



Lene Lundsgaard  
Svend Madsen

## The Big Picture

**Bonnie Greer** (1948-) was born in the USA and studied with the playwright David Mamet and the stage and film director Elia Kazan in the '70s and '80s. Her first play *1919* was performed in Chicago in 1977 and she worked in New York theatres, developing work with women and ethnic minorities, until she moved to Britain in 1986. In London she worked at the Tricycle Theatre from 1986 until 1992 and has had many of her plays produced in theatre and on BBC radio. Her first novel, *Hanging by Her Teeth*, was published in 1995. Greer is currently the Arts Council's Playwright in Residence for the London-based Pascal Theatre Company.

*The Big Picture* first appeared in NEONLIT. Book of New Writing 1 (1998).

---

Bonnie Greer

## The Big Picture

**complexion** hudfarve  
**range** variere, spænde over  
**sable** zobel, brun som  
 sibirisk mår  
**translucent** gennemsigtig  
**ivory** elfenben  
**luminous** klar, lysende  
**pride oneself on** være  
 stolt af  
**delicate bits** små fine  
 bidder  
**naughtiness** frækhed  
**bracelet** armbånd

They had one day left in Paris. As usual, they decided to spend it together.

There were five of them: Patrice, Gloria, Odelle, Marie and Darlene. They had become the best of friends in kindergarten. Now they were forty, with seven marriages, three divorces and one widowhood among them. The ones who had been fat in their youth were now skinny, and the ones who were skinny were now fat. Their complexions ranged from sable to a translucent ivory. Two were tall, one was short and the other two fell somewhere in between. No matter what anyone thought, they considered themselves to be among the finest women on the planet.

And, like most close friends, they had one facial characteristic in common: a pair of large, luminous eyes, eyes with the clarity of a child, eyes that seemed to see everything, know everything. Especially about one another. They prided themselves on that: knowing the little joys, the secret sorrows, the delicate bits of naughtiness that female best friends always know. They were full of one another. Each was a living, breathing Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, no angel with a flaming sword could block their way to one another's Eden. "Open All Hours" was engraved on the silver bracelet each woman received from the others on her birthday. They all knew what that meant.

The bracelets marked their fortieth birthdays. This year, from late winter into autumn, they had enjoyed a succession of parties, culminating in a grand celebration thrown by their families and friends at an expensive downtown hotel.

5 It was toward the end of the party, when they had been sufficiently drunk, that they had entertained everyone with an a cappella rendition of "We are Family" in perfect harmony.

10 Their birthday year had culminated in a trip to Paris. And here they were, in the City of Light, practically broke, but carefree, like the girls they were at heart.

They were sitting at an outdoor café and drinking champagne when Odelle of the alabaster complexion said: "We should go see the *Mona Lisa*. That's supposed to be the greatest painting in the world, 'The Big Picture', girlfriends. But my Aunt Susie saw it last year and she said she  
15 didn't get it. I've seen reproductions of it, and though I don't like agreeing with Aunt Susie, I have to say I don't get it, either."

"How are you going to know anything from a reproduction? The world's got too many repros, and rewinds. We live in edit, I tell my students that all the time," Patrice of the sable skin countered.

20 "But what is a 'great painting'?" Marie asked.

When Marie asked a deep question, the women knew that they had drunk too much and it was time to go, so Gloria signalled for the bill.

"So what is it? Great art. What does it *do*?" Marie continued.

25 They all turned to Gloria, who had taken quite a few art courses at university, and who they had all once expected might have become an artist herself one day.

"Who knows what makes it great," she replied. "And do? What does art *do*? Does it *do* anything?"

30 "Anyway, **THEY** call it great," Darlene added. They all nodded solemnly as if they were in church.

"But let's see it anyway." Gloria was standing up now. "We can't say we've been to Paris unless we've seen the *Mona Lisa*."

35 They all had to agree with that, so they left the little café and made their way on foot to the Louvre, laughing and talking at the tops of their voices.

They reached the museum minutes before it was scheduled to close. They raced past the transparent pyramid near the entrance, through the doors, flashed their day-passes to the guards, hurried down the escalator, found the sign pointing to the appropriate gallery and, laughing and calling  
40 to one another like children, found the room where the *Mona Lisa* hung.

At first they did not see it. Like all legendary things, it was smaller

**throw a celebration** holde en fest  
**downtown** i centrum af byen  
**sufficiently** tilstrækkeligt  
**a cappella** kor uden musikledsagelse  
**rendition** fremførelse  
**We Are Family** (1979)(sunget af den amerikanske popgruppe Sister Sledge, bestående af fire søstre)  
**broke** flad, blanket af  
**carefree** sorgløs  
**alabaster** marmorlignende  
**repro** reproduktion  
**rewind** tilbagespoling  
**in edit** i redigeringsens tidsalder  
**counter** svare igen  
**solemnly** højtideligt  
**Louvre** kunstmuseum i Paris  
**before it was scheduled to close** før lukketid  
**flash** fremvise  
**escalator** rullende trappe  
**appropriate** passende  
**legendary** legendarisk, meget berømt



**encased** lukket inde  
**barely** næsten ikke  
**glare** skarpt lys  
**twilight** skumring  
**awash** oversvømmet  
**frame** indramme  
**velvet** fløj  
**cacophony** disharmonisk  
 larm  
**beyond** på den anden side  
**ablaze** strålende  
**sweep** stryge forbi  
**the quays** kajerne langs  
 Seinen  
**promotion** forfremmelse  
**tremble** skælve  
**psychic** alternativ  
 behandler

than they thought it would be. The sounds of their voices and sensible footwear echoed through the great empty hall as they searched.

