A Conversation from the Third Floor Study Guide

A Conversation from the Third Floor by Mohamed El-Bisatie

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Introduction

Mohamed El-Bisatie's "A Conversation from the Third Floor," like most of his writing, is more like a painting than a typical short story. He creates a scene, then populates it with only essential and simple characters whose gestures speak almost as loudly as their few words. Denys Johnson-Davies, in the translator's introduction to *A Last Glass of Tea and Other Stories*, in which this short story was published, states: "While there is drama in his stories it is never highlighted: the menace lurks almost unseen between the lines." El-Bisatie, Johnson-Davies continues, "is a 'writer's writer'—which is to say a writer who makes no concessions to the lazy reader."

"A Conversation from the Third Floor" is a brief story, almost as short and succinct as the conversation that takes place within it; and it is as stark as the barren environment that encompasses its setting—a prison that sits at the edge of a desert. This makes it read more like a poem, in that every word, every gesture is laden with meaning. Just as in a desert a small patch of green grass screams with color, so too do the quick remarks and the subtle movements in this short story. A small shadow moving across the street toward one of the main characters suddenly becomes a threat, a potent omen.

Describing his inspirations and motives for writing, El-Bisatie, in an article written by David Tesilian for *Al-Ahram Weekly*, stated that he was "interested in the dehumanization of the individual by circumstances." He also said that he writes about people who live in small villages where life is slow and "always the same, and if things happen at all, they happen beneath the surface." "A Conversation from the Third Floor" is an exemplary illustration of these sentiments. The careful reader who takes the time to dig down below the surface of this seemingly simple story will discover that El-Bisatie is not only a master of the written word but also a master of deception.

Author Biography

Mohamed El-Bisatie was born on November 19, 1937, in the Nile Delta in a place called el-Gamalia, Dakahlia, in Sharqiya Province, Egypt, a setting that dominates most of El-Bisatie's writings. He came into this world on a stormy night, as he informs his readers in his autobiography, *Wa ya'ti al-Qitar* (And the train comes, 1999), born to Ibrahim, his father, who was a teacher, and Insaf Rustum, his mother. His mother later told her son that the rain, lightning, and thunder of that birthday storm marked his personality, making him very curious about life and a bit troublesome. He was so difficult as a young boy that his mother at one point attached a rope around his waist, then tied the other end to a stake in the middle of the yard to keep him from causing further problems.

While he was still very young, an epidemic of cholera bore down on his village, and one of its victims was El-Bisatie's father. His grandfather moved into the family home upon El-Bisatie's father's death to help raise the young boy. El-Bisatie had the chore, as a teenager, of boosting his grandfather up onto the family donkey every time the patriarchal figure ventured away from home.

Later, in his teens, El-Bisatie moved away from his family in order to attend the University of Cairo, from which he graduated in 1960 with a bachelor's degree in commerce and accountancy. Although the Nile Delta area where he grew up figures in all his writing, El-Bisatie has never returned there. As his translator, Johnson-Davies, writes in the article "Village Life from Within" for the publication *Al-Ahram Weekly*, El-Bisatie has created such a vivid picture of his birthplace through his writing that "he does not want to risk having the canvas he has painted for himself in any way distorted by reality."

In the early 1960s, El-Bisatie began sending out his short stories to various publications. By 1968, he had written and published enough stories to have them collected in his first book, *Alkibar wa al-sighar* (The old and the young). Subsequently, El-Bisatie has published several more short story collections, including *A Last Glass of Tea and Other Stories* translated by Johnson-Davies in 1994, in which appears the focused story "A Conversation from the Third Floor." He has also written several novels, of which only one has been translated into English, namely *Houses Behind the Trees*, translated by Johnson-Davies in 1998. El-Bisatie is known in Egypt as one of the group of writers called Gallery 68, a reference to a literary magazine of the same name, known as a publisher of avant-garde writers.

After graduating from college, El-Bisatie began a thirty-six-year career as an auditor with Egypt's Government Auditor's Office, finally retiring in 1997. He also served as undersecretary of state in Egypt for three years, from 1994 until 1997.

In 1970, El-Bisatie married Sanaa Abdel Aziz, and together they had three children: Rasha, Hisham, and Yasser. The family currently lives in Cairo, Egypt.

Plot Summary

The story begins with the word "she," and the reader does not know this female character's name until her husband shouts it from inside the prison, where she has come to visit him; but this does not happen until later in the story. At first, the reader does not even know where the woman is standing. All that is told is that this woman has been here once before and that there is a policeman sitting atop a horse outside a long yellow wall. Inside the wall is a long building, and the policeman is trying his best to ignore the woman, who finally begs him to allow her to speak to someone. Who this someone is, where he is, and why the woman wants to talk to him remain a mystery.

When the policeman continues to ignore her, the woman adds, "You see, he's been transferred . . ." No further information is given, as the narrator then describes the weather and the time of day, and adds one more character to the picture, that of a small child, whom the woman carries. Then the woman is described as "quietly" moving away, without protest. She finds a pile of stones and sits down, staring at the building inside the wall. She sees a line of laundry hanging from the "bars of the windows." These bars are the first hint that the building might be some kind of prison. The clothes, hanging motionless by the sleeves and legs, are the second hint, suggesting lifeless as well as incarcerated images of their owners.

The woman stares at the dried mud on her feet and attempts to get rid of it by rubbing her feet together. The mud implies that she has walked a long way. Then she looks up at the third floor, an indication that she knows someone who might be there. Meanwhile, that narrator introduces another figure into the story, a soldier in a tower, confirming that the woman is standing outside a prison building.

Suddenly a man is shouting from a third floor window: "Aziza! Aziza! It's Ashour." The woman, Aziza, sees only two arms at first. She focuses harder and can just barely make out a face in between two bars. Other faces appear in the window as well.

The voice rings out again, calling her, asking her several questions in succession. Ashour asks about a letter he sent to her: did she get it? He asks about their children, identifying each by name. He also asks if she has been taking care of the property: has she pruned the date trees? Through his questions, the reader feels the emotions of this man, who misses being the husband of this woman, the father of his children, the caretaker of his home.

It is now Ashour's turn to focus, this time on the child whom Aziza is holding. Who is the child? Which of his children? Then he wants her to lift the child up, turn him to the sun, so he can see him better. When the child begins to cry, his father is joyful in hearing the young, wailing voice; he is also amused by the sound, "The boy's crying! The little so-and-so! Aziza, woman, keep him crying!" This sound must be like music to the father's ear. In the company of only frustrated men in the jail, the sound of his son is soothing.

Ashour continues to question his wife. He also asks why she is not speaking. Aziza tries to answer his questions with her hands or with nods of her head. Finally, at Ashour's prompting, she vocalizes a response. "Louder, woman," Ashour replies, and Aziza complies. She confirms that she brought the cigarettes that he requested, and Ashour disappears from the window. In his absence, other men take his place. They are crude men who make obscene gestures at Aziza.

Aziza steals a glance at the policeman on his horse. She has spoken, despite, the reader can assume, a rule that denied her this privilege. The policeman seems oblivious, as does the soldier, who "had taken off his helmet." The heat of the day seem to have affected them, making them sleepy and uninterested in the conversation that is taking place.

Ashour reports to Aziza that instead of the five packets of cigarettes, he has only found three. He questions her, criticizes her, then steps away from the window momentarily and returns to apologize. "Never mind," he tells her, "a couple got taken, it doesn't matter." But of course it does. He needed five packets, but he understands that in prison, he has no choice but to acquiesce to others who have power over him. He tries to regain his composure; tries to calm her in an attempt to calm himself. To do this, he brings up another topic. Did she build the wall, he asks. When she tells him that she did not, he tells her that's alright, then reminds her to be careful on the tram. He next remembers that he is being transferred. Did she know? He does not know where they will take him, but he commands her not to return to this place. His last words to her are only to call out her name. He then gestures for her to move away, and he disappears from the window.

