16 [aphorism]. whereas the "student[s] of human nature" are extolled for their links to past heritage and tradition (The Decameron, Gemistus Platho, etc.) as well as to a sense of beauty "beautiful grounds" (l. 29): to their mind, they represent the real tradition of the grand tour, "eager" to see the arts and culture of the place they go through, and "lavish" in the way they show off their knowledge (l. 24-25 "Tell me, where do they place the scene of that wonderful seventh day") with multiple references to Italian art at its height during the Renaissance like Fra

Angelico (l. 19) or Alessio Baldovinetti (l. 39-40) as well as 14th century Boccaccio's tale *The Decameron*, which is only referred to with its title, as a way to show their shared knowledge. Yet, in the same way as the ignorant are mocked, the connoisseurs are also ridiculed: their competence is only superficial: they are name-dropping, their references are allusive "her garden was the scene of the Decameron" and they are eventually more interested in taking "tea" l. 29 in some houses owned by a rich American than in looking at art more seriously. Plus Mr. Eager's attempt at speaking Italian is mocked with the hyperbolic phrase "his over-fluent tongue" (l. 55) seen as something he suffers from, and his mastery of the Italian language has nothing of the beauty of the Italian language: it is compared to an ill-functioning fountain.

C) A sentimental journey and a female Bildungsroman?

Eventually, in the second movement of the text the trip takes on a mythical tinge, as it focuses on the driver, Phaeton, and the girl he is with, referred to or nicknamed Persephone. Both names evoke Greek mythology: Phaeton (the shining one) was the son of Helios (Phoebus) and is famous for driving the sun's carriage and crashing it into the grounds whereas Persephone was the daughter of Demeter who got abducted by Hades and became the Queen of the Underworld. She is symbolically associated with the renewal of spring.

Lucy, by focusing on these two figures, seems to embark in a journey of her own: a journey into love and physical desire. Looking at the two "figures ... sporting with each other disgracefully", she suffers from "a spasm of envy" (l. 33-34). Although understanding in her mind that this is "disgraceful" (I mean she is British), she nevertheless wishes to do the same, with the same freedom and spontaneity. And Persephone and Phaeton seem to recognize this in her when appealing to her in the end. Even if she is not ready yet (Why should he appeal to Lucy?" l. 61-62) the end of the scene seems to suggest that Italy will offer her the opportunity to find her own true self (and be a follower of American transcendentalist Emerson's theory), i.e. an education in human nature rather than an education in the beauty of exotic sites.

⇒ A parody of the Grand Tour in line with Lawrence Sterne's classic masterpiece: *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768)

II. A typical scene in line with Comedies of Manners: an entertaining and theatrical passage serving as a comic and satiric indictment of Edwardian/post-Victorian society.

A) A highly theatrical and dynamic scene

Narrated in the third person by a relatively inconspicuous and effaced narrator with what seems to be limited omniscience, and who relies mostly on dialogues (the "civil converse" l. 1), fast-paced direct speech (l. 2-5, 14-16, etc.), monologues (Mr. Eagers is an omnipresent talker who is difficult to interrupt l. 14), indirect speech (l. 26-27, l. 46, l. 50) as well as some passages in free indirect speech (l. 27 "so rare!", l. 40-, "Why should he appeal to Lucy? (...) Why?" l. 61, l. 64).

All of this generates an energetic, dynamic and fast-paced rhythm ("in a gallop" like the carriage itself), an energy that is also reinforced by

- the vivacity of language: short sentences, parataxis, exclamations, questions, onomatopoeias

- the use of multiple points of view: with some passages in internal focalization (through Lucy's eyes, essentially l. 26-27 and from l. 31 onward) and some passages from the eyes of this distant yet obviously ironic and mocking narrator l. 55-60).

Furthermore there are typical ingredients of "comedy" at large with the presence of a standard comedic love plot (two young lovers thwarted by an older man) as well as the presence of stock and flat characters with puns for their names: "eager" is to be keen and hungry for something to happen, "lavish" suggests that the character is exuberant and effusive, whereas Honeychurch figures a sweet person (Honey) with a modest behaviour (Church). And Emerson might be a comic reference to American transcendentalist thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson, who professed self-reliance and rejection of institutions to find one's true self.

Eventually the emphasis on gestures and movements gives an impression of a puppet show that is sheer entertainment: l. 21-22 "No, you can only see it if you stand – no, do not stand: you will fall" (note the comic reversal) or the "large, slumbering form of Mr Emerson was thrown against the chaplain with the regularity of a machine". (l. 42), giving the scene some elements of burlesque or slapstick comedy, with also comic allusions to light opera: the crooning driver, the "glorious contralto" of Persephone.

B) The carriage as a stage on which the British play: a microcosm of Edwardian / post-Victorian society

All the English characters are in the carriage, a very limited space, an enclosure of sorts, a closed space, cut off from the outside, and the Italy they profess to love (Note that spatially, the two Italians are outside the carriage, on a "box" l. 33.)

Apart from Phaeton and Persephone, they are all typical representatives of Britishness belonging to the upper middle class and thus a typical "English colony at Florence": there is the chaplain Mr. Eager, the voice of Protestantism and morality in the face of lax Italian [Catholic] mores and customs (the kissing Phaeton/Persephone), the bohemian artist Miss Lavish, Miss Honeychurch, the naïve ingenue, Miss Bartlett the chaperon, and Mr. Emerson the free-thinker.

And this English group is facing Italy and Italians that serve as foil to their moral and upright attitude, with bias and prejudices, so typical of a certain Victorian puritan ethos: kissing in the open is to "misbehave" "disgracefully" (l. 33-34), Italians are regarded as liars (l. 50) and eventually the Italian couple's lack of decency is eventually punished (no "pourboire" l. 48, end of the trip for the girl).

