Boston College

Storytelling and Death:

The Value of Fictionin Philosophy

A scholar of the college project submitted to the honors program
of the Department of Philosophy

By Jim McCoy

April 1, 2021

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Introduction

"His face resembled a plaster mask, and his eyes were redder than blazing coals. Julian held the lantern up to look at him and saw that his body was covered with the most hideous sores of leprosy. And yet there was in his bearing something majestic and regal."

- Gustave Flaubert, "The Legend of Saint Julian Hospitator"

Death has always captured the attention of storytellers and their audiences alike, and I myself am no exception to the rule. I find myself time and again captivated by stories featuring reflections on death and mortality, such as the *Iliad, Hamlet,* and *Brothers Karamazov.* Yet in my time as a student, I have found most philosophical essays about death to be lackluster—instead, I've preferred to read essays on epistemology, political philosophy, and metaphysics. As I read more and more works of fiction, philosophical pieces on the subject of death which used to interest me, such as the *Phaedo* and the *Myth of Sisyphus*, seem to fade into the periphery of my mind. Noticing this trend in my preferences, I recently became interested in why I prefer fiction over non-fiction. Is it simply because of the emotional drama which comes with the former? Or, is there something more profound going on here—does fiction actually offer deeper insights about death that cannot be taught through argumentative essays? Is the form of storytelling better at talking about death? This was the question that ultimately sparked this thesis.

In the world of philosophy, it feels like the default form in which emerging thinkers choose to present their ideas is argumentative nonfiction. Moreover, nonfiction essays have become the gold standard of what should be taught in philosophy classrooms, with pieces of fiction often being set aside for film and English majors to grapple with. The issue of whether

different forms of writing have unique roles in philosophy has been treated as a "trivial and uninteresting question," as Martha Nussbaum notes in "Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature" (Nussbaum, p. 3). However, just as Nussbaum responds, "Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content—an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth" (Nussbaum, p. 3). For philosophers, in our quest for truth, we should therefore more closely analyze the ways in which the various forms of what we read and write help us—or hinder us—from accessing the truth.

Therefore, this thesis seeks to present on the advantages of using stories (specifically, fictional narratives) to lead us to truths about death, with the hope that we can simultaneously gain insights about storytelling and about death. In doing so, we will wrestle with a variety of questions about empathy, self, other, fiction, and ways of knowing. All the while, we will try to flesh out the relationship between storytelling and death. Why is fictional so excellent at capturing truths about certain subjects like death? What is it about death which makes it so difficult to talk about without the help of fiction? These are the main questions which will serve as the framework for our discussion.

As we look at the dominance of nonfictional argumentation in the world of philosophy, ethical issues will present themselves alongside our questions about the epistemological value of storytelling. We will examine why, for a long time, academic philosophy has tended to trivialize the importance of emotions, acting as if writers and readers alike should be able to set aside their emotions as they reflect. We will argue that this is a suboptimal approach towards academic discussion, and we will try to show that, instead, writers of philosophy should take more seriously the fact that the discussion of certain subjects (such as death) can be disturbing to readers. We will therefore try to understand in what ways storytelling is better than nonfictional

argumentation at helping both readers and writers process and cope with uncomfortable truths. Thus, we will be considering the ethical benefits of the form of storytelling in addition to its epistemological benefits.

In Part I of this thesis, we will analyze the epistemological consequences of how stories make us think about the "self" and the "other" when discussing death. In Chapter 1, we will consider what it means to step into the shoes of a fictional character. Our main goals in this chapter will be to examine whether stories can teach through experience rather than reason and to examine whether empathizing with characters can teach us any lessons about death that nonfiction cannot. In doing so, we will develop a rough theory summarizing how experiencing fiction is similar and different to experiencing reality. We will continue to use this theory in Chapter 2, where we will consider why stories are especially good at bringing ourselves to recognize truths about ourselves (such as the truth of own mortality), when this can be a challenge for nonfiction writers. Chapter 3 will look at stories featuring characters filled with regret when they encounter death. We will try to show how these stories can facilitate reflections on death by giving us a character to project our thoughts and emotions onto.

In Part II, we will leave behind our investigation of the "self" and the "other" in stories so that we can analyze how the form of a piece of writing relates to its ability to represent reality accurately. Starting with Chapter 4, we will try to show that stories are better than essays at portraying internal, emotional experiences. We will try to affirm the importance of intimately understanding the emotional consequences that death can bring. In Chapter 5, we will show that stories can better represent the motion of time, making them better-suited than essays when portraying events like death, which, by definition, cannot occur without the passage of time. This will lead into Chapter 6, which will discuss why nonfiction essays tend to talk so much in

absolutes that they can fall short when trying to represent reality, which is controlled not just by absolutes, but also by particular circumstances. We will show some of the challenges with talking about death in absolutes, and we will show how storytelling can overcome these challenges. Finally, in Chapter 7, we will look at why stories are so good at representing mysteries about death, and we will also think about why it might be important to represent mysteries about death accurately.

In Part III, we will at last look at the ethical benefits of choosing to discuss death in the form of a story. In Chapter 8, we will show how both writing and reading fiction can be therapeutic when discussing traumatic subjects, such as death caused by war. Specifically, our analysis will look at how stories help us organize and process our thoughts on a subject even when there may not be a clear goal for us in mind, or when we don't have any solid conclusions to draw. We will argue that this is especially important for philosophers, given the fact that any philosophical discussion always leaves open and unanswered questions, meaning that we cannot rely on logic alone to comfort us about distress that we may feel from philosophical reflections. Chapter 9 will examine how storytelling can validate readers' concerns about death, and how stories can turn reflections on death which might be disturbing or isolating into sources of healing and connection.

Finally, in our conclusion, we will reexamine the way in which the world of philosophy has treated the form of fiction and the subject of death. We will try to briefly understand where the roles of both fiction and nonfiction are in the world of philosophy, and we will try to affirm that nonfiction still has an important role in discussions about death. To do so, we will try to understand why a subject like death might lend itself to being discussed through fiction, while a subject like epistemology might lend itself more to being discussed through nonfiction. Thus, we

will end this thesis by summarizing the challenges of discussing death and by proposing how storytelling might be incorporated into the world of academia to discuss any subject which poses similar challenges.

Part I: The Self, the Other, and the Grim Reaper

"They connect the stories to themselves, I suppose, and we all love hearing about ourselves, so long as the people in the stories are us, but not us. Not us in the end, especially. The Midnight Caller gets him*... never me"* - The Coen Brothers*,* "The Mortal Remains"

Introduction

The power of any good story is that it taps into our empathy, inviting us to step into the shoes of its characters. It plays with our sense of self, causing us to forget where we begin and its characters end. Each character's joys bring about happiness in ourselves, and each of their sorrows bring us sadness. We draw similarities between each character's life and our own, and we begin to see the world through their eyes. Such is the state that we are in when we observe a death take place in a story. When we read about Achilles' rage and sorrow upon hearing that his dear Patroclus has died, we feel the same emotions as him, and we experience what he experiences—at least to an extent. But at the same time, we do not fully enter into the situation of Achilles; hopefully, after we put down our copy of the *Iliad,* we can let go of our rage enough to return to normal life. Thus, it seems that when we read a piece of fiction, we enter an interesting, liminal state in which we are simultaneously experiencing ourselves and another. What should we make of this phenomenon?

This is the main issue that we will be examining in the first part of this thesis: what are the epistemological consequences of stepping into the shoes of an imagined character? As we will see, there are a number of ways that entering this state of empathy might help us learn valuable lessons—and more specifically, lessons about death. In chapter 1, we will argue that

empathizing with characters can help us learn lessons which can only otherwise be taught through real-life encounters with death. In chapter 2, we will examine how stories can use our tendency to compare ourselves with characters to provoke a level of self-recognition that cannot be attained through normal argumentative nonfiction. Finally, in chapter 3, we will try to apply some of what we've learned to various stories to clarify our thoughts through examples.

