

ENGLISH: *SPIES*

‘How we see the world is determined by our environment.’

Our ‘environment’ is not simply a matter of where we are in a given moment of time and geographical location. Environment is an infinitely more complex idea, incorporating multiple facets such as culture and multi-culture, socio-economic status, social class, historical background, tradition and customs, and religion. Psychological and social norms, racial prejudice, gender bias and age barriers are also facets of our environment. Environment can be constructed by an individual from memories of the past and hopes for the future or shaped by external forces more powerful than the individual. The way we ‘see’ the world is based on our perception of where we are placed in our environment by our own estimations. It involves how we measure up against the norms of society and the negative and positive opinions of others and how much we allow them to influence us. Significantly, we can choose to accept our given place in the world and show behaviour that conforms to our environment to win approval. We can also choose to reject our environment with non-conformity and risk the disapproval, and even hostility, of the majority. Ultimately the way we perceive the world becomes our reality. When our reality clashes with the realities of others the results can be devastating and tragic.

When we move too far beyond our usual environment, the way we see the world can change. If we have perceived our previous environment as safe and comfortable it could be difficult to move out of it. The novel ‘Spies’ by Michael Frayn is set in the context of World War II. In the environment of the Close the protagonist, Stephen Wheatley, is relatively protected from the realities of the war by the adults because he is still considered a child. He considers the war a source of excitement and adventure. Stephen’s far more confronting journey is his passage to adolescence. This is metaphorically represented when he goes through the railway tunnel, leaving the ‘dull, sweet ordinariness of the Close’ and entering ‘another, more frightening land’ of the Lanes and the Cottages beyond. Here Stephen is forced to reconsider his childish fantasies in the light of adult realities. He finds it difficult to move away from the insulation of childhood that protects him from reality into the painful adult reality of betrayal and conflicting loyalties, ‘a new world of even darker tunnels and more elusive terrors.’ If we have seen our current reality as hostile and terrifying it could be desirable to escape from it. Uncle Peter is immersed in the environment of war as a bomber pilot, and the reality of war has a more immediate and real impact on him. For him the war had been a game that he thought he could play and win, ‘But the game goes on, and it gets more and more frightening.’ One night when Uncle Peter is ‘up there in the darkness five hundred miles from home’ he suddenly realizes that ‘the darkness is inside’ him as well. He escapes from the terrifying environment of war as a deserter. The juxtaposition of Stephen’s childish view of the world and Uncle Peter’s view of the world at war underscores how our perception of the world is determined by our environment.

When we cannot forget the past, and move into the future, we may construct our own reality based on our past to maintain our connection with what was before. This fantasy may be challenged by others as not being the truth and may be destroyed by the more powerful reality of that individual. In ‘A Streetcar Named Desire,’ the play by Tennessee Williams, he presents the play’s primary clash between Blanche Dubois and Stanley Kowalski, who represent opposing ways of seeing the world. Blanche represents the conservative and genteel Old South that has been slowly dying since the end of the American Civil War. Stanley represents the new, working-class migrant that is influential in shaping America post World War II. William’s explores how people create an alternative reality based on past triumphs. Blanche DuBois cannot adapt to the changing world represented by the French Quarter of New Orleans. Within the noise and chaos she constructs a fantasy world as a refuge from the events of her recent past and from her fear of an uncertain future. She substitutes the reality of her current situation of poverty, unemployment and sex scandals for an imaginary world where she is still ‘A cultivated woman’ with ancestors from the ‘French Huguenots.’ Blanche maintains her performance as an aristocrat from the Old South, ‘fanning herself with a palm leaf and clinging to racial and social prejudices of the old world.’

Stanley is the antithesis of the social reality Blanche represents, and is not fooled by Blanche's pretences of grandeur. He is infuriated by Blanche's 'superior attitude' and becomes intent on challenging Blanche's fantasy world. Her fragile world of 'lies and conceit' is shattered by the brute future Stanley represents. The contrast between Blanche's view of the world and Stanley's view of the world highlights how our perception of the world is determined by our environment.

When others in our environment construct our realities for us we can either accept it and conform to their version of reality or reject it and offer ourselves as non-conformists. Although conforming may facilitate a more peaceful environment, it may mean compromising our own reality or giving up the goal of a more desirable reality. Sometimes we have to fight for what is right, even if it means being labelled as a non-conformist. In his novel 'The Lot in Words' Michael Leunig reveals his very personal reality, and defines that his way of seeing the world differs from 'society's mood or madness.' In fact he shows that his perception of the world as in opposition to 'mainstream Australian' views, and claims to 'have resisted such assimilation with all my heart and soul.' His non-conformist views arouse controversy in various sections of the community, including 'the Catholics, the gays, the feminists, the militarists, the Israeli cheer squad, the football fanatics or the earnest, academic intellectuals.' Although Leunig has been accused of being insensitive, un-Christian, pro-Islamist and un-Australian, he remains 'unto thine own self be true.' In his essay 'The Pursuit of Unhappiness' Leunig accuses the media of manipulating our view of reality to make 'all that is appalling and mad in the world' seem normal. He challenges us to question the media's perception of 'this is how things are' and see the reality of 'a different, more grisly and murky story.' The contrast between Michael Leunig's view of the world and mainstream society's view of the world emphasises how our perception of the world is determined by our environment.

Through their individual writing Frayn, Williams and Leunig all make a similar, poignant social comment about the environment of the world as a whole. Essentially they imply that the 'real' world can be a hostile and brutal place, and that we could perceive it so. The challenge is to 'lighten off' the 'rucksack full of bricks and broken 'glass' and embrace our own reality. Only then will we be able to live our 'own true and wonderful lives.'