Aziza sits back down on the pile of stone and nurses her child. While sitting there, she notices a shadow coming toward her as the sun begins to set. When the shadow touches her toes, she draws them back. Time is passing. The laundry on the line that once was motionless is now flapping in the breeze. Earlier, Aziza had concluded that the laundry was wet and that was why it did not move in the breeze. Although she makes no comment about it now, the fact that the clothes are moving indicates that they must now be dry. When she looks back down at her feet, she sees that the shadow has "clothed the tips of her toes." She then stands up.

Before leaving, Aziza looks back once more at the window, but it is empty. She glances at the soldier in the tower but only sees the tip of his boot. When she reaches the policeman on his horse, he again appears to be sleeping. In some ways, the scenery has not changed from the beginning to the end of the story. Aziza leaves the scene, walking "down the narrow passageway toward the main street."

Summary

"A Conversation from the Third Floor" is Mohamed El-Bisatie's short story of a woman's visit to a prison where her husband is incarcerated and the denial of her request to visit with him, despite her long journey. The story's structure and dialogue is as stark as the desert setting and seems natural in a place where nothing is lush or abundant.

As the story begins, a woman makes her second visit to a place near a huge wall encasing a large rectangular building with three floors. It is afternoon, and the woman encounters a policeman on horseback who pretends to ignore her, moving his horse crossways in the road to prevent her from passing. Finally, the woman asks the policeman if she may just say a few words to someone, but the policeman maintains his position of silence astride his horse.

The woman moves a little closer to the big wall, explaining to the policeman that the person she has come to see has been transferred. The sun is now directly overhead, and the woman moves her child to her shoulder and notices that the policeman has begun to sweat from under his hat.

The woman realizes that she will make no progress with the policeman, and she walks along the wall and sits down on a pile of rocks facing the building. The woman notices the prisoners' laundered shirts and pants hanging motionless from the barred windows. The woman repositions her child on her lap and stares at the dried mud on her toes as she stretches out her legs to rest. The woman rubs her feet together to break away the mud and stares up at the windows on the third floor of the building.

While the woman gazes upward, a soldier in a wooden tower of the building moves closer to the edge and surveys the scene near the prison and away toward the city. Suddenly, the woman sees an arm waving from one of the barred windows, and someone calls her name, "Aziza! Aziza! It's Ashour." The woman stands in silence. The man calls out again, but Aziza says nothing, trying to discern the face that goes with the voice coming from the barred window.

Other faces crowd around Ashour's, but Aziza can almost make out her husband's face as he calls out to her that he has been transferred from this place and is leaving in just four days. Ashour yells out questions about the children, the pruning of the date palm trees and whether Aziza received his last letter. Ashour sees that Aziza has brought the baby, Shakir, and asks Aziza to hold him up high so that Ashour may see him better. Suddenly, Ashour disappears from the window for a while, and then he reappears. Aziza holds Shakir up toward the sunlight so that Ashour can see him again.

When Shakir begins to cry, Aziza holds him close to her chest once more to calm him and notices that the soldier in the tower has retreated. Ashour once more asks about domestic matters, but Aziza does not answer questions about the pruning of the date palm trees. Ashour advises Aziza to ask his friend, Abu Ismail, to prune the trees in Ashour's absence. Ashour then asks Aziza if she has brought his cigarettes, and Aziza

replies that she has just brought the cigarettes. Ashour disappears briefly to find the package of cigarettes, and Aziza hears her name called by a strange man. Aziza looks toward the window and sees that the men are making obscene gestures to her. Aziza glances at the policeman, who still feigns ignorance, and the guard dons his helmet inside the tower as the voices of the men get louder.

The voices cease calling out to Aziza as Ashour reappears at the window. He chastises Aziza for bringing only three packets of cigarettes when he asked for five packets. Aziza contends that she did bring five packets, and Ashour disappears briefly once more and reveals that two of the packets have been stolen. Aziza rises from her seat on the rocks and walks toward the wall. Ashour attempts to tell Aziza something, but he changes the topic to domestic matters once more.

Ashour tells Aziza again that he has been transferred and is leaving in two or three days because the prison is to be demolished. Ashour does not know the new location of his incarceration, though. He tells Aziza not to come to this place anymore and that he will notify her of his new location. Ashour stares silently at Aziza for a while and then suddenly retreats away from the window.

Aziza stares at the window in silence for a while, sits again on the pile of rocks and nurses her child. As Aziza looks around, she can see the shadow from the policeman has touched her foot, and she pulls her leg up a little bit. When the shadow moves to cover Aziza's toes, she stands, looks silently at the policeman once more and then proceeds down the passageway leading toward the town.

Analysis

The story is told in the third person narrative point of view, which means that the reader is an observer of the plot with no access to the thoughts or motives of the characters. This perspective is appropriate for the stark plot structure and desert setting of the story. Everything about the story is minimalist, even the dialogue between Aziza and Ashour, who speak in stilted sentences. At times, Aziza does not speak at all, preferring to use her hands to gesture her answers.

The story progresses slowly to mirror the stunted conversation and the inability of the couple to change their situation at the present. The author uses the sun and shadows not only to indicate time but also to symbolize the control over the couple's life. At the beginning of the story, the author writes, "The sun had passed beyond the central point in the sky, but the weather was still hot. A narrow patch of shade lay at the bottom of the wall." This indicates that the time is a little past high noon, and the woman's request to see her husband has not yet been denied.

When Ashour asks Aziza to hold the baby up, she does so, and the child cries, prompting Ashour to tell Aziza to shield the child from sunstroke. This indicates that Aziza is still waiting during the strongest heat of the day. When Ashour disappears for the last time inside the building, Aziza sits to nurse her child and sees the shadow of the

policeman and his horse approaching. "The shadow advanced halfway across the street. She saw that its fringe was touching her foot. She drew her foot back a little." The author wants the reader to know that Aziza still waits during the long afternoon when the policeman's shadow is reaching far from across the road. The threat of the policeman's authority creeps in with the shadow and unnerves Aziza just a little. Finally, "When she looked at her foot again, she saw that the shadow clothed the tips of her toes. She stood up." Now, the shadow is falling long, indicating the end of the day and also the increasing threat of the policeman, who has been a menacing presence during the entire day.

Symbolically, the relationship between Ashour and Aziza has suffered a communications breakdown due to his incarceration. This is represented by the wall, courtyard and barred windows which now separate them.

The most important theme in the story is powerlessness. Ashour has obviously lost any power or control over his life due to his incarceration, and there are indications that he has lost influence over domestic matters. Aziza has not trimmed the date palm trees or built the wall at home, and Ashour directs Aziza to ask for help from a friend. Ashour has lost power inside the prison, as he must sacrifice two packets of cigarettes, presumably taken by the guards. Even the limited time he has with Aziza must be shared with other prisoners who crowd at the window where he attempts to talk to his wife.

Aziza is powerless because she has come to visit her husband and has been denied the privilege with no explanation. There is also no explanation of where Ashour will be transferred, and Aziza is to wait for further word from her husband before taking action. It is not clear if Ashour has been imprisoned before, but Aziza seems to understand the limitations and her fate as a single parent as she resignedly leaves the prison wall without the satisfaction of having visited with her husband or received any information about his transfer. The story's title, "A Conversation from the Third Floor," is ironic because the day is spent in frustrated expectations and stilted communication between husband and wife, hardly the outcome either one had expected.