Chapter 1: Seeing through the Eyes of Another

Let us start our investigation by reflecting on a scene from *The Plague* by Albert Camus. Throughout the first half of this novel, a scholarly priest named Paneloux claims that God has sent the plague which is decimating the town where he lives, and that because this plague is God's will, the deaths resulting from it must be accepted as good. Paneloux is quite certain of this conclusion, because he came to it through reason, and he places reason above all else. Rieux, the narrator of the story, who often acts as the voice of Camus, explains that

> Paneloux is a man of learning, a scholar. He hasn't come into contact with death; that's why he can speak with such assurance of the truth—with a capital T. But every country priest who visits his parishioners and has heard a man gasping for breath on his deathbed thinks as I do. He'd try to relieve human suffering before trying to point out its excellence (Camus, p. 126)

Thus, Camus sets forth his philosophical stance on death: that it teaches the importance of relieving suffering on Earth through its observation. In other words, witnessing death teaches a lesson which cannot be taught through logic or reasoning. Furthermore, Camus sets forth that the horror of death and the importance of fighting against it is universally understood by all who have witnessed it. Rieux affirms this in the novel, saying that the one constant in his time as a doctor is that "I've never managed to get used to seeing people die" (Camus, p. 128).

In accordance with Rieux's view on the teaching power of witnessing death, Paneloux changes drastically when he watches a young boy die from the plague:

> Paneloux gazed down at the small mouth, fouled with the sordes of the plague and pouring out the angry death-cry that has sounded through the ages of mankind. He sank on his knees, and all present found it natural to hear him say in a voice hoarse but clearly audible across that nameless, never ending wail: 'My God, spare this child' (Camus, p. 217)

Clearly, Paneloux's first experience witnessing death teaches him quite a powerful lesson. He is compelled to bargain for a life, something which he preached against time and time again when before this experience.

We should note here the significance of the fact that Paneloux learns through experience rather than reason. A lesson taught by experience explicitly trumps a lesson which Paneloux previously learned through reason. This conflict between experience and reason creates a complication for us as philosophers: how is it that we, the audience, are supposed to learn lessons such as the one which Paneloux learned from witnessing a boy's death? Clearly, if such a lesson can only be learned through a real encounter with death, we cannot rely on argumentative nonfiction to be a good teacher. We would undoubtedly find ourselves in the same position as Paneloux before he has encountered death: scholars misled by their faith in pure reason. Should we therefore conclude that the only way to learn this lesson is by witnessing a death ourselves? This conclusion would pose some clear problems to us; the trauma which witnessing a real death can cause and the rarity of how we might encounter death are obvious roadblocks that may keep us from learning this lesson through real-life experience.

However, we are not at a complete loss, because instead of argumentative essays and real-life encounters with death, we have access to stories such as *The Plague*. These stories are, of course, much more accessible than real-life encounters with death, and bring the other obvious

benefit of being far less traumatic. But if we are following in Camus' thinking that certain lessons can only be taught through experience, then we how could a story, which is not itself a real-life experience, help us learn what Paneloux learns?

One solution to this question would be to claim that Camus' intention is actually not to use this scene to teach his audience the exact same lesson that Paneloux learns. Instead, it may be that Camus wishes to teach us by showing us what we don't know. He may want to demonstrate the importance of witnessing death firsthand before making judgements about it, and he may be trying to show that those of us who have not witnessed death don't have the full picture.

Just as Plato establishes in the *Apology*, "The wisest... is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he really is worthless" (Plato, p. 46). In other words, there is deep value to understanding that you lack knowledge—for example, it may provoke you to seek out the knowledge for yourself, or to seek counsel from those who do have the knowledge which you lack, or at least to be less rash in making decisions now that you are aware of your own ignorance. We can imagine how someone who has never witnessed death firsthand might benefit from reading this section of *The Plague*. They might become more cautious about attributing value to death with blind confidence, and they might be more willing to value the opinions of those who have come into contact with death when making decisions that could potentially cause (or fail to prevent) deaths of others. Thus, the audience still takes away this lesson about their own ignorance of death, even if it is not the same lesson as Paneloux.

We can see in *The Plague* why stories might be more effective than nonfictional arguments for communicating such a lesson about the limits of our knowledge. A nonfiction essay might be able to say to its readers, "you can only learn the importance of fighting death when you have witnessed it," but statements like these are unconvincing on their own, as they

cannot be verified through pure logic. We remain unconvinced. In contrast, when we read a story such as *The Plague*, we may start the story by relating to Paneloux, and we may feel like we are having the same experience as him, only to remember that we did not even witness a real death occur—just a fictional one. Then, we recognize that what we have felt when reading the story would pale in comparison to experiencing the real thing, and we recognize our own foolishness in ever thinking that we could pretend to know what it is like to witness a death. We become aware that there is no way we could take away the same lesson as Paneloux. Thus, by reminding us of the limits of our experience, a story can remind us of the limits of our knowledge.

This is all assuming that we experience a character like Paneloux as an "other," i.e., we feel a stark divide between what their experience is and what our experience is. Yet we may be able to go even further in our analysis, and claim that we actually can learn the same lesson as Paneloux by saying that reading *The Plague* is, in certain ways, a valid substitute for the experience of witnessing death. If we could show this, we would be able to claim that *The Plague* teaches its readers in the same way that witnessing a death teaches an onlooker: by experience. But, in order to prove that a story can substitute for a real-life experience, we will first have to parse out some of the most important similarities and differences between experiencing a story and experiencing real life.

Let us start this investigation by considering the quote that opened this part of the thesis, which comes from *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* by the Coen Brothers, an anthology of short films centered on the subject of death. In the final of these films, "The Mortal Remains," Thigpen, who is, among other things, an entertainer, claims that the characters in stories are "us, but not us" (Coen & Coen). This statement is rather cryptic, but anyone reflecting on the experience of empathizing with a character can see the truth to it.

Characters are "us," because they share certain experiences and characteristics with us. As we explored in our *Iliad* example, we might identify with the characteristic of Aeneas' pride, or with his experience of being angry with ourselves over a mistake. Yet, at the same time, characters are "not us," because we still maintain a sense of "self" and "other" when we read the *Iliad*; we never that we actually are Aeneas, and we have relative ease coming back to reality after we put down our copy of the book. Even when we truly try to let go our sense of self while reading, it never leaves us completely—even simple things like the difference between a character's name and our own are constant reminders that they are an "other." In summary, we recognize our "self" in general aspects of a character's experience (Aeneas' experiences of pride, regret, etc.), but not with specific details (such as what it is like to be a Greek warrior). This means that we step into the shoes of a character halfway, getting the same general experience as them, i.e., an experience that we can imagine happening to the "self," but not the exact same experience, as we recognize that the specifics could only happen to the "other."

Similar to how we recognize both the "self" and the "other" in characters simultaneously, we also recognize truth and fiction in stories simultaneously. We know, in the case of the *Iliad*, that it is not a literal account of the Trojan War—for example, we can recognize that names of certain characters have been completely made up. We identify these specific aspects of the story as fiction. However, we know that in a more general sense, the *Iliad* is a true account of all wars. We know that the fear, anger, etc. that the characters go through are real experiences of soldiers at war. Therefore, we simultaneously experience stories as false (because we know the details of the plot are all made up) and as true (because we know that every event that happens in a story can be interpreted in a more general way).

We can now combine our observations about self, other, truth, and fiction into one theory about how we experience stories. We will posit that we experience stories in two different ways, often simultaneously. When we read a story with our focus on the details of the story, we tend to fail to empathize with the characters and we tend to be reminded that the story is made up. The more focused we are on the specifics of Achilles' situation, the harder it is to empathize with him, and the more aware we are of how fictitious the story is. We treat a character like Achilles as the "other." However, when we read a story with our focus on the general aspects of the story which relate to our lives, we empathize with the character more strongly, and we recognize the truth in the story. We come to see characters like Achilles as the "self." This is why after reading a scene like the death of the boy from *The Plague,* we might have the experience of at first trying to reassure ourselves that it is just a story, only to continue to feel uncomfortable. We know that the specific boy dying isn't real, but we do know that death is real, so we perceive his death in a general sense. His death sticks with us, because although we can take comfort in knowing that this one particular death never occurred, we cannot shake the fact that deaths such as these do occur often in the real world.

Thus, just by knowing that the general experience a character like Paneloux is going through could truly happen to ourselves, the story attains a quality of reality. We do not have the exact same experience as Paneloux, but the story does give us a general experience which is similar to his. And so, as long as the lesson we are trying to learn can be taught by a general experience (such as witnessing any death) instead of a specific experience (such as witnessing the death of a specific boy), stories can substitute for real-life experience.

