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<u>Care to share a truth?</u>

"It is as easy as lying." *Hamlet* 3.2.387.

In a world that values sincerity as a trait above almost any other, lies— treachery, conspiracy, rumors, and even white lies— run abundant. Honesty is a virtue run amok, and it always seems that the most virtuous die the most untimely deaths. The people who can understand their own truth and communicate it with others live the most fulfilling lies. Those that are convinced of a faulty truth, or those that can know the truth but cannot tell it to others (an *inner* truth), often result in tragedy.

In the historical Battle of Balaclava that serves as the subject of the poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade" by Alfred Lord Tennyson, the soldiers in the light brigade were unaware of the misdirection. Their truth was that of the officer's command: it was "Theirs not to reason why \ Theirs but to do and die" (Tennyson 14-15). The heroism lies in the soldiers' firm belief and dutiful actions carried out for their commander, even if they knew it meant certain death. They carried out their truth — but their truth was a miscommunicated blunder.

It's not difficult to see how an absolute faith in a defective idea, or putting absolute trust into someone or into a philosophy, contributes to an inability to find one's own truth. Because no person has the same understanding as others, this means the ideas are already thought out and there is no need to challenge them. Blind faith in a religion is a common example— taking every idea from scripture literally without any interpretation or skepticism is a recipe for catastrophe. The path has already been trodden, but it may be paved to disaster. In contrast, the "pathway of finding truth … was thickly grown with weeds … [where] each weed \ Was a singular knife" (Crane 1-9). This is a path that is often neglected out of convenience; or, in the case of the soldiers at Balaclava, not an option.

But for those willing to take the overgrown path, other tragic pitfalls await.

Hamlet is deeply saddened as he observes his uncle's marriage to his mother and ascension to the throne only a month after his father's death, to the point that he contemplates death in the first soliloquy. After the ghost of his father tells him of the regicide, Hamlet knows the truth and is determined to stay alive to carry out his uncle's demise under the cover of apparent madness and absolute secrecy. He *knows* "[the marriage] cannot come to good. \ But … I must hold my tongue" (Shakespeare 1.2.164). The discrepancy between what he *knows* and what he *expresses* causes his demise.

Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Polonius, Laertes, Ophelia, and the Queen— people dear to Hamlet at some point— are all without knowledge of the true cause of the King's death. They are all less disgruntled by the King's death and the hasty remarriage of the Queen. While this may only be because they lack the atomic-family relationship that Hamlet shares with his father, Hamlet perceives it as a test of faith, a disloyalty to the royalty. While Hamlet puts on his "antic disposition" (Shakespeare, 1.5.192) in an attempt to keep his friends uninvolved with the revenge plot— a noble cause— they each are slowly driven insane by his lack of transparency. Ophelia is driven to mental illness and eventual death, and Hamlet "hast cleft [his mother's] heart in twain" (Shakespeare, 3.4.177).

The tragedy in Hamlet's contained virtuosity can be explained in light of Kugelmass's downward spiral in "The Kugelmass Episode" by Woody Allen. In an attempt to escape the mediocrity and tedium of everyday life, Kugelmass uses the service of a sketchy self-employed magician to live his dream life. The difference between the two characters is that Kugelmass is doomed from the beginning— after all, throughout the whole story he "see[s] ruin and alimony; jail. For adultery with Madame Bovary, my wife

will reduce me to beggary" (Allen 4) and therefore he is not honest to himself— but Hamlet only sees his flaws as his plot progresses in an increasingly violent manner. But both are compulsive liars— they share the ability to lie through their teeth. Kugelmass is willing to lie to everyone except Persky, his accomplice and confidant, in order to fulfill his goal. While Hamlet's intentions are sound at first, the goal is warped by his means as he gets further entangled in his convoluted plot, and he only is able to confide in his best friend Horatio. Both Kugelmass and Hamlet isolate themselves in the realms of their own minds, so disparate from the real world that they cannot help their friends or their friends them.

In his loneliness, Hamlet is infected with the seed of revenge, honorable but corrupting. The results of his apparent madness are the degradation of his public image, the loss of his dearest friendships, and a greater motive for the King to assassinate him. Only after Horatio is instructed to "report [Hamlet] and [Hamlet's] cause aright \ To the unsatisfied" (Shakespeare 5.2.370-371) is Hamlet finally the people's hero, but this effort is too little and too late.