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Characters

Ashour

Ashour is Aziza's husband. He is in prison for some unexplained crime. He is excited to see his wife. He shouts out her name, saying, "Aziza! Aziza! It's Ashour." The fact that he has to tell her who he is indicates how far away he is from the street where Aziza is standing. He must also ask who the child is that she has brought with her. The child is still nursing, so Ashour has not been in prison for very long. It is only that he is so removed from the street that he cannot tell for sure which of his children is with his wife.

It is obvious that even though Ashour has been in prison for a while, he is used to giving Aziza specific orders. He asks if she has pruned two date trees. He asks why she did not bring their two other children with her. He tells her to lift the child up high so he can see him; to turn the child toward the sun. When the baby begins to cry, Ashour tells Aziza to let him cry, then he tells her to quickly cover him to protect him from the heat. Next, Ashour chastises his wife for only sending him three packets of cigarettes when he had asked for five. Later he softens his tone when he realizes that someone inside the prison has taken the other two packs. Although Ashour's presence is felt throughout the story, his appearance is small and removed, just as he must have appeared to Aziza from the street.

Aziza

Aziza is the wife of Ashour. She stands at the outer perimeter of the wall that surrounds a prison in which her husband is incarcerated. She has come to talk to him. However, she is not allowed inside the wall. She has received a message that her husband is to be transferred, but she does not know where he will be taken.

She pleads with the policeman, but he pays little attention to her. In frustration but without giving up hope, she walks to the other side of the street and sits down. She carries a small child with her and waits in the heat outside the prison, hoping to communicate with her husband.

Aziza is quietly defiant. Although the policeman outside the prison wall does not give her permission to talk to her husband, in a short while Ashour appears at one of the windows. Aziza disregards the policeman and answers her husband's questions. She has brought the cigarettes that he requested, but she has not completed some of the chores at home that he asked her to do. She does not explain herself. She lets her husband come to his own conclusions about why she has been unable to do what he has asked of her. When he tells her, at the end of the story, to go away, she remains, but only for a short time.

Although defiant, Aziza accepts her role. She pushes the limits only slightly and only in desperation. She pleads with the policeman but does not demand. She has walked a

long distance, carrying a baby in her arms in order to bring the cigarettes to her husband. There is no sense of complaint in her. She merely asks where her husband will be transferred, leaving the reader to assume that if she found out, it would be only so she could also walk to the new prison to deliver yet another package. She shows very little emotion. The only time that the reader can sense her feelings is in the few words that she says to the policeman: "Sergeant, please just let me say two words to him." Every other action and response that Aziza makes appear as if she does them by rote. She waits, she listens, she responds, then she walks away.

Themes

Disillusionment

El-Bisatie's "A Conversation from the Third Floor" is saturated with expectation. Unfortunately, most expectations lead to disillusionment. There is the wife, Aziza, who travels all the way to the outskirts of some barren land to visit her husband, who is in jail. She is told, when she arrives, that she is not to speak to him. She must visit with him while he is three floors above her and a wall and wide courtyard apart from her. She expects to see him, to talk to him, but the most that she receives is a glimpse of parts of him: his hands, his arms, his nose, part of his face. In order to talk, she must shout. In order to share her children with him, she must lift her baby over her head and expose him to the hot sun. Aziza came to find out where her husband would be transferred, but she was forced to leave without knowing.

Ashour expected to see all of his children but had to satisfy himself with seeing only his baby, the one he knows least, and he sees the baby only from a far distance. His expectations are so meagerly met that he rejoices when he hears the baby cry, the only emotional response that he will receive. He also expected that Aziza would have trimmed their date trees at home and built a wall. Neither of these chores has been completed. When he asks about the cigarettes that he requested, he hurriedly rushes off to find the package after Aziza confirms that she did indeed bring them. He asked for five packs of cigarettes, but when he finds the bundle that Aziza had brought to him, there are only three packs left. Someone has taken two of them, a price that must be paid when someone is in prison.

As El-Bisatie has stated, one of the main focuses of his storytelling is to explore human disillusionment. As a writer, he never has his characters bemoan their disappointments. They experience them and accept them, as they are a part of their lives that they sense will never go away.

Lack of Authority

El-Bisatie intrudes into the situation of his story as the police officer sitting on his horse interferes on the actions of the people around him. Both are present but only in the most subtle of ways. El-Bisatie is of course the author, having created the characters and the scene. However, he appears to control very little of what is happening. He presents his characters but does not come to any conclusions. He presents the story only in the sense of a witness. He does not impute meaning to their actions; does not present interpretation that might explain what his characters are feeling or thinking.

Likewise, as a mirror-image of the author, the policeman on his horse represents authority. He sits above the people passing in the street, such as Aziza, who must look up at him when she pleads with him to allow her to talk to her husband. Although

readers are not privy to a possible prior conversation, they can assume that the policeman has told Aziza that she is not allowed to talk to her husband. However, when she does finally talk, the policeman keeps his eyes shut, as if he were not there. He also does nothing when cell mates shout out of the window and make obscene gestures directed at Aziza.

The soldier in the tower is also ineffective. He paces a bit, shows signs of being affected by the heat, but he makes no motion toward Aziza or the prisoners when they are obviously breaking some rule. Also, for the prisoners inside the jail to be able to gather at the window, shout, and struggle with one another, there must also exist a lack of authority inside. Thus, the whole story is imbued with this sense of no one really being in charge. El-Bisatie writes as if life proceeds on its own course with little intervention, or maybe little opportunity to change it.

Style

Setting

The setting of El-Bisatie's story is very deserted. He makes it appear that there is little to describe. Readers learn of a yellow wall, a tower, a pile of stones, a string of laundry, a few faces at a couple of windows. There are only a few characters in the story, and all through the course of narration, the reader gets the feeling that no one else ever passes by on the street. The land is dry and lacking in vegetation, the village is lacking in structures, and the story is lacking in details. This creates a setting in which the reader senses a wide expanse of space, much like the space between Aziza and Ashour.

This sense of space in the setting also invites an impression of simplicity and where there are few people, few buildings, and few plants, one notices more subtle things. When an author describes his story in simple form, for instance, the nuances of shadow and light take on more importance. The simple calling out of Aziza's name conveys more passion.

If El-Bisatie's story were a painting, one might be reminded of Georgia O'Keefe's works, her scenes of the desert and the sun-bleached bones of cattle. El-Bisatie presents his stories in much the same way. He creates a setting with only the bare bones of construction. He hints at the surroundings and then allows the reader to fill in the images. He tells the reader that the wall is yellow, but he does not relate what kind of yellow. He does not compare it to the sun, or a flower, or a fruit. It simply is yellow. Neither does he convey details about the type of materials that make up the wall or how high the wall is. This leaves the reader with a vague picture, one that is simple, because only simple facts and words were used to describe it. The setting, like the story itself, is presented as a somewhat incomplete picture, hinting at what is there without fully illustrating it.

Passage of Time

Time is presented not by hours on a watch but by natural occurrences. "The sun had passed beyond the central point in the sky," writes El-Bisatie. Later, there is mention of the laundry that hangs outside the barred windows. Although there is a breeze blowing, the clothes on the line do not move. Aziza concludes that the laundry must be too heavy to move, thus it must be wet. Toward the end of the story, she notices that the clothes are flapping in the breeze and now must be dry. The reader does not know how much time has elapsed from beginning to end, but time has surely moved from one point to another. Likewise, there is mention of the shadow that the wall forms. First it is a thin line at the bottom of the wall. Later, the shadow creeps across the street. Finally, the shadow touches Aziza's feet as she sits and nurses her baby. Time, in this story, is measured only by the progress of the sun, either in its movement across the sky or in its ability to dry the newly washed laundry.