In summary, in this chapter, we started by recognizing that not all lessons can be learned through nonfictional argumentation. We claimed that instead, some lessons require real-life

experiences to learn; for example, Camus puts forth that the importance of fighting against death and suffering can only be fully learned through the experience of witnessing death. Then, we showed that at the very least, even if we treat a character like Paneloux as the "other," reading a story about him can point out to us when we haven't had the critical experience necessary to learn a valuable lesson. Because knowing the limits of our knowledge is important, this proved to be a valuable advantage of storytelling in and of itself. Trying to go even further, we then focused on developing a theory to explain the similarities and differences between experiencing a story and experiencing real life. We concluded that we often experience stories in two ways simultaneously: on the one hand, all the specific aspects of a story remind us of the differences between us and its characters and of the fact that the story is fiction; on the other hand, if we can get away from the specifics of a story, we connect to all the general aspects of a story, recognizing the truth that every story reflects about the real world.

Thus, we acknowledged that stories can, unlike nonfiction, substitute for real-life experience. This proved to be of epistemological significance, as ultimately, we showed that fiction can teach in a way nonfiction cannot.

Chapter 2: The Story as a Mirror for the Self

In the last chapter, we used Thigpen's cryptic commentary that characters are "us, but not us" to create a broad theory about what is going on when we empathize with a character in a story. We showed that experiencing a story can be comparable to experiencing reality to the extent that we are able to recognize ourselves in the story's characters, which lets us step into their shoes. Thus, we can learn lessons alongside characters if we see them as the "self" and not the "other." However, we should point out that Thigpen also notes in the very same commentary

that characters are "not us in the end, especially. The Midnight Caller gets him... never me" (Coen & Coen). This statement points out that when we experience a story, we seem to have the ability to selectively choose what we empathize with and what we do not—to an extent, we can choose what we recognize as the "self" and what we recognize as the "other." Thigpen draws attention to the fact that this especially happens when we are discussing death. We often approach the topic of death from a distance, using whatever strategies we can to avoid confronting the truth directly, since the subject of death—and especially the subject of our own mortality—makes most of us uncomfortable.

In this way, many of us can relate to the character of Peter Ivanovich from *The Death of Ivan Ilych.* Peter, upon learning that his friend has died, at first thinks to himself, "Three days of frightful suffering and then death! Why, that might suddenly, at any time, happen to me" (Tolstoy, p. 11). But soon after, he quickly shies away from this truth. We learn that "the customary reflection at once occurred to him that this had happened to Ivan Ilych and not to him, and that it should not and could not happen to him, and that to think that it could would be yielding to depression which he should not do" (Tolstoy, p. 12).

Peter's shyness about his mortality, and more generally, the shyness which all characters in this story show towards the subject, obviously has many factors that go into it. For example, there is the social pressure that most people simply refuse to acknowledge the reality of death. Ivan himself notes this, realizing that "the awful, terrible act of his dying was, he could see, reduced by those about him to the level of a casual, unpleasant, and almost indecorous incident... He saw that no one felt for him, because no one even wished to grasp his position" (Tolstoy, p. 60). Or, we might point out that youth and health keep people from confronting engaging with the fact that Ivan is going to die. For example, Ivan's daughter is described as "strong, healthy,

evidently in love, and impatient with illness, suffering, and death, because they interfered with her happiness" (Tolstoy, p. 69). Characters in this particular story associate death as something for only lower classes or the elderly. In general, we can see that characters in this story, like most people in real life, tend to associate mortality with characteristics of the "other," and they tend to not really engage with the idea as a reality.

Whatever the reasons for our generally tendency towards emotional numbness when we think about death, it's clear that in order to communicate the truth about mortality in a lasting way—in other words, in order to make someone truly believe their mortality—a reader needs to be reached in a powerful and creative way. They need to stop viewing mortality as something that happens to the "other;" they need to start seeing that it is true of the "self."

Certainly, nonfictional arguments have enormous trouble reaching their readers in this way. Ivan Ilych himself realizes this limitation of nonfictional argumentation as he is dying. Tolstoy writes, "The syllogism [Ivan] had learnt from Kiesewetter's Logic: 'Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal,' had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius, but certainly not as applied to himself" (Tolstoy, p. 52). In other words, simple logical arguments about mortality do little to actually reach their readers in a meaningful way.

Tolstoy himself offers a convincing explanation of why these sorts of nonfictional writings fall short. Ivan's reflects,

> What did Caius know of the smell of that striped leather ball Vanya had been so fond of? Had Caius kissed his mother's hand like that, and did the silk of her dress rustle so for Caius? Had he rioted like that at school when the pastry was bad? Had Caius been in love like that?... "Caius really was mortal, and it was right for him to die; but for me, little Vanya, Ivan Ilych, with all my thoughts and emotions, it's altogether a different matter." (Tolstoy, p. 52)

In other words, although nonfiction can certainly describe reality, it doesn't quite represent reality in its fullness, making it difficult to concretely understand what the abstract meaning of the lessons which nonfiction teaches. We will return to explore this idea more fully in Part II, but for now, we should just note that nonfiction can make it easier for the reader to distance themselves from the lessons which they learn, since nonfiction can make arguments so abstract. Therefore, a reader of nonfiction might only learn lessons as they apply to the "other," but not as they apply to the "self"—in short, the problem for a reader of nonfiction is their lack of self-recognition. In contrast, stories can reach their readers by providing the entire history and interior experience of a character (such as Ivan Ilych) as that character approaches and grapples with mortality, making the truth feel much more real to the audience which receives it, because they are more willing to see Ivan as the "self" than some other.

Still, even in fiction, it can be difficult for readers to be led to self-recognition, especially when it comes to potentially disturbing subjects. As Thigpen notes, we often choose to distance ourselves from the idea that we are mortal. It requires a talented and directed approach from the author to help the audience get there. To find a good account of how stories can lead their audience to self-recognition, we will return to looking at "The Mortal Remains," this time, analyzing the story more fully.

In this short story, five characters ride together in a horse-drawn coach. An Englishman and an Irishman sitting on one side of the coach introduce themselves and explain that they are bringing cargo to a place called Fort Morgan. Some mild banter between the Frenchman, the trapper, and the devout Catholic sitting on the other side of the coach evolves into a heated exchange, and the Catholic starts to have a panic attack. The Frenchman calls out to the coachman to stop the coach at once, and as he looks out the window at the coachman who

ignores him, whipping the horses on. The Englishman remarks, "Coachman never stops. Policy" (Coen & Coen). Noticing the coachman's black attire from head to toe, we, the audience, realize that these people are on a passage to the other side, even though the three confused figures sitting on one side of the coach do not.

As the Catholic calms down, the Englishman, whose name we learn is "Thigpen," explains that he is a bounty-hunting partner with the Irishman, Clarence. Thigpen claims, "they're so easily taken when they're distracted, people are. So, I'm the distractor, with a little story... And Clarence does the thumping while their attention is on me" (Coen & Coen). Thigpen also comments on his favorite part of watching people pass to the other side, as he stares at the three sitting across from him. He says, "it's always interesting watching them negotiate... watching them try to make sense of it as the pass to that other place... I do like looking into their eyes as they try to make sense of it," and in an eerie rupture of the fourth wall, he looks slightly left into the camera and says, "I do like it... I do" (Coen & Coen). When asked by the Catholic if people ever do make sense of it all, Thigpen replies briefly, "How would I know? I'm only watching" (Coen & Coen). At last, their coach arrives, and after disembarking, René, the Frenchman, looks around for a moment, considering whether he can turn back. He cannot, as the coach and the coachmen have left without him or any of the others, headed off to some other place. Resigned, René follows the others through the doors of Fort Morgan and into what we presume to be the afterlife.

This story is filled with nuances that are relevant to our greater investigation, and so we will circle back to this story throughout this thesis. For example, we should note how the Coen Brothers communicate the relentlessness of death through the personification of death in the form of the coachman who never stops, as well as the way that the fact that the movie itself

keeps going until, at last, it doesn't. In Part II of this thesis, we will have more to say about this choice to use imagery and the structure of the story itself to communicate this relentlessness, which we will argue is more epistemologically effective than a simple nonfiction statement such as "death is relentless."

We must also consider the significance of Thigpen's response, "How would I know? I'm only watching," when asked about whether dying people ever make sense of it all. This statement could be examined as an example of how storytelling can help us recognize the limits of our own knowledge, as it calls attention to the limits of being an "other." We have already discussed the value of this in Chapter 1. However, we will also want to return to this quote in Part III, to show how even when there is no lesson to learn, fiction can still offer the therapeutic effect of being able to bring a certain amount of order and clarity in spite of the absence of a clear takeaway.

But rather than digressing too far into these other subjects, let us focus on the two ways that this story aims to lead its readers to self-recognition: by (1) luring them in with entertainment to make them more vulnerable to the truth, and by (2) calling them out directly.

