

The situation

The scene takes place outdoors, in the English countryside, in the early nineteenth century.

A group of common people have gathered to hear a young female Methodist preacher.

This scene illustrates how Methodism originally reached out to the working class, outside Anglican churches and liturgy. It emphasised personal faith (*sola fide*) and piety over knowledge and authority, allowing ordinary people to preach, including women.

The “stranger’s” doubt about Dinah’s vocation as a preacher seems to indicate that she does not have much experience in this activity, and may be attempting to prove her worth to her audience, and perhaps even to herself.

Dinah’s sermon

A ‘nonstandard’ preacher

Dinah is a woman, a lay person and a working-class one. Her gender doubly excludes her from the priesthood: directly (no women could be ordained), and because women could not join the universities, where the Anglican clergy was trained.

A ‘democratic’ sermon

As a layperson, Dinah does not preach down to her hearers but as a member of the community addressing her peers (see her use of the first person plural: we, us); her voice is not that of the Church but of the people. She uses demotic, nonstandard forms (“told us as the Gospel meant...”, “so as we rear our carrots and onions”).

As such, her language is simple and does not rely on much scriptural or academic knowledge. Instead, she takes her images from the everyday lives of her hearers: worms, carrots and onions.

Still, when she quotes, in direct speech, the words spoken by the minister, she speaks those words herself, so that she may appear to appropriate his authority and legitimise her preaching: “you must have heard the clergyman read these words: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor.’”

Point méthode : le discours rapporté (reported speech) au style direct (direct style) : Rapporter les propos d’autrui au style direct n’est pas anodin : cela consiste à prononcer sa parole telle qu’il l’a prononcée, à la mettre dans sa propre bouche. Cela implique entre autres d’utiliser des pronoms personnels choisis non pas en fonction de soi mais comme si on était la personne qu’on cite. Le discours rapporté est par essence polyphonique (polyphonic) : il mélange ou enchâsse l’une dans l’autre au moins deux voix, celle du locuteur cité et celle du locuteur qui cite. Qu’exprime ce dernier : une identification à l’autre ?, un désir d’être cet autre ?

Dinah’s identification with her audience has ambivalent effects on her sermon: on the one hand, being like them lends her relevance and credibility; on the other, if she is like them, what can she tell them that they don’t already know? Her relationship to her audience makes the authority of her sermon problematical, prompting her to resort to complex strategies to become authoritative.

Authority: individuality and transmission

Dinah’s reference to the minister is ambiguous in that it does not help to clarify Dinah’s position concerning him: she uses this mention to introduce her subject matter, but it implicitly raises the question of their respective positions; yet she moves on with her sermon without answering that question, which boils down to those of her religious conformity and her authority to preach. This pinpoints the possibly uncomfortable position of Methodism: on the one hand, Dinah does not challenge the C of E or its clergy, but merely claims to further their mission and supplement them; on the other Methodist preachers are not sanctioned by the C of E and may thus be regarded by it as nonconformists.

Dinah’s legitimacy does not come from the Church, but from her own experience and faith; she does not imitate other preachers.

However, this form of legitimacy is compounded by its opposite: transmission from the founder of Methodism, whom Dinah claims to have seen first hand.

Eloquence: sincerity and rhetoric

Dinah’s eloquence does not borrow from set patterns (she does not imitate other preachers) but from sincerity and spontaneity.

Her lack of formal education is thus turned into an asset, but that means that the absence of standardised rhetoric in her sermon is actually a form of rhetoric: she adapts her language to her audience and to her aims. The narrative emphasises how her delivery is paced, how its is punctuated by pauses, how facial expression and gesture complement verbal language to make the sermon impactful.

A self-targeting sermon?

Although the reference to the “rougher hearers” indicates that Dinah may be trying to convince a portion of her audience of the explicit part of her speech, the reader is also made aware that another portion of the audience is comprised of Methodists (line 3), people who already share Dinah’s convictions. These people have not come to learn any of the things that a young woman has to teach: they are probably here to hear a pleasing sermon, or to check if Dinah is able to make such a speech. In other words, their interest is in the sermon as an aesthetic performance. Thus ‘the medium is the message’ (Marshall McLuhan): the sermon is its own end. Similarly, the “stranger’s” intention is to determine if Dinah has talent and a vocation to preach. One underlying, but no less crucial for that, aim of her sermon, therefore, is to prove that she can preach, an aim which may be more crucial than the explicit one.

Dinah’s complex relationship to authority (parroting the words of the minister, appealing to transmission from Wesley, and showcasing individual inspiration, all at once) and to eloquence (a rhetorical denial of rhetoric) points to the complexity of her position as she strives to establish authority as a preacher. The reader is made aware of both the boldness she, a young, female, working-class person, needs to muster up to claim legitimacy in others’ eyes, and the insecurity she evinces as she tries to prove that legitimacy to herself too.

If Dinah’s sermon is implicitly self-referential, then the narrative which narrates and analyses this self-referential sermon is also probably self-referential inasmuch as Dinah’s situation and behaviour reflect the challenges the author (a woman writing her first novel) faces and her complex reactions to them.

Proposition de problématique

The narrative stages a sermon which advertises Methodism’s democratic promise of salvation for everyone and uses this very promise as an empowering tool, showing this speech as shaped by multi-faceted aims which produce a multi-layered rhetoric that is at once a vehicle for a spiritual message and a battlefield where the preacher confronts authority, to which she responds in a complex way in an effort to establish her authority in others’ eyes as well as her own.

Version