Imagery

The image of the laundry hanging out on the line not only portrays the passage of time, it also becomes a portrait of the prisoners' status. The men in jail, too, are hung up, entrapped, stuck in one place, waiting for time to pass, for someone to finally release them. They have been sent to jail to be "cleaned" of their crimes. In prison, they live out their time much like their newly washed shirts and pants; they are suspended, heavy, and lifeless. Once their time is done, they will once again flap in the breezes and be released.

The shadow that creeps across the street and finally encroaches onto Aziza's feet is likewise an image of time but it also has secondary representations. It is time as seen as darkness. Aziza's life without her husband is difficult. She must assume not only her role as mother and nurturer but also his role as provider and maintainer of the home and field. As time is heavy for Ashour, it is also depressing for Aziza. She waits, not knowing how long her husband will be in jail, how long she will have to wait for him, how long she will have to walk the many miles to see him, work the long hours. She watches the shadow, and every time it nears her foot, she moves away from it. When she can no longer avoid it, she gets up and walks away. The shadow is the approaching end of day. She must return home before complete darkness. She has no man to walk at her side. She must face the night alone.

Historical Context

Brief Political History

Egypt has one of the longest histories of all known civilizations, with records going back to about 3200 B.C. Situated as it is on the northeastern corner of Africa, with a land bridge connecting it to Asia, its prominence in the Mediterranean made Egypt a natural center of trade. The Nile River, which bisects the country, has a fertile delta that made it conducive to agriculture. These elements helped Egypt develop an early, as well as an enduring, civilization. These factors also made it ripe for invasion.

In 641 A.D., Muslim Arabs invaded and conquered Egypt, and ever since, Egypt has been a Muslim country. Despite several other invasions, which led to Egypt coming under the control of the Ottoman Empire (1805 to 1849) and later the British Empire (1882 to 1952), its official name today is the Arab Republic of Egypt.

The Land

Only one-tenth or less of Egypt's 626,000 square miles (slightly more than three times the size of New Mexico) are settled or cultivated. The rest is desert. Most farms and villages are located in the valley of the Nile, in isolated oases, or on land along the Suez Canal. Cairo is located just south of the mouth of the Nile, where the river splits into the Rosetta and the Damietta. To the east of Egypt is the Gaza Strip and Israel; to the west is Libya. To the south is Sudan. Conditions of weather and other natural occurrences make living in Egypt challenging. Besides hot, sultry summers in the delta, there are threats of periodic droughts, frequent earthquakes, flash floods, landslides, volcanic activity; hot, driving windstorms called *khamsin* occur in the spring, as well as dust storms and sandstorms. There are no forests or woodlands. Date palms are one of the few indigenous trees that grow in the delta, valley, and oases areas.

Environmental Issues

In an attempt to provide electricity for Egypt's growing population, the Aswan High Dam was built in 1970. One of the effects caused by the dam is that it has slowed the flow of the Nile and has trapped the rich silt that has, since antiquity, fertilized the Nile Valley. The waters of the Nile, upon which the entire population depends for drinking water and for irrigation, are becoming progressively more polluted.

The loss of silt, compounded by the spread of urban areas, has decreased the amount of agricultural land. To help boost the economy, Egypt has promoted tourism. However, the increased traffic, the construction of new hotels, and the subsequent increased pressure on the sewage system, have created their own set of problems.

The People

Egypt has a population of over seventy million people, and with most of them concentrated in the Nile Valley, there are, on average, almost five thousand people per square mile, with 45 percent of the population living in urban centers. Cairo and Giza, its sister city on the west bank of the Nile, have a joint population of almost seven million people.

Although there is a standardized Arabic language, only well-educated people can understand it. The rest of the population speaks a colloquial Egyptian Arabic, with a small portion speaking other ancestral languages, such as Berber.

Almost everyone in Egypt is a Sunni Muslim. Since the 1980s, a militant group, the Islamic Jihad, has been active in promoting the establishment of a government based on strict Islamic law. Traditionally, education was received through religious establishments. However, since the early nineteenth century, a public, state-run system has been in operation. Due to economic stress today, many classrooms are overcrowded and ill supplied. Although school is compulsory for children between the ages of six and fourteen, many children are forced to work to help supplement the family income. Only half of the population of Egypt is literate, with the highest rate of illiteracy, over 70 percent, among the adults.

There are two major socioeconomic groups in Egypt. The wealthy upper class and the Westerneducated upper-middle class make up one group. The other group consists of the peasants, the urban lower class, and the working class. This second group encompasses the majority of Egyptians and represents Egypt's most grave social problem—that of poverty.

The Literary Arts

Ancient Egyptian literature dates back to 2755 B.C. and includes stories, instructive literature known as wisdom texts, and poems, among other things. Even in these early writings, such literary devices as simile, metaphor, alliteration, and punning are found. In more contemporary times, at the turn of the twentieth century, the Egyptian *Nahda* (Renaissance) began. Egypt experienced a revival of the literary arts, partially influenced by European journalists who brought more modernized views on the arts to Egypt. It was during this time that the short story and the novel form were introduced.

Egyptian literature was recognized worldwide when the author Naguib Mahfouz won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988. Mahfouz is often referred to as the father of the Egyptian novel; however, many contest this claim. Mahfouz was responsible for popularizing the form. Book reading is not as popular in Egypt as it is in the United States. This, plus problems of illiteracy, variations in colloquial languages, and massive poverty, means book sales do not generate much income for writers. The difficulty in translating Arabic languages into English and other European languages impedes the popularity of Arabic authors on the international level.

Critical Overview

While El-Bisatie is a prolific writer and well recognized in his homeland, only two of his books have been translated into English. His minimalist style of writing, which is visually stimulating but lacking in drama, makes his works feel, to the general Englishspeaking public, somewhat incomplete. Despite this, many reviewers have praised his collection of short stories for their visual appeal. Most reviewers have enjoyed reading El-Bisatie's works. Their main complaint is that they want more.

David Masello, in the *New York Times Book Review*, describes El-Bisatie as a "generous host," although Masello refines his statement by adding that, in contrast to El-Bisatie's generosity, "his portraits of the people and places of the Nile Delta give only tantalizing tastes of this little-known region." Masello continues by referring to El-Bisatie's writing as being like "allegorical paintings," a reference that many critics use when describing the Egyptian writer's style of writing simple prose, describing the scene without interpreting what is happening in the story.

Brevity and simplicity are traits that El-Bisatie has mastered. His writing style differs not only from that of English-language writers but also from other writers of his own culture. As Johnson-Davies writes in the article "Village Life from Within" for *Al-Ahram Weekly*, El-Bisatie's writing makes "no attempt to either dramatise or romanticise the situations." Instead, El-Bisatie stands aside and allows his characters' "actions and cryptic conversations to speak for them and to provide the only commentary." Johnson-Davies comments that the subject matter of most of El-Bisatie's writing is the same, the "daily comings and goings of these [village] people and the small dramas and comedies of their lives." In another article, "Tasteful Fare," written for the same publication, Johnson-Davies comments, "Peasants are almost wholly invisible in Arabic literature and it is only in modern fiction that the peasant comes into his rightful own in . . . the writings of Mohamed El-Bisatie."

Writing for *Publishers Weekly*, Sybil S. Steinberg continues along the same line in describing El-Bisatie's writing. She states that these stories "follow a logic that is more visual than dramatic and portray a world whose rhythms are more cyclical than narrative."

Commenting for *World Literature Today*, Ibrahim Dawood calls El-Bisatie's book "a striking collection." Dawood adds, "The fact that Mohamed El-Bisatie grew up in the Nile Delta contributes to making his collection representative, documentary, and implicitly satiric of this region's lifestyle and problems." Dawood also points out that this collection of short stories "bears witness to the strict social customs and unbending rules which dominate life in the region in which the stories are set."