We might be able to compare the Coen Brothers' tactic of luring their audience into a false sense of security before presenting them with the truth to how the two bounty hunters operate when they are trying to kill. Just as Thigpen uses a story to lure his victims in and keep them engaged so that Clarence can take them out, so too do the Coen Brothers put on a beautiful show to lower our emotional defenses; in this state, we can be struck by a truth we wished not to admit. In other words, the entertainment factor of a story can actually have epistemological value. When we read a piece of nonfiction trying to demonstrate the fact that we are mortal, we are more prepared to distance ourselves from any uncomfortable truths that we may encounter. We set aside our emotions, we are only ever forced to process truth on an intellectual level, and

not an emotional level. But when we are pulled in by the spectacle of a story, our emotions get riled up and we intensely engage with the story on every level. Our emotional defenses come down, and we are more vulnerable to the truth.

This emotional state that we enter into when watching "The Mortal Remains" together complements the Coen Brothers' attempts to use many elements of their story—the passengers' inability to grasp their situation despite its obviousness, the claim that people require a certain emotional distance from the deaths of the characters in the stories that they listen to, the way that Thigpen breaks the fourth wall to show that we are in the same situation as the passengers—to directly confront their viewers and challenge them to process their mortality, rather than remain distant. The Coen Brothers essentially invite us to point and laugh at how ridiculously unaware these passengers are of their situation, because it is so obvious as an outside viewer that these people are passing to the other side. Yet, because we are so naturally compelled to empathize with the characters in the film, we soon start to question whether we see more "other" or more "self" in these characters. And when Thigpen turns to the camera to look at us in the eyes as if we were a passenger, we become forced to confront that we are just like these characters. We point at the "other," noticing that Grim Reaper is behind them, only to realize that we are really pointing into a mirror which points right back.

Thus, we have just seen that we can learn by being presented with a character whom we at first wish to treat as the "other," but whom but we recognize as the "self" in the end. The opposite is true as well—we can be led to recognize truth about ourselves by being presented with a character with whom we would like to empathize, but who ultimately does something that does not fit with our self-image, and causes us to recognize our "self" by recognizing how we are different from the "other."

For example, consider the following scene from *A Hero of Our Time,* by Mikhail Lermontov. In this book, we meet a character name Pechorin, who is described as "a portrait of the vices of our whole generation in their ultimate development" (Lermontov, p. 4). Nevertheless, he can be an empathetic figure throughout the book; the sadness of his life can make it difficult not to feel for him. Early in the story, Pechorin's lover, Bela, is kidnapped and stabbed in the back by the villainous character Kazbich. Pechorin rushes to her, and "[kisses] her cold lips in vain" (Lermontov, p. 38). Nothing can seem to heal her. That night, Bela becomes delirious, calling out for Pechorin, referring to him with "all kinds of affectionate names" (Lermontov, p. 39). At last, she ends up dying, and the doctor taking care of her recounts Bela's final moments to Pechorin and the narrator. When the story is over, the narrator explains, "I wanted to console him, more for decency's sake, you understand, than anything else. But when I spoke he lifted up his head and laughed. That laugh sent shivers down my spine" (Lermontov, p. 41). Pechorin's laughter despite the death of Bela is representative of his general disengagement with life; he simply doesn't attach to anyone. As we later learn, this likely stems from Pechorin's general feeling of disillusionment with the world. Pechorin later says,

> We can no longer make great sacrifices for the good of mankind, or even for our own happiness, because we know it is unattainable; and as our ancestors plunged on from illusion to illusion, so we drift indifferently from doubt to doubt. Only unlike them, we have no hope, nor even that indefinable but real sense of pleasure that is felt in any struggle, be it with men or with destiny (Lermontov, p. 153)

Throughout the first half of this scene, it is easy to become attached to Pechorin—as a reader, you naturally start to put yourself in his place, imagining what it might be like to go through the tragedy that he goes through—having to kiss a dying lover, hearing how she hallucinates calling out his name, and hearing how she dies. Thus, you start the scene by seeing Pechorin as the "self." However, upon hearing his laughter, we are ripped out of this experience;

we immediately recognize that this is not how we would react in his place. We are then forced to consider whether we see Pechorin as a "self" or an "other" by the fact that the story produces so many angles from which we perceive him. We perceive him through our own eyes, through his eyes, and even though the eyes of the narrator. Triangulating from all these perspectives, we become more aware of ourselves and our differences from Pechorin. Thus, we viscerally learn a lesson about the value that we place on life and love.

In summary, this chapter has looked at the way that we come to recognize truth about ourselves through stories. We argued that when reading nonfiction, we tend to treat the truths that we learn as if they only apply to others, and we don't process them on an emotional level. We showed that in contrast, fiction can force us to look at ourselves and reflect on how the lessons we learn apply to ourselves. Fiction can help us by presenting ourselves with a character whom we perceive at first as the "other," to whom we can attach traits like "mortal," which we may be uncomfortable attaching to ourselves—only then does the story directly confront us with the fact that we are just like the character, helping us achieve self-recognition. Or, a story might present us with a character like Pechorin, whose differentness from ourselves helps us understand something about ourselves. Either way, stories have proved to be a useful tool for reflection, helping us understand the truth not as it applies to others, but as it applies to the "self."

Chapter 3: Stories of Death and Regret

We would be remiss to finish this part of the thesis without discussing another notable type of stories about death which take advantage of the fact that their audiences' sense of "self" and "other." Specifically, it is important that we look at stories in which a character's encounter with death leaves them filled with regret about a past action which they no longer can undo. In

fact, we have already looked at such a story in the form of the *Iliad,* in which Aeneas regrets causing the death of Patroclus, but only when it is already too late. These stories are interesting to look at, because although the lesson that they try to teach is often clear (such as "don't let your pride be your downfall, in the case of the *Iliad*), it isn't as obvious how these stories actually do teach us their lessons. Therefore, we will try to look at these stories using the analysis tools we developed in the first two chapters, trying to see how these stories exploit our concepts of "self" and "other" to teach us.

Let us start by examining one of the final episodes of the TV series *BoJack Horseman*, in which BoJack, the protagonist of the series, overdoses and begins to drown in a pool. In an eerie dream sequence, BoJack's hallucinates a variety of figures, including his childhood role model, Secretariat, who reads a long poem narrating the experience of a man who believes that jumping to his death will ease his suffering, only to realize during the process all that he has to live for, when it is already too late. Here is a brief section of it:

You’re flying now, you see things
Much more clear than from the ground
It's all okay, or it would be
Were you not now halfway down.

Thrash to break from gravity
What now could slow the drop?
All I’d give for toes to touch
The safety back at top

But this is it, the deed is done
Silence drowns the sound.
Before I leaped I should've seen
The view from halfway down.

. BoJack's hallucinations make him realize the error of his self-destructive behaviors when he is already drowning and he cannot go back. Clearly, the audience is supposed to learn that we

should not make the same mistakes as BoJack; we should possess the foresight that BoJack lacked and be less self-destructive. But how is it that we should learn this lesson? Do we learn because we experience the story to the extent that we recognize BoJack as the self, or is it because BoJack allows us to reflect on ourselves better because we can project our own thoughts and emotions onto him before coming to self-recognition?

Let us start by trying to apply the analysis we developed in Chapter 1. In that chapter, we modeled stories as "teaching via experience." Using what we said there, we could claim that we have an experience that can substitute for a near-death experience ourselves when we watch this episode, because we recognize our similarities to BoJack and the truth of the fact that such an encounter with death can happen to anyone. We see BoJack as an extension of the "self," and we learn the same lesson that he does, i.e., the value of our lives, not through reason, but through experience. Thus, it seems that this "teaching via experience" analysis checks out.

In addition, we can also see how our analysis from Chapter 2 might come into play. Recall that in that chapter, we modeled stories as "teaching via self-recognition." Using this model, we might claim that it is easier us to first recognize destructive behaviors in BoJack when thinking about him as the "other," and then slowly come to recognize them in ourselves as we empathize with BoJack more and more. Or, like Pechorin, we might come to recognize that we are in no way like BoJack because we are so horrified with his self-destruction, and we may resolve to never become like that despite other similarities we see between ourselves and him.

Remarkably, we can see that both of our analyses work when looking at BoJack's overdose. Thus, stories are able to teach us through multiple means at once; they can provide logical arguments, teaching experiences, and a headspace that facilitates self-reflection all at once, showing the breadth of their epistemological power.