It's all too true that history is written by the victors. Usually the victors have the pride to express themselves and record their achievements. But a character such as Hamlet, so invested in keeping the plot secretive, will, sadly, go down in history as the mad prince who kills the King for reasons unknown. While Hamlet does watch the downfall of the King unfurl in his dying moments, it is too late — Hamlet is ensnared by his own lack of truthtelling. Had Laertes not opened up the truth at last ("The King, the King's to blame" (5.2.351)), the truth of King Claudius's guilt would never have been exposed. The secret would die with Hamlet. He would die a villain, not a hero.

Similar sets of attitudes appear in the medieval epic *Beowulf* and John Gardner's *Grendel*. The monster Grendel is no stupid creature; in fact, he is older than any living human, having watched the rise of human civilization. But his insights are all rendered naught when he is killed and his death celebrated by the people of the kingdom. From his experiences with nature and with man, Grendel discovers many philosophies throughout his lifetime, from solipsism and nihilism to Machiavellianism. These philosophies are his truth, but not impressed upon anyone or anything else. His effort to communicate (peacefully) with the humans is never enough; he knows the truth but cannot spread it. The dragon has a little bit more power, telling his truth to Grendel, but he too is killed by Beowulf, and civilization sees its death as a triumph. So much knowledge, gone.

Tragic loss. "A terribly pity— loss of a remarkable form of life. … Meaningless, however" (Gardner 70), instructs the dragon to Grendel.

Many parallels run between Beowulf and the dragon, between Grendel and the dragon, and therefore between Beowulf and Grendel. Beowulf, for example, calmly states that Unferth will "prowl the stalagmites of hell for [murdering his brothers" (Gardner 162), able to dictate how his fights were heroic without jest; Grendel cannot. Grendel instead plays with Unferth, abusing the only human besides Beowulf capable of understanding Grendel's speech; he laughs as he heartlessly covers Unferth in apples, reducing him to "a poor miserable virgin" (Gardner 85) rather than the hero the people saw in him. Unferth is the only human that can help the people glimpse Grendel's truth. To state and debate one's position is the foundation of society, but Grendel never does the latter.

Eveline has a similar problem in James Joyce's short story "Eveline." She spends too much time arguing, not with her father or her fiancé, but between her different selves. Rather than be dragged to one side or the other by her family's or her friends' words, she is dragged apart by her own. Her personal opinion is stifled because "the voices around [her] \ kept shouting \ their bad advice" (Oliver 3-5), and she

never goes far enough that “there was a new voice \ which [she] slowly \ recognized as [her] own” (Oliver 27-29). In other words, Eveline is able to understand the opinions of both her family (who would benefit from her stay) and her love (who would benefit from her leave), but not at the same time. Her ambivalence cripples her ability to hold an opinion and communicate it with others, so that she couldn’t escape her difficult situation. Here, she can understand multiple truths, but without the communication with others, she cannot synthesize a satisfying solution.

An external honesty remedies the problems with simply being moral internally. Horatio and the guards outside of Hamlet’s palace have the good loyalty and honesty to tell the prince all that they had seen, revealing the truth to others. King Hrothgar and the Shaper are able to sustain a kingdom for so long together because they both share the glorious image of the kingdom as they see it (the humans’ truth) to the people, rather than keeping it to themselves. Even the young king Hygmod is able to resist disaster by Hrothgar’s troops by presenting his sister as a gift— bringing to mind the human truth of beauty and love. All of these characters, able to transmit some value of themselves to their respective communities, live not only past the tragedy of their introverted friends, but also to fame and remembrance. While King Hrothgar is not as physically powerful or philosophically advanced as Grendel, and while Horatio not as intelligent as Hamlet, they are able to impose their beliefs on other people.

Communication is key.

“Tell the truth but tell it slant—” Dickinson 1

Human society is built upon the idea of the forum: conversation, discussion, debate. While the truth may be dangerously “Too bright for our infirm Delight” (Dickinson 3), it is certainly better to reveal some truth (a “slant” truth) than none at all. Because if one holds ideas to himself, with sole intentions but no cooperation or other real action, what happens at his death? What is he to the world who keeps his secrets and tells not one bit of the truth?

Tragic is the loss of great ideas, not communicated or communicated through loss.

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