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English 10

17 October 2016

A Humbling Truth About Truth

Truth is like a fog that blankets a town in the morning, where one cannot see farther than their hand held before them. It is like a crowded street during rush hour, where one only notices the best dressed lies but not the truth in rags and tatters. At once blatantly beckoning and invisible to the naked eye, truth serves as both a theme and a source of conflict in William Shakespeare's play *Othello*, which was written in 1604 and set in Venice, Italy. In the tragedy, the fervent love between a Moorish general named Othello and a Venetian beauty named Desdemona encounters a multitude of obstacles in the face of jealousy, betrayal, and revenge, all beginning at the cunning, wicked hands of Othello's standard bearer, Iago. Truth, however, commences with "Republic VII" by Plato, which delineates the formation of the complex concept of verity using an allegory that equates being held captive in a cave to being confounded by a false illusion of truth. The passage describes a cycle of oblivion, realization, and denial that is applicable to a plethora of scenarios. Truth is also explained by Heilbroner's "Don't Let Stereotypes Warp Your Judgment," which points out the harmful but prevalent issues of stereotyping in modern society. Plato's "Republic VII" and Heilbroner's "Don't Let Stereotypes Warp Your Judgment" establish truth's origins, conflicts, and formation, which are ultimately illustrated by both works in Shakespeare's *Othello*.

Society is exalted as the epitome of sound judgment and moral rectitude, but instead too often fosters individuals to accept misconceptions of reality. In "Republic VII," Plato pronounces

this unconsciousness of truth the first step on the path to the discovery of truth. As Socrates states within the excerpt while the prisoners are enchained within the cave, “From the beginning people like this have never managed, whether on their own or with the help by others, to see anything besides the shadows that are [continually] projected on the wall opposite them by the glow of the fire” (Plato 1). By this, Plato encapsulates the servile attitude of individuals in their process of learning and growing. The prisoners in the cave can see nothing but the shadows forced before their eyes, but just as shadows are only a reflection of truth, the prisoners’ lives are only a reflection of lies. Similarly, under the influence of tradition and of the established rules of society, individuals are restrained from countering society’s mantras, restrained from speaking their truth amidst people who have limited perspectives of their surroundings. Their ideas and opinions are enslaved and bound in chains, just like the shackled inhabitants of the cave of which Plato writes.

Likewise, Plato and Heilbroner show that the beginning stages of truth’s formation in *Othello* are defined by ignorance and a halcyon atmosphere. According to Heilbroner, “When a group of Nebraska students sought to match faces and nationalities of 15 European countries, they were scored wrong in 93 percent of their identifications” (Heilbroner 1). This is merely one example of the countless false stereotypes that exist in individuals’ daily lives. Because they have seen nothing that contradicts the falsehoods which they have been fed, they see reason to believe that their judgments are justified in every way. Just as individuals in society live in a world that shields truth, Othello too is trapped in a whirlwind of unwitting deception. Towards the climax of the play, Othello speaks in a way that no lover is expected to speak, saying, “Get me some poison, Iago, this night: I’ll not expostulate with her lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again. This night, Iago” (Shakespeare, 4.1.156-158). This shows how Iago was able to

twist Othello's mind into a warped reality, deluging Othello's infatuation with Desdemona with his treacherous plans and wicked beguilement. Seeing no evidence to contradict Iago's claims that Desdemona was cheating on him, Othello is not only convinced by Iago that his wife is unfaithful, but even convinces himself that such a figure of disloyalty has no place in his life. Alas, the world of ignorance is not blissful as is commonly said, but rather a dangerous place where lies take on the semblance of truth.

Following the bliss of incomprehension comes the striking blow of discerning reality, which Plato reveals as the second step of the journey to truth. Socrates declares, "Watch the process whereby the prisoners are set free from their chains and, along with that, cured of their lack of insight" (Plato 3). Although the released prisoner is initially blinded by the brightness of the sunlight, his eyes soon adjust, and he is now capable of seeing objects as they really are, rather than seeing only their shadows. In other words, his mind is liberated and enlightened as he and all he sees are bathed in truth, as his past ignorance and shrouds of doubt dissipate. The discovery of truth is equally liberating in the real world; when individuals are told the truth for the first time, it can be shocking, or perhaps even utterly revolting. However, when they come to realize that established principles are but one among infinite ways of living and perceiving, they dispel of their preconceived opinions of society, forming new ones that reflect higher moral standards and a clearer understanding of truth.