Seeing the ease at which we can use our new theories of "self" and "other" in the story to explain how we are taught by these stories, let us analyze another story of death and regret: *The Death of Ivan Ilych.* We might notice that at the end of his life, once he has accepted his own mortality, Ivan Ilych looks at people who have bought into beliefs and values pushed on them by society. We learn that "in them he saw himself—all that for which he had lived—and saw clearly that it was not real at all, but a terrible and huge deception which had hidden both life and death" (Tolstoy, p. 81). Ivan becomes incredibly regretful of everything that he had done in his life, but it is too late for him. In many ways, the scene is quite reminiscent of the famous scene from *The Heart of Darkness* in which Kurtz, a ruthless colonizer who exploited the Congo throughout his lifetime, cries out "the horror, the horror" (Conrad, p. 69) on his deathbed as he recognizes what he's done. For these two scenes, we certainly might be able to do some analysis using the "teaching via self-recognition" model, saying that Ivan and Kurtz serve as sorts of mirrors with whom we are supposed to compare ourselves. If we look at them and see the "self," we might recognize what actions of patterns of behavior in our own lives we may regret when we die. Furthermore, we can also try to apply the "teaching via experience" model. We might try to claim that a story like *The Death of Ivan Ilych* produces in us the experience of what it is like to be diagnosed with a terminal illness, and thereby teaches us a lesson about how important it is to have no regrets at the end of your life that we could not have gotten to through logic alone.

However, on further thought, we will that this final analysis isn't 100% correct. Despite what it seems at first, the characters of Ivan and Kurtz themselves do not learn any new lesson on their deathbed. They are not actually taught any lesson which was not within themselves already—they are just unmasked, and more willing to confront the truth about their lives. Death has forced self-reflection in them and made them more honest; it would be more accurate to say

that they have been transformed than that they have been taught. The same is true for the audience as is true for the characters. Any lesson which we as the audience feel like we might learn when relating to Ivan or Kurtz is not actually a new lesson; it is just a truth which was already inside ourselves which only now we have been forced to confront.

Thus, in our final analysis of the role of "self" and "other" in fiction, we have made yet another discovery. It appears that fiction can recreate experiences that do not merely teach us—they can actually unmask us, making us more honest with ourselves. This implies that stories do not just teach—they transform. We can see that even with the extensive investigation into the "self" and "other" in stories that we have done so far, there is still much more research to be done in this area. Investigating whether or not stories can bring about deep changes in the character of a reader or viewer is another interesting question that may merit further research.

In the end, perhaps the most important thing to remember about stories of death and regret, however, is what sort of lessons they are teaching us, and what sort of transformations they are causing in us: they are teaching and transforming before it is too late. Characters like Paneloux, Achilles, BoJack, and Ivan all waited for too long before they learned lessons and confronted themselves honestly; it took them going through incredibly difficult experiences to do so. In contrast, when we read a story, even if we do feel an intense, vivid, real experience while we are immersed in the stories, we return to the real world and we can readjust. We do not actually have to lose a loved one from our own pride to learn what Achilles learns. Instead, we enter into the experience long enough to learn the lesson, but we can also exit the experience and still retain what we have learned. And so, we can see that the way we experience "self" and "other" in fiction is especially useful because we can learn lessons that normally require loss before it is too late.

Conclusion

In the first part of the thesis, we have examined several ways that stories can teach us better than nonfiction. We showed that encountering characters in stories can make us experience the "other" and/or the "self," which can help them teach us in the following ways:

1. In so far as we see a character (like Paneloux) as the "other," we can compare our experience of a story against their experience, which can help us learn the limits of our own knowledge.
2. In so far as we see the "self" in a character (like Paneloux), and in so far as we read a story not as a fiction, but as abstractly representative of the real world, we experience the story as if it were real. This can help us learn lessons through experience rather than reason, which is an advantage stories have over nonfiction.
3. Stories can help us understand that lessons apply not just to the "other," but to the "self," because they allow us to label characters (like the passengers from "The Mortal Remains") as the "other," and then slowly start to view the "other" as the "self."
4. Stories can use characters like Pechorin to help us understand ourselves better. We recognize our differences from them so starkly that we see ourselves more clearly.

We then went on to apply these ideas to a few stories about characters feeling regret when they encounter death. This showed us that stories might even have the power to transform us alongside characters, and it also showed us that there is still plenty of research to be done on the epistemological consequences of stepping into a fictional character's shoes.

All throughout our discussion, we've seen a number of challenges that the subject of death has posed writers of nonfiction. Encounters with death teach us lessons by experience

rather than logic, making it hard for nonfiction writers to teach us the same lesson. We tend to shy away from fully recognizing our own mortality, and nonfiction helps us do so, by making arguments seem as if they apply to the "other" but not the "self." Thus, we have also started to clarify what it is that makes death so tricky to tackle in a nonfiction essay, which we will continue to do throughout the rest of this thesis.

Part II: Finding Reality in Fiction

"That's what fiction is for. It's for getting at the truth when the truth isn't sufficient for the truth"

- Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*

Introduction

So far, we have looked at how stories use their ability to tap into our empathy as a means of teaching us. However, this is not the only epistemological advantage of storytelling. As we will argue in this section, fiction has the ability to represent several aspects of reality better than nonfiction. Being able to accurately represent reality is of clear value to philosophers; after all, if we cannot even describe and capture the nuances and complexity of reality, how might we be able to analyze it?

In Chapter 4, we will start our discussion by examining the importance of capturing the internal, emotional experiences of others fully. As we will argue, nonfiction has difficulty cutting to the core of what others internal emotional experiences are, yet many philosophers have historically been fine with writing in exclusively nonfiction, perhaps because of a long tradition of bias against being emotional within academic philosophy. Yet certain subjects, such as death, cannot be completely understood without fully looking at their emotional consequences. As we will argue, this cannot be done without storytelling.

Moving on to Chapter 5, we will begin to examine the consequences of the fact that stories happen temporally, whereas essays do not. As we will argue, this allows stories to represent things that dynamically shift with the course of time (such as our relationship to our mortality) more accurately than essays can.

Chapter 6 will argue that stories are able to represent reality better than nonfiction, because nonfictional argumentation leaves out the minor quirks of life that are everywhere. Whereas the form of nonfictional argumentation tends to force writers to speak in sweeping absolutes, stories remind us that many events in life (such as death) are not just ruled by absolutes—they are also filled with many little coincidences and particularities, and these particularities of life deserve examination as well.

Finally, we will shift gears slightly in Chapter 7 to address the use of loose and apparently paradoxical imagery in stories, trying to show that stories are better at capturing the mystery and uncertainty of reality. We will argue that because the approach of storytellers is less goal-oriented than the approach of essayists, stories are better than essays at simultaneously presenting all the facets of complex subjects such as death.

Chapter 4: Communicating Emotional Truth

For a long time, philosophers have placed great importance on representing material reality as accurately as possible. Certainly, most scholars studying a subject like the ethics of war are expected to familiarize themselves with some basic statistics on the rates of PTSD, mortality, etc. that occur during war, and are likewise expected to present them in their essays. However, it would not be unfair to say that nonfiction philosophy writers have historically neglected to pay adequate attention internal emotional world of, say, veterans of war. It would certainly be rare to see an essay on the ethics of war which tries to fully portray the emotional complexity of fighting in a war. This could simply be because of a deeply rooted philosophical tradition which treats emotions as something to be tamed. Yet, as we will argue, it is also related to the fact that the form of nonfictional argumentation itself is not good enough to fully capture what goes on in the

mind of a person when they, say, witness the life of a fellow soldier taken before their eyes. Therefore, it is likely that nonfiction writers do not even attempt to portray such an experience, as they know that they would not be able to.

However, it seems obvious that understanding the internal experience of a veteran is just as important as understanding statistics on PTSD when considering the ethics of war. If the goal of philosophy is the pursuit of knowledge in all forms, shouldn't we be receptive to trying to understand the emotional, internal consequences of coming face to face with death as fully as possible? Certainly, the internal experience of another person is just as much a part of reality as any statistic or logical argument.

Storytelling, in contrast to essay writing, is a method by which we can communicate the complex internal experience of another. It does so for a number of reasons. First, as we talked about in Part I, a story can make us step into the inner world of a character by tapping into our empathy, giving us an experience which can substitute for really being at war. But beyond this, the fact that storytellers can introduce fictional elements (that is, the fact that storytellers can make things up in their stories) actually can help them communicate the truth of their internal experience more fully. Thus, a fictional story can actually transcend simply recounting the historical facts of how an event happened when the facts don't actually do justice to how it felt when the event took place.