It was Darlene who found it. The others joined her.

They stood in silence around the small canvas. It was encased in protective glass, barely visible amidst the glare from the lights in the gallery. They did not move until it was time to go. 5

It was twilight when they emerged into the plaza outside. The transparent pyramid was awash in white light, the deep blue of the late autumnal evening framing it like a jewel in velvet.

Near it the great cacophony of the place de la Concorde hung in the air as the Parisians sped from Left to Right Bank through its open space in that great Grand Prix known as rush hour. 10

Just beyond was the wide boulevard of the Champs-Élysées, lights twinkling in the trees that lined it. And just behind it was the Eiffel Tower, ablaze, glittering like a gigantic Christmas tree. 15

But the women saw nothing.

They walked along without saying a word to one another.

They reached a bridge. It was dark by now. The light from the tourist boats, the *bateaux mouches*, swept the grand façades of the buildings on the quays. It was Patrice, the first-born, who broke the silence. 20

"Did you see it?" she said. "It looked like it was breathing. I saw her chest move. It moved like my daughter's, like Shantell's neck does. That child hasn't spent one night at home in two years. I know she's a grown woman, I know I'm only her stepmother, but why did she have to just up and disappear like that?" 25

"Uh-uh," Darlene countered. "I didn't see any breathing. She wasn't breathing. Her breathing had stopped. Like his did. Just like his did. He said it would. I did what he asked me to do. I couldn't see him like that any more. I couldn't see my husband like that any more. I changed and washed him and then I did what he asked. I did. I'm not sorry." 30

"It didn't do anything for me. Nothing," Gloria muttered. "It was cold. Just like her. That bitch. Took my promotion. I taught her everything I knew, tried to be a sister. She was really cold-blooded. I'll never trust another black woman as long as I live behind that." 35

Odelle began to speak.

"Birds. Those black birds. Flying in the background like they did behind Nana's house. Nana. Nana really understood me. Knew me better than anybody else ever did. Ever will. Nana. They say God takes the good ones first." Odelle began to tremble.

"It was her. Mona Lisa is who she meant," Marie almost sang. "Her. 40 Rosamund, my psychic, told me somebody would smile at me, a very old

woman and then I would know I was on the right path. I could stop therapy, I could ...”

Marie stopped speaking. She, too, was feeling what the others were feeling – feeling, but not communicating.

- 5 It seemed now that a great curtain had dropped between each one of them, separating them one from the other.

They were each in an enclosure that the others could not enter. An enclosure whose entrance had been guarded by a mysterious face whose smile they now knew encompassed infinity.

- 10 A *bateau mouche* passed beneath the bridge. It was empty. Its light illuminated the five friends as it passed.

Soon, it went on its way, plunging the women into darkness.

enclosure afspærret  
område  
guard bevogte  
encompass omfatte,  
indeholde  
infinity uendelighed  
plunge plumpe, kaste

## Questions for discussion

1. Make a list of the facts we know about these women at the beginning of the story.

Why is the description of their eyes so important?

If the eyes are mirrors of the soul, then what do we know about these girlfriends when the story begins?

2. What is the idea of the inscription on the bracelets that they give each other for their fortieth birthdays?

3. Why does Odelle want to see the *Mona Lisa*?

4. Give a brief characterization of each of the women from the way they speak of the *Mona Lisa*.

5. There is no description of the painting itself. Why not?

6. There is no description of any conversation between the women while they are standing in front of the painting although they have been talking “at the tops of their voices” on their way to the museum. Why?

7. Give an account of the information you now get about each of the women’s lives.

Compare that information with your notes on the women at the beginning of the story. In what way did they behave and talk *before* they saw the painting? And in what way do they behave and talk to each other *after*?

8. Try to answer Marie’s question now: “So what is it? Great art. What does it *do*?”

9. Why does the experience of seeing the *Mona Lisa* separate them? And what does the narrator realize at the end of the story?

10. Explain the importance of the setting in the story. (CD-ROM question)
11. Comment on the imagery of light and dark in the story. (To know more about imagery, see “Big Things”)
12. State the reasons why “The Big Picture” belongs to the literary form *short story*. (CD-ROM question)

### **Writing topics**

1. There has always been a lot of speculation as to what secrets the beautiful eyes and smile of the *Mona Lisa* hold. Write an essay in which you give your guess. Take a look at the CD-ROM for inspiration, where you will find some examples of people’s speculation. You could also use the hints about one of the women as your starting point.
2. Write a review of a piece of art that means a lot to you – not necessarily a painting, it may also be a piece of music, a play at the theatre, a film, a poem, or a story.
3. Go and see an exhibition of pictures/paintings at a gallery or a museum, and describe what you saw and the experience it gave you.

### **Extra material and exercises**

- Story and plot
- Setting