In describing El-Bisatie's writing in general, reviewer Sophy Proctor, for *Egypt Today*, states that the strength of his style "is its sparsity, its economy of language, detail and explanation." However, Proctor also finds that these same qualities can be "its

weakness." Readers have to work when reading El-Bisatie's stories. Or, as some critics put it, El-Bisatie is not for lazy readers.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Hart has degrees in English literature and creative writing, and she focuses her writing on literary themes. In this essay, Hart explores the drama that El-Bisatie so skillfully hides beneath his seemingly simplistic text.

Mohamed El-Bisatie's stories, such as his "A Conversation from the Third Floor," are often described as paintings. This description aptly fits El-Bisatie, who likes to create scenes to which only the barest form of narration is applied. In other words, his narration is used to fill in the setting as a painter might use a brush to paint a picture. His sparse narrative is journalistic, in a sense, making El-Bisatie appear more as a reporter than a storyteller. His stories are told from what he sees, not from what he feels, and what the reader must do, in order to fully grasp and appreciate what is going on in the story, is pay attention to the intricate and subtle details that El-Bisatie offers. His stories may appear deceptively simple, but a studied reading reveals the depth that the author intended.

In the opening lines of "A Conversation from the Third Floor," El-Bisatie offers two descriptive sentences. In them, he conveys the message that a woman (whose name is not revealed) has come to some place (unnamed) and stands in front of a policeman. This is the basic information of these first two sentences, but there is a lot more being said here. First of all, El-Bisatie mentions that this is the second time that this woman has come. With the mention of this circumstance, the woman's intent grows a bit more serious. The fact that she has no name creates an atmosphere in which the reader looks at her much as the police officer sees her, as a nameless peasant woman. The details that this policeman is sitting atop a horse and is looking down at her give the reader the woman's perspective. She is not only nameless in this simple introduction, she is also belittled.

Next, El-Bisatie's narrator conveys a glimpse at the landscape and setting. The woman and policeman are in the middle of a long street that has a yellow wall running along it. Inside the wall is a nondescript building with windows "that looked more like dark apertures." The overall feeling of this next section is that of unrealized tension. Why is the building surrounded by the long wall? Why is the woman standing so close to the policeman's horse? Why does the officer allow his horse to move so undirected while the woman is standing there? And, of course, why does the narrator describe the windows with the foreboding image of dark holes? In contrast to this underlying tension is the seeming nonchalance of the officer, who closes his eyes as if to sleep.

The woman then moves even closer to the horse. The horse responds by bending one of its forelegs, which gives this moment a sense of expectation. What will the horse do next? Will it move toward the woman in an aggressive manner to impede her progress? The narrator relieves the tension by having the horse replace its hoof back on the ground. The horse, like its rider, is somewhat uninterested in this woman, who next offers the first words spoken in this tale. She begs the officer, not to see or touch her

husband, but only to speak "two words to him." The policeman says nothing. He does not even look at her. She is of no significance to him.

The narrator never tells the reader that the woman is standing in front of a prison. However, the reader is able to deduce this fact from the barbed wire on top of the wall and the guard who stands somewhat idly in a wooden tower at the end. The tension of the story increases with the woman's second comment to the officer that whomever she has come to see will soon be transferred. This adds an element of urgency to her mission. Her sentence also ends on a note of incompletion, with an ellipsis, a hint of resignation or perhaps a loss of hope. This person inside the jail that she has come to see is important to her. She wants to know where he will be sent, when he will go, how she will find him on her next attempted visit. All these questions are implied, but never stated.

With a couple more strokes, the narrator turns up the heat of this story. The woman is carrying a small child. The afternoon sun is hot. The policeman's face is sweating. The woman walks away from the officer "quietly." She is carrying a heavy burden, but she does not want to irritate the officer who is uncomfortable in the afternoon sun. She has not given up, but she must protect her child.

When she looks up at the windows of the jail, she notices laundry hanging out to dry. This is the first glimpse she has of the prisoners, or at least a representation of them, hanging suspended above the ground, entrapped by the clothespins that fasten them to the line, "hung by the arms and legs." She fixes her gaze on one *gallabia*, a long, usually white shirt-like garment, possibly her husband's. The *gallabia* is usually worn in the country by peasants, so with the mention of this type of clothing, the narrator is providing more information about the characters of this story.

Everything in this part of the story appears still. Even the clothes do not move in the breeze. There is no mention of any passersby on the street. There is only the woman, who is now sitting on a pile of stones, her eyes half-closed, the police officer halfasleep on his horse, and the guard who leans against the wall of his tower, lazily scanning the sky and the rooftops of nearby houses. In this silence, the cry of one of the prisoners rings out, piercing the seemingly tranquil scene, not only with his yell but also with his emotion. "Aziza! Aziza! It's Ashour." Suddenly there is recognition, not only between the characters, but among the readers. The woman has a name, and it is Ashour whom she has come to see.

In a rush of questions, Ashour fills in many of the gaps of this story. This must be the woman's husband. He knows the names of their children. He knows the layout of the home they once shared, the chores that must be done. He mentions that he is being transferred. This is the same information that the woman mentioned to the policeman. Ashour also feels the tension of moving away to some unknown place. He flings his arms out of the window as far as he can to grab her attention, in a mock attempt to reach and touch her. He is hampered and ridiculed by his fellow inmates, who mimic his cries, his gestures. They press into him, invading his attempted privacy with his wife. He must fight them, push them away. He finally notices the baby in Aziza's arms and asks

who it is. He's been away so long he does not recognize his own child. The child has grown, and his father does not know him. As he struggles to see his child, the inmates again hassle him. He is pulled away from the window. Other faces appear where he once stood. Again he must fight to see the child. When he makes it back to the window, he rejoices in hearing his baby cry, as if the child were speaking to him. He is so deprived of the voices of his children that even a cry is welcomed.

Ashour continues to question Aziza, who tries desperately to obey the commands of the policeman not to speak. She is torn between the authority of the officer and the authority of her husband, who shouts at her, telling her to talk. Without glancing over at the policeman, Aziza finally gives in to Ashour and answers not through gesture but with her voice. At first she speaks softly, but Ashour cannot hear her, so she is forced to shout.

When Ashour leaves the window to check on a package that Aziza has brought him, Aziza must endure abuse; a prisoner remaining at the window "makes an obscene movement in the air with his hand," and another man calls out her name and then lifts his *gallabia* and exposes himself to her. Her reaction is to smile, then look quickly at the policeman, then the guard, both of them oblivious to the insults as well as to her having broken their rules and spoken. She is caught between the crude remarks and her need to communicate with her husband. She must not draw too much attention to herself or demand too much of the situation. In order to find out more about her husband's welfare, Aziza must suffer the vulgarity of the men's reactions to her, just as she must bear the heat, the mud, and the journey to and from the prison. As more men call out her name, she nervously looks at the guard, concerned that the commotion will force him to tell her to move away.

Then there is the issue of the cigarettes. Ashour requested five packs, and Aziza has brought them as he wished. However, only three packs are in the bundle. By using this incident, El-Bisatie further illustrates the frustration, the lack of authority, the humiliation that Ashour must face. His wants are quickly diminished. Ashour, like Aziza, must resign himself to the particulars of his present situation. He is not a free man. Even his smallest desires will not be fulfilled. His wife, who has spent her precious money on the cigarettes, has done so, as it turns out, in part to please the guards, or whoever stole the missing cigarettes. This incident also illustrates a more general fact of all peasants' lives, who must bend their will to the landowners, always accepting less than their dreams. Finally Ashour laughs at the missing cigarettes, just as Aziza smiled at the obscene gestures. With their laughs and smiles, Ashour and Aziza demonstrate their lack of power to change their situations. In the social position in which they both live, it is better to make light of the abuses they experience. To scorn them is useless. Complaining would only bring more of the same.