Tim O'Brien, the author of *The Things They Carried*, a fictionalized account of his time as a soldier in Vietnam, describes this phenomenon. He explains that in times of intense emotion and chaos, we tend to have an internal experience that diverges from what is actually happening in the material world. For example, time might to slow down, or certain minor details of what we are looking at might jump out at us. This is why O'Brien justifies exaggerating certain elements

of an experience and adding others when he recounts the story of the death of a fellow soldier who died stepping onto an explosive. As he explains:

> In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. When a booby trap explodes, you close your eyes and duck and float outside yourself. When a guy dies, like Curt Lemon, you have to look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed* (O'Brien, p. 67-68)

Thus, O'Brien shows that a nonfictional account of witnessing death might not be able to fully capture how he actually experiences what it is like to see someone die. Even if when O'Brien was at war, he only ever heard an explosion, looked away, and caught a few details of Curt Lemon's death, what he actually experienced was something quite different. His internal experience diverges from material reality, but it is no less real—in fact, the internal experience is what someone like O'Brien perceives as most real. That is why he resorts to telling strange details in his story which couldn't have happened, like the slowing of time, or how he floated outside of his body for a moment—lying about material reality allows him to get at a different aspect of what was happening.

But fictional stories don't just describe the internal experience of a storyteller. They also communicate it better—they make us feel it. Processing truth on not just an intellectual level, but also an emotional level is important. As we saw in Chapter 2, keeping emotional distance can make us as readers especially prone to only learning truths as they apply to others, but not to ourselves. As storytellers are much more intentional about connecting with their audiences emotionally, they might avoid these sorts of problems. O'Brien admits this as the goal of his

fiction saying, "I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth" (O'Brien, p. 170).

If we look at another story that O'Brien writes in *The Things They Carried*, we can see how fiction can make an audience feel the emotions of someone processing the death of a comrade better than, say, an essay. O'Brien points to this story as one that "makes the stomach believe" (O'Brien, p. 74). It is a story recounting how Rat Kiley, the soldier who had been with Curt Lemon when he died, reacts to the death of Curt Lemon in the hours which followed it.

> We came across a baby VC water buffalo... Rat Kiley went over and stroked its nose. He opened up a can of [rations], but the baby buffalo wasn't interested. Rat shrugged. He stepped back and shot it through the right front knee. The animal did not make a sound. It went down hard, then got up again, and Rat took careful aim and shot off an ear... He shot it twice in the flanks. It wasn't to kill; it was to hurt. He put the rifle muzzle up against the mouth and shot the mouth away. Nobody said much. The whole platoon stood there watching, feeling all kinds of things... Curt Lemon was dead. Rat Kiley had lost his best friend in the world... Rat went automatic. He shot randomly, almost casually... Again the animal fell hard and tried to get up, but this time couldn't make it. Rat shot it in the nose... then he shot it in the throat. All the while the baby buffalo was silent, or almost silent, just a light bubbling sound from where the nose had been... Nothing moved except the eyes, which were enormous, the pupils shiny black and dumb. Rat Kiley was crying. (O'Brien, p. 75)

Unlike O'Brien story of watching Curt Lemon die, in which he simply embellishes on details, O'Brien has actually completely invented this story from scratch. Yet that doesn't mean that reality is not represented in it; in fact, this story makes us feel the emotional turmoil O'Brien's platoon went through much more deeply and accurately than a historically accurate account of whatever they actually did following Lemon's death. Specific images, such as the silence of the platoon, or the eyes of the buffalo, are much easier to attach to than the more boring, less powerful sorts of images that a historically accurate account would be full of. Thus, we can see that completely making up a story—writing fiction—has value for communicating

emotional realities to an audience which nonfiction lacks. This is why Tim O'Brien writes that fiction is "for getting at the truth when the truth isn't sufficient for the truth."

Finally, our analysis might benefit from a side by side comparison of a nonfictional account of something happening and a fictional story meant to represent the exact same thing. O'Brien provides such a comparison for us in a chapter in which he tells a fictional story of killing a soldier in order to communicate the guilt he feels with himself for participating in the war. At first, he explains:

> Here is the happening-truth. I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, many real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief (O'Brien, p. 171-172)

This account is true, but it is obviously ineffective at getting across what O'Brien's grief from the war must feel like. He doesn't have any clear memories of bodies or faces to attach his grief to. In other words, in his memory alone, he has no good stories. O'Brien goes on to contrast this historically accurate account of his time in the war with a fictional story:

> Here is the story-truth. He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him (O'Brien, p. 172)

Clearly, someone like O'Brien needs to invent fictional stories in order to communicate his grief. An image, such as the face of a dead man, and an imagined circumstance, such as O'Brien being forced to kill another in a one-on-one gunfight, is all that is necessary for him to get across his emotions to the audience. When we read the "story-truth," unlike the "happening-truth," we get enough of an image that we can immediately attach to and understand in order to see what O'Brien's war experience was like. In other words, it's necessary that we get a fictional image for us to understand O'Brien's internal reality. In fact, it may be equally necessary for

O'Brien to invent these images so that he himself can better process what happened in the war, an idea that we will return to in Part III.

Thus, in this section, we have seen the first aspect of reality that stories are good at representing: inner, emotional experience. We've shown that compared to the very limited form of nonfiction, there is no question that fictional stories are better at communicating the emotional consequences of being exposed to death. First, fictional details can actually be better to include, because the internal experience of an author does not always match up with what happened on a purely material level, especially when events such as death shake our perception of the world. Second, entirely fictional stories have the ability to present quick, intentional, and concise images which communicate the exact emotions of the author as effectively as possible, when the real world rarely contains these sorts of images. Stories can thereby make us feel the rich, complex, emotional effects of witnessing death, which as we have argued, are as crucial as any statistic for an ethicist to consider.

Chapter 5: Representing Time

We have just looked at how fiction can capture the emotional aspects of reality, and especially the emotional consequences of death. We will now turn our attention to another aspect of reality which can pose problems to essayists: time.

The fact our lives unfold temporally has many consequences, all of which make it difficult for nonfiction writers to perfectly capture what it is like to be mortal. Luckily, the genre of fiction does not experience the same problem, as it brings with it many tools which are much more equipped to describe things which evolve over time, such as our relationship with our mortality. As we will argue, the structure of the narrative form itself allows fictional narratives to

capture death and truths about death with more precision and accuracy than the nonfictional form because of this capacity to represent time. In this chapter, we will look at a variety of ways that storytellers do so, while trying to show how each challenge which the temporality of death poses to a traditional writer of nonfiction with a solution provided by the form of fictional narrative.

One significant consequence of the how death unfolds over time is that our view of death is constantly evolving. How we think about death is heavily colored by personal experience, and personal experience changes over time. As our history of experiences and current life situations change, death takes on new meanings for us—a phenomenon difficult to capture in nonfiction. Luckily, fictional narratives benefit from their ability to capture subjects (like mortality) which change like this and which are extremely personal. In contrast, nonfiction often fails to do so, because in speaking in universals, essayists often fail to account for the fact any given individual approaches death with a unique history of experience.

For example, in *On the Nature of Things*, Lucretius experiences this problem. He fails to fully account for how we might feel towards death, because he represents our feelings as humans as static, when in fact they evolve with experience. He tries to make the claim that "Death, then, is nothing to us and does not affect us in the least, now that the nature of the mind is understood to be mortal" (Lucretius, p. 89). Lucretius tries to explain this on the premise that on the same "wretched, damnable day [that disposes you] of every one of life's precious gifts... No craving for these things remains with you any longer" (Lucretius, p. 92). However, we can criticize Lucretius for not understanding the way in which we wish for things, like life, not just for our present self, but also for our past and future selves, with whom we share a connection. We do not necessarily care about how we might feel in the future about our mortality; we simply know how we feel about it in the present. Lucretius fails, because the task he sets for himself is to describe

how all humans should relate to their mortality at all times; a task which is impossible, because death takes on such different meanings at different points in life, and because we experience life not just in a static moment, but rather in the flow of time.

In other words, even though a philosopher like Lucretius may make universal statements about how humans relate to death, a 5-year-old child, a wartime doctor, and a medical examiner will all relate to death (and should relate to death) in different ways. The attempts of nonfiction writers to broadly describe man's relationship with death are therefore often futile. In contrast, fictional narratives can create an entire history for a character and can recognize that such a character approaches death in a unique way. Consequently, empathizing with and understanding the unique history of experiences that such a character brings with them as they approach death may be more useful to us than some universal statement as we try to understand how our own histories shape how we personally relate to death.