And this English "colony" seems indeed to be victorious for the time being: they establish their superiority over the lying Italians but also over their American counterparts whose accent and lack of intelligence is also mocked (l. 11-13)

C) A satirical representation of Edwardian society

Yet, the true butt of the satire is not the Italians but this English colony who is regarded by the narrator as the true "menace" l. 16. The scene is a subdued but real critique of the upper class ruling over the oppressed mass, and their colonial mind thanks to the fiction of their moral, cultural and intellectual superiority (thinking they understand Italy, the Italian language and Renaissance artists when they don't) and not even realizing that the Italians are the direct descendants of Gods and mythical figures in their own right!

English society of the time is presented as fraught with divisions and tensions: it is a class society with no real interactions between them as there is no connection and no real communication:

- antagonistic relationships between the characters with battles of egos and trials of strength (Eager vs Lavish as they both struggle for control of the conversation, Eager-Lavish vs Emerson) and a certain level of violence they exert on the others ("thrown against" l. 42, "lose his pourboire, immediately get down). Nothing is "civil" in this society and they are just like dogs to one another: their "wit" is indeed mordant.

- a conversation with questions but only negative answers l. 2-5

- they do not talk to but "against each other" l. 39

- nobody is truly listening to the others l. 24-26, l. 26-27

All in all, this English colony is basically a bunch of English snobs (and far distant cousins of *Mr Collins* in *Pride and Prejudice*).

How to write an introduction and conclusion - Examples

1) Catchphrase and presentation of the novel

In the 17th century appeared a specific way of travelling for British aristocracy: the Grand Tour, a long journey which consisted in visiting several countries in Europe among which Italy, in order to get educated. Those travelers were called "dilettanti", but nowadays this word has another meaning which is a form of superficial interest on a subject. In this excerpt from E.M. Forster's *A Room with a View*, English-speaking people are travelling through Florence, Italy, in a rather uncomfortable carriage. Two of them, Mr. Eager and Miss Lavish, are talking with Miss Honeychurch who confesses to be a tourist, which leads Mr. Eager to a sharp criticism of tourism, to which he prefers a long stay, closer to the tradition of the Grand Tour, as a better way to appreciate the country.

2) Example of Conclusion

A) To conclude, this is a rather funny text thanks to Forster's subtle use of irony. He succeeds in both criticizing mass tourism and the "dilettanti" who criticizes it. While doing so he draws a rich satire on Victorian society, ruled by superficiality and people with no emotions but who merely follow fashions. This denunciation looks like a comedy of manners but is even richer because of the shifts in focalization, which allow the reader to see the scene from different angles: he or she too is "handed about" but the jolts are not "agonizing", they are delightful.

Corrigé de la version

Lucy éprouva un accès d'envie / L'envie saisit Lucy / Lucy eut un sursaut d'envie/ élan de jalousie. En admettant qu'ils souhaitassent effectivement mal se comporter, il était plaisant qu'ils pussent / il était plaisant pour eux de pouvoir le faire / d'agir de la sorte / tant mieux pour eux s'ils pouvaient le faire / agir de la sorte. Ils étaient certainement les seules personnes à prendre du plaisir à/ à apprécier cette équipée / excursion / expédition / escapade. La carriole montait, secouée de cahots atroces puis traversa la Piazza de Fiesole avant de prendre la route de Settignano.

- Piano! Piano! fit Mr Eager, passant la main, avec élégance, au-dessus de la tête / avec un geste élégant de la main au-dessus de sa tête.

- Va bene, Signore, va bene, va bene, chanta / chantonna / fredonna le cocher avant de cravacher ses chevaux à nouveau.

Puis Mr. Eager et Miss Lavish se mirent à débattre du cas de Alessio Baldovinetti. Était-il une cause de la Renaissance ou en était-il une de ses manifestations? L'autre carriole avait pris du retard / était distancée / était loin derrière. Alors que le rythme s'accéléra / s'intensifia pour passer au galop, l'imposante masse endormie (somnolente) / la silhouette massive et endormie de Mr. Emerson se trouva projetée contre l'aumônier aussi régulièrement qu'une machine / que s'il s'était agi d'une machine / d'un automate / d'un métronome / avec une régularité (toute) mécanique.

- Piano! Piano! dit-il en lançant un regard de martyr à Lucy.

Une embardée supplémentaire / une très forte embardée / une nouvelle secousse le fit se retourner avec colère sur son siège. Phaethon, qui cherchait depuis quelque temps à embrasser Persephone, venait de parvenir à ses fins.

Une petite scène s'ensuivit, qui, comme le fit remarquer Miss Bartlett ultérieurement / par après, fut des plus désagréables / désagréable au plus haut point. On arrêta les chevaux, on ordonna aux amoureux de se sortir de là, le garçon devait se voir confisquer son pourboire, la jeune fille devait descendre à l'instant.

- C'est ma sœur, fit-il, en tournant vers eux (pour les prendre à partie) un regard à faire pitié / pitoyable.

Mr Eager prit la peine de lui dire qu'il mentait.

Phaeton courba (baissa) la tête, non par l'accusation elle-même que par la forme qu'elle prenait / que par le ton utilisé. C'est le moment choisi par Mr. Emerson, que l'arrêt brutal avait réveillé, pour déclarer qu'en aucune manière on ne devait séparer ces amoureux, puis il leur donna une petite tape amicale dans le dos pour leur montrer son approbation. Et Miss Lavish, bien qu'elle ne désirât pas devenir son allié / sans vouloir devenir son allié, se sentit obligée de prendre parti pour la vie de Bohème.