As Ashour and Aziza say good-bye to one another, it is curious that El-Bisatie inserts the question: "Anything you want?" This question is not specifically attributed to either one of them. It is like a general question that either of them could have asked. The answer is "No," although the reader can surmise that the real answer would be so long that it would be impossible to delineate. Of course there are things that both of them want. They want to know where Ashour will be transferred. They want to know when he

will be able to come home. They want to know how they are going to endure their separate circumstances—Ashour's inhumane existence inside the jail; Aziza's struggle to maintain her home, to care for and feed her children. They do not, probably in consideration of one another, offer any of these answers. It is simpler to respond with "no," although both know that the other is needy.

Then there is silence in the story as the two of them stare at each other's faces. The last voice heard is the simple cry "Aziza!" as Ashour wraps his arms around the bars of the window, a poor substitute for wrapping his arms around his wife and children. The narrator does not supply background information or interpretation that might convey the emotions of his characters. There is no need. The simple cry of his wife's name is filled with yearning. The cold, rusted bars that he hugs reveal his desperate emotional hunger.

Although Ashour tells Aziza to move away, she must linger. She has a baby to feed. As she sits on the pile of stones, a shadow from the wall slowly makes its way across the street to her feet. She recoils from it until she can move no more. Then she stands up and walks away so the shadow cannot touch her. This shadow is reminiscent of the description of the prison windows as dark apertures. A darkness fills the hole through which Ashour looks out at the world. A similar darkness attempts to fall across Aziza, but she does not let it.

The story ends as it began, with Aziza near the horse and the sleeping policeman. She again is walking quietly. The horse is again motionless, as Aziza escapes through a narrow passageway, returning, once again, to her world.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "A Conversation from the Third Floor," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Wallace is a freelance writer and poet. In this essay, Wallace explores the way in which Mohamed El-Bisatie uses his description of the exterior setting to reveal his story's inner truth.

At first glance, it's tempting to think that almost nothing happens in Mohamed El-Bisatie's short story "A Conversation from the Third Floor," which first appeared in his 1994 collection *A Last Glass of Tea and Other Stories*. The plot is hardly complex: a woman, carrying a child, walks to the fence which surrounds a prison, asks for and is refused permission to enter, has a brief conversation with a man, who is forced to shout at her from the third floor, then departs. Even the characters themselves are arguably flat: readers are given almost no description of the woman, the man, and their history, and minor characters, like the policeman and the soldier, are so quickly drawn that they barely constitute sketches—El-Bisatie gives not one single detail to set them off in any way from any other policeman or soldier.

On closer inspection, however, "A Conversation from the Third Floor" is actually a story in which something of great importance happens: a woman sees her husband and the father of the child she holds for what may be the last time. It is the kind of meeting that people retain in their minds in unnatural detail and that she will remember, word by word, and incident by incident, for years. It is an incident to which the child will also return again and again, hoping to find clues to himself and his current problems in what he's been told and remembers about the encounter, whether he's really old enough to remember it or not.

El-Bisatie tells the story of "A Conversation from the Third Floor" in all the detail that the woman, with the acute memory of momentous happenings, will retain and that the child may wish for in days to come. The details El-Bisatie chooses to use, like the details our minds preserves, are initially strange: he spends far more time describing the barren landscape than the face of the man the woman has come to see. But at a second glance, we often discover that our memory has picked details for us that are far more telling than what we might have chosen consciously, and the same is true with El-Bisatie's choices: through his extremely detailed description of the setting, he subtly reveals far more about the underlying emotional truth of the encounter than the surface events of the story do. In fact, in El-Bisatie's world, the characters' surroundings often overpower them to such an extent that, in many cases, the setting actually begins to represent the character.

"A Conversation from the Third Floor" opens with a brief depiction of a woman addressing a policeman, then moves into a very detailed description of the building beside them, in particular the "small, identical windows." Initially, this seems like a digression from the conversation between the policeman and woman. But, as the one-sided conversation continues, it becomes clear, through another detailed description of the barbed wire which lines the wall, that they stand before a prison and that the woman

is trying to get contact with a prisoner—and suddenly, the windows he might be standing beyond become significant.

Still, not much is obviously happening. Everything in this landscape is static: the policeman who closes his eyes and refuses to respond to the woman's pleas, the shade which lies at the bottom of the wall, even the prisoners' laundry, which hangs limp on the line despite the breeze. Only the woman acts against this backdrop, imploring, moving the child from shoulder to shoulder. Even after the policeman makes it clear that he is going to ignore her request, and she sits down helpless, she continues to fidget, both physically and mentally, even making up a reason for the eerie stillness of the washing: it "must be wet."

To the reader, however, the lesson begins to be clear: this is a world in which, both literally and metaphorically, the overwhelming setting overpowers everything. Obviously, the walls of the prison have enormous power, separating the woman completely from her husband. But it's not just the prison that makes it difficult to move in El-Bisatie's story. The entire environment, inside and out, is oppressive and overwhelming—to the extent that some human beings, like the unmoving policeman, seem to lose their humanity and turn into scenery. In this world, it is the scene that matters. The human beings are just details, even to other human beings. This is driven home especially clearly by El-Bisatie's description of the soldier who, glancing out the window, looks at "the sky . . . the roofs of the houses . . . the street"—but doesn't take notice of any of the people in the landscape.

But the woman has a partner in her attempts to act in this suffocating setting. Just when she has run out of options, there's a shout from one of the windows El-Bisatie mentions in the very first paragraph of his description of the setting. It is the man the woman came to see, who has probably been alerted to her presence due to the delivery of the package she left on her earlier visit. Even here, however, he's no match for his surroundings: locked securely inside the prison, all he can do is shout and wave one arm out the window. In fact, this window already seems to have taken his place, to some degree, in the woman's mind. Sitting pensively outside the wall, she looks up, not to see his face but "at the windows of the third floor." And once she hears his call, she stares, not at him, but "at the window."

Still, the man manages to shout both his name and hers, for the first time giving them personal identity beyond "man" and "woman" and separating them from the more generic "policeman" and "soldier," who are dangerously close to disappearing entirely into the scenery. But even as he speaks, the man reveals that he, too, shares El-Bisatie's, and the story's, obsession with physical setting. His first concern is a change of scene: he's going to move from this place to another, he tells her. And then he asks about the physical conditions at the place he's left: "Did you prune the two date palms?" And when he finally begins to ask about human beings, his concern is still with place: he asks not how, but where, they are: "Where are Hamid and Saniyya? . . . Where's Hamid?"

For a moment, his speech seems to conquer the setting with humanity. The woman can see his face and even discern the other faces around him. When she looks around, she sees not scenery but human beings: "the policeman on the horse . . . the soldier in the tower." The man is able to catch a glimpse of the child. And even the inflexible soldier, who is closely associated with the rest of the oppressive scenery, withdraws inside the tower momentarily. But it's a short-lived victory, perhaps because the man himself continues to worry about the scenery, or the physical world he's leaving. He asks again about the date palms and then, in a gesture that seems at first to be motivated by humanity, tells the woman to give his regards to a friend. In the next sentence, however, he reveals that he sends the greeting in hopes that the friend will prune the palms for him.