In Gustave Flaubert's *Three Tales*, we are presented with a perfect example of a fictional narrative being used in this way: "The Tale of Saint Julian Hospitator." Julian, the protagonist of this story, is a character whose attitude towards death changes throughout his lifetime as he encounters it again and again in different ways. As a young child, he first encounters death with a sense of curiosity and fascination—when he kills a mouse in church, we're told that he was "amazed to see its little body lying motionless in front of him. There was a tiny bloodstain on the flagstone. He quickly wiped it clean with his sleeve, threw the mouse outside and said nothing to anyone" (Flaubert, p. 45). Very quickly, this feeling of curiosity turns into excitement, as Julian develops a sadistic impulse. We see this as he kills a pigeon as a child: "The child was exasperated by its stubborn refusal to die. He proceeded to wring its neck. The bird's convulsions

made his heart beat faster and a flood of savage pleasure ran through his body. As the bird finally went stiff in his hands, he almost swooned" (Flaubert, p. 46).

However, this all changes for Julian when he is hunting one day and kills a family of a fawn and its mother and father. The mother of the fawn lets out an "almost human cry of anguish" (Flaubert, p. 51), and as Julian kills the stag, it lets out a learns of the prophecy and "Julian was astounded and then suddenly overcome with fatigue. A feeling of loathing and immense sadness welled up inside him. He placed his head in his hands and wept for a long time" (Flaubert, p. 51). From then on, Julian seems to realize that the fate of the family of deer is the same as his own; death his parents (even worse, at his own hands)—and eventually to himself. As he has this realization, contemplating death not just as something that happens to others, but rather to all, the world begins to feel "utterly desolate yet filled with vague and threatening dangers" (p. 52). His attitude towards death changes even more after the crucial moment when he finally does kill his parents. After this, "he sought out lonely places. But the moaning of the wind sounded to his ears like the gasps of dying breath; the drops of dew as they fell to the ground reminded him of certain other drops which had fallen more heavily to the floor" (Flaubert, p. 65).

Julian is utterly haunted by death at this point, to the point that "It became more than he could bear and he resolved to die" (Flaubert, p. 65). Briefly being suicidal, his relationship with death changes again, as he now desires it, hoping it will be a release from his pain. However, when he catches his reflection in a body of water, with his face now aged, he sees his father, and he ceases to wish for death. Finally, at the end of his life, Julian encounters a leper, implied to be an embodiment of death, whom he feeds, clothes, and lies beside. At this point, it is clear that Julian is now comfortable with death, literally embracing it, treating it as something which

connects him to the leper and to the rest of humanity. His experience of death in the end is not painful at all, but rather his soul is filled with "a flood of boundless delights and unearthly bliss" (Flaubert, p. 70).

Flaubert's story illuminates several ways in which stories can be used to talk about mortality despite the challenges posed by its temporal nature. But before we continue our analysis, let us briefly note the fact that in this story, Julian is much like a reader of a book learning about death through empathy in the way that we modeled in Part I of this thesis. Just as we may learn through fiction by identifying a bit of ourselves in characters which die, Julian does so by identifying with beings dying around him: identifying that his family is like the family of animals, that he is like his father (when he sees his reflection), and in the end by identifying with the dying leper. These lessons which Julian goes through by identification with others rather than by logic reinforces general support for the idea that stories teach us by blurring the distinction between self and other and that encounters with death have unique lessons to teach us that cannot be taught by essays (but can be taught by fiction!)

But digressions aside, we should now point out that Flaubert uses narrative to demonstrate how the context of a person's own personal history may shape the way that they approach death and what it means to them. This allows him to avoid the troubles which come with being limited to making broad, general statements about death, as nonfiction writers are often forced to. Unlike the static and impersonal way in which most philosophers describe the relationship between humans and death, Flaubert captures that our relationship with death is dynamic and personal. Curiosity, excitement, fear, sorrow, and acceptance are all attitudes that we might adopt towards witnessing and thinking about death at one point or another, but it's rare that anyone ever feels all these things simultaneously or in a vacuum of context. Therefore, the

fact that Flaubert is able to present Julian's relationship with death as dynamic and dependent on the context of his life is crucial, as humanity's relationship with death is in fact so dynamic and context dependent that it would be misleading to represent it any other way, as a writer of non-fiction may be forced to.

Finally, Flaubert overcomes another challenge which nonfiction writers have when talking about death: the challenge of communicating what it is like to continually move towards death, until at last, life stops. But in this piece of fiction, the fact that the story of Julian starts and stops itself, just like a life, helps communicate in an indirect way what death may be like; it is like the end of a story. Thus, the structure of the story mirrors the structure of life itself, helping Flaubert represent the role of time in reality.

We could also think again to the structure of "The Mortal Remains" to look at how narrative structure accurately portrays what the truth of time's constant flow towards death. Because in a narrative, and especially in a movie, we have no control over the rate at which the story unfolds and the time when it finally ends, our own sense of mortality is naturally conveyed to us by watching René making this journey against his will. Whether or not René calls to the coachman, he will ride on; whether or not René makes sense of his life in his final moments, he must enter Fort Morgan; whether or not we make any sense of our lives in time, we will die nevertheless. This is a lesson about death which clearly is more easily communicated through a narrative than through an essay, as the narrative is the only of the two which always moves in one direction towards its end. Or rather, we might say that an essay lacks an inherent temporal quality; we could rearrange each chapter of *On the Nature of Things* and we would still be left with essentially the same piece, but the same is not true of *Three Tales*.

Stories are also useful when discussing our evolving relationship with time because we are able to look at multiple points of a story simultaneously and in order to synthesize interesting conclusions. To get a deeper appreciation for this advantage of storytelling, let us think back to the way in which Peter Ivanovich at first acknowledges he could die any moment. Now let us think about how immediately after, "the customary reflection at once occurred to him that this had happened to Ivan Ilych and not to him, and that it should not and could not happen to him, and that to think that it could would be yielding to depression which he should not do" (Tolstoy, p. 12). Upon reading such a line, it feels natural for us as the audience to recognize that Peter is wrong in changing his mind; he is, in fact, mortal, and we see that he is shying away from the truth, rationalizing something just to make himself feel better. Just like in a story of death and regret (as we covered in Chapter 3), we may simultaneously experience the insight that we are like Peter at one time (when he is in denial) as well as the insight that we should be like Peter at another time (when he accepts his mortality).

We are able to make such a conclusion because we have stepped outside of the linear time of the story. In other words, it is not just the fact that we experience a story linearly that can be useful. It is also the fact that the story is linear and temporal, but we can step outside of it. We can go back and forth between empathizing with the past and the present version of Peter, drawing a conclusion with our fresh perspective. We are able to view and synthesize from all of the events which have come to pass in the story simultaneously. Thus, stories help us look at the entirety of a transformation happening over a period of time so that we can better get a handle on what is happening.

In conclusion, this chapter showed that stories represent the passage of time and therefore dynamic events better than nonfiction. They do so simply because stories are innately meant to

be read from start to finish in a unilateral direction. Thus, a single story can show something that is dynamic, such as the relationship between a person's past experiences and how they treat their own mortality, by showing it progress and evolve through different stages. Similarly, stories can help us model and try to understand mortality itself, because the structure of stories mirror life, moving unstoppably to an end.

Chapter 6: Absolutes and Happenstance

In addition to all the problems we have looked at so far, nonfiction writers may also have problems when trying to account for the fact that events in life are not just controlled by ideals and absolutes. In any real event, small quirks and peculiarities of life constantly come into play. The sparks of love that we feel for a partner might not come from universal forces felt by everyone, such as a desire for beauty, as Plato suggests in the *Symposium*—instead, a feeling of love may stem from something as specific as seeing a partner's favorite flavor of ice cream at a store. Strange details matter in life. Such is true in the case of death as well. In order to appreciate and account for the role of strange details in life, we must turn to storytelling.

To understand the problems that nonfiction writers face when writing mostly in absolutes, let us look at Albert Camus' famous nonfiction essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus." In this essay, Camus analyzes whether or not suicide is a legitimate response to recognizing the absurdity of life. As he is writing a piece of nonfiction, Camus is restricted to speaking in the broadest ways possible. He represents all of humanity in the character of Sisyphus, stripping them of the fact that they are all individuals. Furthermore, he can only consider and discuss whether suicide is a valid response to a broad and universal experience that anyone might have, like existential angst. Because essayists like Camus must speak broadly, trying to connect with a

wide audience, they mostly can only consider these sorts of large-scale questions which could apply to anyone's life.

