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In *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Tracy Chevalier deftly channels her voice through a seemingly ordinary maid in 1660's Delft, Holland. Griet, a daughter of a bereft and blind tile-maker, and a woman of no formal education destined to marry a butcher's son, must convey her story through minute observation. She seems to see the world through wide and wondrous eyes; her lens helps contemporary readers focus on this unfamiliar historical setting. Yet at the same time, this voice must evoke an entire historical novel, interwoven with subtle character development and psychological complexity.

As I read this well-paced novel, I often wondered how Chevalier made this first person voice so convincing given the innate artificiality of its conceit. After all, I can safely assume that most young Protestant women from the Dutch golden age would never have shared or verbalized their intimate life to an audience of any sort, and of course, due to a lack of education, it's doubtful such a narrator would have the verbal prowess that Griet seems to possess. And yet at no time does this voice sound a false chord; though an illusion, Griet is as restrained, evocative, sensual, and real to the beholder as one of Vermeer's paintings.

Chevalier chooses a maid as her narrator, and her attention to detail makes for a perfect conduit of the particular—the light from a dusty window, the placement of objects on a table, and the beauty of paint pigment, a finely ground dust. These details arise through cleaning, an action inherent to the main character's daily living and her gradual process of discovery. The reader sees her interact with the carefully arranged world of Vermeer's studio, and gains insight into his distilled imagination through concrete observation. As Griet leaves her home to work with Vermeer, humble details give way to

richness—details such as chopped vegetables change into yellow mantles and ermine linings. Griet's transition into Vermeer's assistant and then subject matter for painting seems well-suited for someone so attuned to his way of life in the attic studio.

In this way, Chevalier mirrors Griet with Vermeer, and shows how her eye for detail, composition, and light reflects like a pearl in the eye of the painter. A maid begins to have a measure of power over the painter, and though unsaid, the reader laments her lack of opportunity to develop her raw talent, made real through the sway she has in choosing the right composition for a painting, and for the luminous nature of her portrait, which Vermeer chooses to view again before his death.

I also like how Chevalier raises the stakes in a plot that may seem too placid. Its moment of climax, after all, falls with Vermeer witnessing from afar Griet's long hair loosed from her cap. But Chevalier has already grounded the reader in the social context of her novel, so that the impact of this moment is clear—this is the buffer to her sexuality, and tacitly links Vermeer to its burgeoning presence in their relationship. His decision to paint her weighs on the reader because of past details too. Protestants such as Griet's parents don't approve of figurative painting, and proper women must not gaze at their beholder with lips slightly parted, as hers will remain forever inviting on Vermeer's canvas. When delivered in the convincing voice of a seventeenth century Dutch narrator, these moments have an intensity that belies their banality.

For my own writing, I hope to glean from Chevalier her devotion to realism in a story that could easily fall prey to melodrama or lyricism—the breathless young maid and the dashing genius artist. I especially like how even though the reader knows her as the girl in the painting, Griet herself admits to never having viewed this painting. I find this

observation wonderfully realistic, and it leaves the reader with a poignant absence in this richly told story. Even at the close of the novel, when many writers leap to overt meaning, Griet simply pawns off the pearl earring given to her by Vermeer. This seems a startling choice to close a story of so many characters and themes, and yet it remains faithful to the voice and real actions of Griet ten years after she posed for Vermeer's most mysterious portrait.