Despite the man's concern with setting rather than humanity, the man and woman do achieve at least one more small bit of human contact. In her earlier visit, the woman was apparently able to smuggle some cigarettes to him. And this contact even seems to affect the landscape. Just after describing the delivery of the cigarettes, El-Bisatie adds that the soldier has taken off his helmet, allowing the woman a partial view of his head and making him solidly human, if only for a moment. But the soldier quickly puts his helmet back on, and the woman's small accomplishment is clouded by disappointment: all five packets didn't make it to the man, as she intended. The setting, specifically the prison itself, has taken its portion. Frustrated, and perhaps angry at the man's remonstrances, the woman turns to go. The man calls after her, but when she turns back, it is not to him but again to the far less personal "window."

Again, however, his speech brings his face into focus. The woman can see him smile, and they steal a few more lines of conversation. Still, the man is concerned primarily with setting, asking, "Did you build the wall?" and giving her the details of his transfer. But it is in this exchange, when, in passing, he lets the woman know that "they're pulling down the prison," that the setting, until now all-powerful, shows its vulnerability. Through his speech, the man destabilizes everything that currently comes between him and the woman, letting her know that, although he may soon be interred somewhere else, the walls that separate them, the policeman and the soldier, and perhaps, by extension, even the blazing sun that beats down on her, are not eternal. And this revelation, that the seemingly all-powerful setting can be changed, leads to another, deeper revelation, the key to his concern about the tree and the wall at home: in this world where physical surroundings create such insurmountable obstacles, these small domestic details are his chance to change the scene, to build a wall which is not the prison's but his own. And just after this revelation that their physical surroundings are not as impenetrable as they seem, for the first time, El-Bisatie reveals not just the names of the man and the woman but their human relationship, naming the man as her "husband" for the first time.

Of course, the man is a prisoner, and his hopes for a change of scene at home still don't allow him to leave the prison walls at the close of this story. He disappears back into the cell, and his wife is again left "looking up at the window." But as she did before, she continues to insist on her focus on humanity rather than scenery, stretching out her leg and suckling her child. As she does so, a remarkable change takes place in the surrounding scene, which is no longer static or impossible to act in. The shadow moves

across the street. The laundry has begun to sway in the breeze. The soldier and the policeman, who have aligned themselves too closely with the now-vulnerable, paralyzed setting, now appear just as frozen in space as a wall or a tree— and seem helpless, rather than invincible, due to their lack of movement.

Perhaps most important, El-Bisatie finally breaks the connection in his language between the man and the window. In all previous references, the woman has looked up at "the window" as if it were, in fact, her husband in some way, as if the seemingly unchangeable setting had changed him into nothing more than an opening in a prison wall. But as she looks back for the last time, she sees that "the window was empty." And in this seemingly desolate statement, El-Bisatie actually offers a note of victory. The man has not been overcome by his surroundings. He is more than a slot in a prison wall. He is a man, moving about somewhere inside the building which will soon be pulled down, full of his own plans for the change of scene he wants to create in the future for his wife and family.

And in the final line, the woman stages her own small rebellion against the oppressive, seemingly unchangeable setting in which she was forced to meet with her husband: she changes it completely, simply by walking away.

Source: Carey Wallace, Critical Essay on "A Conversation from the Third Floor," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

DeFrees is a published writer and an editor with a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Virginia and a law degree from the University of Texas. In the following essay, DeFrees discusses how short story writer El-Bisatie conveys the experience of Egyptian village life by focusing on external detail in favor of internal character development.

When encountering literature from another country, a reader may well expect to learn something more about a place and culture than he knew before: the food the people eat, the houses they live in, the customs they observe, the way they converse. In skilled hands, such details immerse the reader in a new world and provide the feeling of having traveled to a far-off place. Too many details, however, and the spell is broken—the story becomes a lecture, and the narrative sags under the weight of a travelogue. In order to involve the reader, a writer must strike a careful balance between what is described and what is left out. Of course, this is a balance that all writers of fiction must strike. In a sense, even a story set in the reader's hometown is inviting him to a place he's never been, and convincing him of that place's reality is no less difficult. The unfamiliar scenes the reader encounters when reading a foreign writer's work simply remind him all the more clearly of the task that any work of fiction must undertake.

Egyptian writer Mohamed El-Bisatie sets his short story "A Conversation from the Third Floor," like most of his work, in a small village on the Nile Delta. In its few pages, however, it offers little in the way of geographical or cultural context. The simple title is a straightforward summary of what happens in the story: a woman arrives in front of a prison and talks to her husband, who yells down to her from the window of his cell. The title gives no hint of what the conversation is about, but then, what the couple discusses does not seem particularly important. They talk about their two date palms, and some cigarettes that she has sent him. Even the most potentially dramatic piece of information they exchange—that the husband will soon be transferred to a different prison—does not make much of an impact. As the title suggests, this is just a conversation, not much different from any other conversation.

Why, then, does El-Bisatie bother to describe it? He seems deliberately to have left out the very details that would capture the reader's interest. He never reveals, for example, why the husband is in jail or if he will ever be released. More important, he never reveals how either of the pair feels about the husband's imprisonment. Like the ever-present sun, the wall that separates them and limits their communication is just a fact to be accepted without comment or explanation. Even the husband's captors fail to provide excitement. As the story opens, the woman encounters a policeman on horseback, whom she must pass to get to the prison:

The woman stood a few paces away from the horse. The policeman looked behind him at the windows, then at the woman. He placed both hands on the pommel of the saddle and closed his eyes. After a while the horse moved and came to a stop crossways in the

street. Then, a moment later, it made a half-turn and once again stood at the top of the street.

Here El-Bisatie sets the stage for conflict. It would seem that the policeman has the power to decide if the woman talks to her husband or not. And indeed, a few lines later she asks his permission. But the policeman is utterly passive. He barely moves, and when he does it seems to be his horse's decision. The woman's request goes unanswered and she heads to the prison anyway. What seemed to be an obstacle is no obstacle at all. What might have been an opportunity to learn something about the woman— is she brave? angry? sad?—is left unexplored. And so it goes for the rest of the story. El-Bisatie scrupulously avoids drama at every turn. The husband's cigarettes have been stolen, but he shrugs it off; the woman greets the rude catcalls of the other prisoners with a smile.

Having noted the lack of either emotional or physical action in "A Conversation from the Third Floor," it is a wonder that the story has any power over the reader at all. And yet it does. What El-Bisatie withholds about the characters' personal history and emotions does not seem to cheat the reader or make the story incomplete. Rather, it focuses the reader's attention all the more sharply on the simple visual details in which El-Bisatie economically grounds his story: the lines of sweat on the policeman's forehead, the dried mud on the woman's toes, the faces pressed against the prison window's bars. This effect may be found in many of El-Bisatie's stories, and it has led critic David Masello to say that they are more like paintings than stories. Reviewing El-Bisatie's short story collection, *A Glass of Tea and Other Stories* (which includes "A Conversation from the Third Floor") for the *New York Times Book Review*, Masello writes that the stories "allow the reader to witness scenes rather than become involved in them; often one learns more about the harsh landscape than about the people within it."

This is certainly true of "A Conversation from the Third Floor." But El-Bisatie's painterly interest in the surface does not mean his characters have no depth. He may not state explicitly what the wife is feeling, but his careful description of the "harsh landscape" she inhabits reveals her to the reader in a different way. "It was afternoon," the story states at the start. "The sun had passed beyond the central point in the sky, but the weather was still hot." The sun beats down on the wife but not on the husband, and the story repeatedly refers to the sun to underscore their isolation from each other. The woman has brought their child, whom she lifts up toward her husband's cell. He instructs her to "face him toward the sun so I can see him." She does so, and the child closes his eyes and begins to cry. The sun that lets the husband see his son blinds the child, and eventually he tells the woman to cover him. When the conversation stalls for a moment—the husband has forgotten what he wanted to say—the woman turns away her head from the dark cell window "so that part of her face was against the sun." At the beginning of the story, the prison wall casts a narrow shadow on the ground. By the end, this shadow has grown: "The shadow advanced halfway across the street. She saw that its fringe was touching her foot. She drew her foot back a little." This small gesture suggests as much about her character as the few words she says. Of course, as the afternoon wears on the shadow will lengthen, and eventually cover the woman, if she stays still. Her acknowledgment of this seems to prompt her departure. "When she

looked at her foot again, she saw that the shadow clothed the tips of her toes. She stood up." It is as if the sun's movement in the sky governs the conversation, rather than anything the man and woman have to say to each other.