This stepping stone of recognizing and exploring the newfound wrinkles and rivulets of truth is also a significant turning point in the plot of *Othello*. As limned by Heilbroner, this hard-to-grasp truth comes through a gradual process that "adds bits and pieces of reality to the pictures in our heads, until gradually they take on some of the blurriness of life itself" (Heilbroner 3). Here, Heilbroner shines a light on the fact that the scattered shards of truth cannot be gathered

and pieced together overnight. Instead, over the course of time and trial, individuals begin to realize the unreliability and bias of the masses, as well as what is morally and socially correct. This essential realization is what hits Othello in the play moments after he kills Desdemona out of spite, when Emilia laments before him, “Oh, my mistress, a villain has made a mockery of your love! My husband said she was unfaithful” (Shakespeare, 5.2.162-163)! Shocked beyond disbelief, Othello at last sees through Iago’s villainously crafted plot that cost him the dear love of his life. From this moment on, Othello truly comprehends the consequences that fall like rain droplets of hot iron in the absence of truth, and feels the leaden weight of the remorse that comes with murdering his wife. Ergo, regardless of the gravity of the situation, breaking the glass wall separating one from truth often results in his own hands becoming bloodied first from the sharp cuts of sudden realization.

Finally, the ultimate stage in Plato’s process is denial and rejection in the conveyance of the truth to those who haven’t seen it. Plato delineates this by writing, “If any one tried to loose another and lead him up to the light, let them only catch the offender, and they would put him to death” (Plato 3). In this quote, Plato explains that prisoners who have never seen the light fail to comprehend or accept the seemingly radical statements from the released prisoner who understands the concept of truth. Hence, they respond in the only way they know, which is to view the returned prisoner as an outsider who poses a threat, and in turn, threaten to harm him should he continue to spread supposed lies. Likewise, individuals are inherently close-minded, holding their own beliefs to be the ultimate truth. Therefore, they shun any idea that goes against their preformed presumptions of righteousness. When one has never seen the light of truth, they perceive it as a fire that burns to the touch.

The truth is like a bitter medicine; it is hard to swallow, but if one holds it in his mouth he will choke. In this sense, Plato and Heilbroner's principles aptly describe Othello's reaction to being told the truth. As Heilbroner notes, "Sharp swings of ideas about people often just substitute one stereotype for another" (Heilbroner 3). What he is saying is that after being enlightened by the truth, individuals tell their peers that the stereotypes to which they have been exposed are only an illusion. However, others do not believe what they are being told, and instead mock those who have seen the "truth," thus stereotyping those who spread the truth as liars. This scenario is no different in *Othello*, when Emilia says to Othello about Desdemona's loyalty to him, "She was too attached to her filthy marriage ever to do a thing like that" (Shakespeare, 5.2.166-167)! Even though Emilia reveals that Desdemona in fact loved him faithfully, Othello initially still clings to his belief in Iago's supposed truth and Desdemona's guilt, bringing up the false evidence of the handkerchief and of Cassio's "confession." Therefore, persuading Othello of the truth proves to be a difficult ordeal, but as the other works have shown, he is not the only figure who is reluctant to cast away all his former beliefs and graciously accept reality as it is.

Thus, Plato's "Republic VII" and Heilbroner's "Don't Let Stereotypes Warp Your Judgment" show both the tangible and abstract aspects of the process of discovering truth in *Othello* through their discernable impact on the unfolding of the story. In what is seemingly a game of verity turned awry by unfounded lies, truth is unearthed step by step in history, fiction, and society. Though truth is indeed elusive and challenging to convey once attained, one eventually comes to a point of realization that much of the road behind them was only a shadow of the road before them. This shadowy road, however, lives not only in the figurative realm, but also very much in the world that one lives in today. One more often than not chooses to live

within the safe confines of willful ignorance, refusing to venture into the unsafe or the unknown. However, if one takes the daring step out into the sunlight, he may be blinded for a moment, but he will no doubt recognize that truth is not meant to be believed or even to be known; it is only meant to be realized.

Works Cited

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