In an essay in *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Egyptian critic Nur Elmessiri says that in El-Bisatie's work "everything is there for the reader to see. But what the reader sees, what comes starkly into view, is the impermeability, the utter opacity of things." This is a good description of the deceptive simplicity of "A Conversation from the Third Floor." There is nothing mysterious or hidden here. The characters do not seem to have any secrets. That, however, is precisely what keeps the reader engaged. Much like the woman, who scans the mass of arms and faces in the prison window, trying to pick out her husband, the reader pores over the details El-Bisatie presents in search of some larger meaning. The woman will never see inside the prison, but is instead at the mercy of what the window reveals to her. Similarly, the reader's understanding of the people and culture here represented wholly depends upon a few seemingly insignificant details: the prisoners' laundry, the soldier's helmet, the mundane topics of the conversation. The reader finds himself in an alien place, and El-Bisatie does not provide a guidebook. On the one hand, this thrusts the reader all the more immediately into the woman's life. All of the background information that is lacking, all that is not known about her and her situation, is precisely what she takes for granted. The reader is thus forced to experience this conversation at the prison as she does—as an unremarkable part of a larger routine. The story's narrow focus keeps the reader in the moment, and the reader must surrender to the rhythm of a life different from his own. If El-Bisatie's decision to withhold more specifics results in a lessthan-comprehensive knowledge of what life is like in the Egyptian countryside, at least it prevents the reader from falling into the trap of false understanding. The reader is never allowed to forget that he is a tourist here.

Source: Allison DeFrees, Critical Essay on "A Conversation from the Third Floor," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Topics for Further Study

Most of El-Bisatie's stories take place in small villages in rural Egypt. The author was born in el-Gamalia, Dakahlia, a small village bordering Lake Manzalah in the Nile Delta. Find as much information as you can about this area, the people who live there, and the way they live. Write a paper on your findings and make a presentation to your class, using as many illustrations as you can (maps, charts, slides, etc.).

El-Bisatie moved to Cairo as a young adult and has lived in this capital city ever since. Research the history of this ancient city and write a paper that incorporates some of the more significant elements of its long history. Some questions you might want to consider are: Who were some of its most important leaders? How has the architecture changed over the years? What role has religion played in the political aspects of this city? How does the culture differ from U.S. culture?

Ashour, one of the main characters in El-Bisatie's story, is imprisoned, but the reader is never told what his crime is. Research the political atmosphere, the judicial system, and the correctional systems of modern Egypt and then create a crime for Ashour. How might he have been tried? Would he have had a lawyer? What are the prospects of his ever being released? What is his life like inside the prison?

El-Bisatie is often described as a painter who uses words to create his pictures. After reading "A Conversation from the Third Floor," create a picture of the main scene of this story—that of Aziza outside the prison, looking up at her husband on the third floor. Include all the elements that El-Bisatie describes. Try to paint or draw them in a very simple style that reflects the way El-Bisatie writes.

What Do I Read Next?

Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931) was born in Lebanon and later emigrated to the United States. Although he considered himself a painter, he is remembered most for his writings. His most famous work is a book called *The Prophet*, first published in 1923, which contains a series of philosophical essays on topics such as love and marriage. His *Broken Wings: A Novel* was retranslated in 1998, demonstrating a style of writing similar to El-Bisatie's. It was this novel that had the most profound effect on Gibran's fellow writers in Lebanon. Also by Gibran is *The Storm: Stories & Prose Poems*, retranslated in 1997, in which Gibran explores issues such as injustice dealt to the poor and the tender innocence of young love.

For a female perspective on Egyptian culture, Miral Al-Tahawy's *The Tent* offers a glimpse into the lives of Bedouin and peasant women, exposing elements of their private lives. This novel is set in the desert and explores the sometimes abusive and oppressive nature of a dominant patriarchy. The author Al-Tahawy received her degree in literature at Cairo University. This is her first novel.

Like El-Bisatie, Said Al-Kafrawi focuses on the short story form for his writing. Al-Kafrawi was also born and raised in a village in the Egyptian Delta, and his writing reflects his memories of those experiences. *The Hill of Gypsies and Other Stories* (2000) is his first collection of short stories to be published in English.

Only two books written by El-Bisatie have been translated into English: *A Last Glass of Tea and Other Stories* (1994), in which "A Conversation from the Third Floor" is contained, and his novel *Houses behind the Trees* (1998). The novel is set in a small Egyptian village in which everyone knows everyone else and their most private secrets. In this story, El-Bisatie explores the impact of these conditions on the villagers' psyches when there is no running away from the past.

In 1988, Naguib Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. Born in Cairo in 1911, Mahfouz is considered one of Egypt's best writers. *The Cairo Trilogy: Palace Walk, Palace of Desire, Sugar Street* (2001) is an epic trilogy covering Cairo's history during its years as an English colony and demonstrating its effect on a Muslim family living in Cairo in the early part of the twentieth century. The story traces the lives of three generations. For a sampling of Mahfouz's short stories, *The Time and Place: And Other Stories* (1992) is a good place to start.

Further Study

Botman, Selma, *Engendering Citizenship in Egypt*, History and Society of the Modern Middle East series, University Press, 1999.

Beginning with the early years of the twentieth century, when Egypt won independence from British rule, Botman studies the effects of an evolving Egyptian culture in which women's social inferiority has been mandated by a dominant patriarchal political, legal, and social system.

Fahmy, Khaled, *All the Pasha's Men: Mehmed Ali, His Army and the Making of Modern Egypt*, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Most historians consider Mehmed Ali Pasha (1769-1849) the founder of modern Egypt. He was an Albanian officer who helped the Egyptians in their fight to rid their lands of the British forces and gain their independence. Pasha is credited with helping to modernize Egypt, building factories, railroads, and canals, and with bringing in European architects and technicians to create a more modern Cairo.

Foster, John L., *Ancient Egyptian Literature: An Anthology*, University of Texas Press, 2001.

Foster has collected poems, stories, prayers, and wisdom texts from ancient Egyptian writings, making this an excellent introduction to the literature of an ancient land. Foster has been collecting and translating texts from Egypt for more than thirty years. This is a culmination of some of his best work.

Malek, Jaromir, *Egypt: Ancient Culture, Modern Land*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1993.

Covering the vast period of five thousand years, this book uses essays, photographs, maps, and diagrams to illustrate the natural environment, the culture, the economy, religion, and everyday life in Egypt from ancient times to the present.

Rodenbeck, Max, *Cairo: The City Victorious*, Vintage Books USA, 2000.

Rodenbeck is a noted journalist who has spent most of his life in Cairo. This book has been described as a travel book, as a popular history, and as journalism. The reader is given a tour of Cairo, both past and present, through the eyes of this reporter.

Weaver, Mary Anne, *Portrait of Egypt: A Journey trough the World of Militant Islam*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.

Torn between the governmental secular forces which have ruled Egypt for many decades and the rising power of the militant Islamic clerics, Egypt is becoming a country in crisis. Weaver explores this conflict through exclusive interviews with militants,

generals, and politicians. She concludes with her own views on how this struggle affects the Western world.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

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Beverly Jendrowski

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Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an at-a-glance comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature, a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535