This is not to completely criticize Camus for speaking in absolutes; certainly, all humans do share a certain basic qualities and experiences broadly enough that it can makes sense to model us all as the same. But as a result, the model becomes extremely limited, because it cannot account for variation within all of humanity.

As a volunteer with 300 hours of experience at a suicide hotline, I can confirm that suicide is rarely an option which people think of as a response to a greater, overarching problem which all people share. I would estimate that 99% of the time, there is an extremely specific, unique cause in a person's life that pushes them to consider taking their own lives. In order to talk about suicide then, not just in one case, but in all cases, we will want to be able to model a suicidal individual as that: an individual with a unique background of experience.

Stories have the ability to get into this level of specificity. We can see this clearly if we consider another story from *The Things They Carried* which contrasts with "The Myth of Sisyphus." This story, titled "Speaking of Courage," recounts how one of O'Brien's comrades, Kiowa, slipped beneath a field of mud and drowned to death. Another comrade of his, Norman Bowker, tried to pull Kiowa out, but abandoned him because the stench of the field was so intense. A split-second decision, Bowker didn't realize in the moment the consequences of what he was doing, which was essentially leaving his friend to die. The story goes on to explain that years later, after the war, Bowker would go on long drives alone, all day, silently thinking about the smell of the field and about how he might recount the story if anybody ever asked him about his time at war. But as he has no one to talk to, he eventually hangs himself.

In this story, unlike in "The Myth of Sisyphus," we are able to zoom in on one individual, and recognize that the question of suicide cannot simply be modeled as a result of some absolute force which interacts with all humans. Certainly, there are some broad themes in Bowker's story, such as guilt and loneliness, which a nonfiction writer may be able to talk about. But crucially, O'Brien is able to include extremely specific details, such as the fact that Bowker's suicide can be traced back to something as minor as him obsessively thinking about the stench in a field.

This has epistemological significance. When we have philosophical discussions of suicide without an attention to these sorts of details, we miss out on something important. We don't quite capture reality. We model reality as if it is just the manifestation of universal truths, when it is not—it is also a manifestation of particularities. In Norman Bowker's case, his death is the manifestation of an obsession over a memory of the stench of a field, which is certainly not a universal experience. When O'Brien includes this sort of small detail in his discussion, he provokes us to think about the world not just in universals, but also in terms of specifics.

In other words, in this particular case, O'Brien's story might help teach us the importance of war veteran's processing even the smallest details of their past traumas if we want to help them, because it shows how small details can factor into decisions like suicide. Or, O'Brien's story might also show us that the way in which universal forces in our lives, such as Norman Bowker's worries about whether others can truly understand what he went through, manifest themselves in very odd and specific ways, such as in the way that the smell of the field haunts him. The absolutes and specifics cannot be disconnected in real life, and so a story does not present them that way. In contrast, a philosopher like Camus may fail to point this out to us, because he has such a focus on the importance of analyzing universal experiences.

Thus, we can see that stories have value because they can get away from exclusively asking large, universal questions. They can give us valuable insights to the way that not just universal forces, but also strange happenstances shape the course of reality.

Chapter 7: The Mystery and Complexity of Reality

Let us now look at another problem which death poses to writers of nonfiction: its mystery. In an essay, writers are constrained to propositional language, which is to say, they are generally forced to make claims that have specific meanings; there is little room for interpretation. However, this poses them a challenge when they are forced to talk about a subject, like death, which has many elements of mystery. They cannot quite represent death's mystery properly; saying that "death is mysterious" certainly does little to communicate the truth of the statement. In contrast, communicating the mystery of death is easy for storytellers.

We can take a look at "The Legend of Saint Julian Hospitator" again to see how storytellers can reflect mystery. Similar to how he uses narrative form to his advantage to accurately describe the kaleidoscope of reactions which death brings on with the passage of time, Flaubert also uses the flexibility of fiction to present evocative images which help to portray the way in which death lies on the brink of knowability and mystery. For example, after Julian kills his parents, he is struck both by the horror of what he has done and by "a look of serene majesty on their faces, which spoke of some secret they would now guard for eternity" (Flaubert, p. 63). Similarly, when Julian encounters the leper at the end of his life, who is an embodiment of death, he sees eyes "redder than burning coals," (Flaubert, p. 68), "hideous sores of leprosy" (Flaubert, p. 68), and "something majestic and regal" (Flaubert, p. 68) in his bearing. In both of these cases,

Flaubert combines the non-propositional nature of storytelling with the imaginative nature of fiction to tackle the fact that death is, by nature, not knowable to living beings.

Unlike a philosopher writing about death through the form of nonfiction, Flaubert is able to be more creative and experimental in how he talks about death, simply presenting images with which his audience can sit with and meditate on. Flaubert can point his audience in a general direction—and he can even point them in two contrary directions simultaneously—and let his audience reach their own conclusions, without having to strongly commit to claiming any specific truth about death. In fact, leaving what he is saying about death open to interpretation is beneficial in communicating a truth about death. Flaubert is able to represent the tension of certain qualities of death—majestic, hideous, serene, painful—in its true, unresolvable state. Thus, by painting only part of the truth about death and leaving questions and tensions unresolved, Flaubert does more justice capturing truths about death than if he attempted to make definitive claims. In this way, narrative proves itself to be a strong tool for dealing with issues involving inherent mystery.

We may be able to borrow some terminology from Heidegger to understand why Flaubert's writing is epistemologically significant for us. Heidegger essentially conceived that there were two different ways of thinking: thinking in a goal-oriented way and thinking in a meditative way. We might think of essay writing as more goal-oriented, while storytelling is more meditative. While goal-oriented thinking is very good at achieving its specific end-goal, it is not too good at doing anything else. In contrast, when we think meditatively, we might come to truths that we weren't even expecting to find. In this case, we can see how Flaubert's fictional story, full of rich imagery, is more helpful to us if we want to more loosely meditate than if we have a clear goal in mind. By presenting a leper as an image of death and loosely associating a

variety of characteristics with the leper, Flaubert lets us ask ourselves any number of questions about death and still use the leper as a starting point from which we can reflect.

It is also interesting to note that just as Flaubert presents this image of a "a look of serene majesty on their faces, which spoke of some secret they would now guard for eternity" (Flaubert, p. 63) when talking about the parents of Julian, so too does Tim O'Brien talk about the smile of the man that he killed in Vietnam in *The Things They Carried*. O'Brien claims that some nights, he wakes up seeing the ghost of the man he killed, and "he'll pass within a few yards of me and suddenly smile at some secret thought and then continue up the trail to where it bends back into the fog" (O'Brien, p. 128). This recurring image throughout various pieces of fiction of a secret being worn on an expression is another perfect example of fiction can communicate complex truths about death within an image. This use of imagery is used throughout many works of fiction, the image of faces, and especially dead faces, recurs again and again. Although we will not have time to fully investigate it fully, it is worth wondering about whether images like these are necessary to communicate certain truths that can never be verbalized.

Beyond being able to represent mysteries better than nonfiction, stories are doing something else in all these scenes: they are trying to give us a complete picture of death itself. Consider again the images that Flaubert presents in the character of the leper. Within one character, Flaubert can attach different ideas, such as mystery, pain, ugliness, and serenity, to the concept of death. In other words, it is not just mystery that Flaubert is portraying—it is complexity. He is helping us remember that every subject can be approached from multiple angles by trying to show all of the angles of death at once. This is of course exceptionally harder for a nonfictional argument to do than a fictional image.

In summary, in this chapter we have seen another problem with nonfictional essays: they can only handle presenting a few ideas at a time, and the connections between all their ideas must be clear and logical. This both fails to capture the mystery and the complexity of reality. Furthermore, it pushes us to think in a goal-oriented way, which can potentially divert us from truths that free, meditative thought might lead us to. We contrasted nonfiction with stories, which we argued were able to present mystery and complexity, leading us to a more meditative mode of thinking which can be beneficial.

Conclusion:

In this part of the thesis, we looked at the relationship between reality and fiction. Specifically, we looked at how fiction is able to represent inner emotional realities of people, the reality of time, the quirks and particularities of the real world, and the mysteries of the real world. We also showed that the complexity of the real world could be captured in fictional stories. In contrast, we argued that nonfictional arguments have significant trouble capturing all of these aspects of reality. In focusing on material/historical truth too much, emotions get neglected; in speaking only in absolutes, the quirks of individual experience get neglected; in speaking atemporally, the fact that time is a part of reality gets neglected; in speaking only in clear, propositional statements, our view of mysterious and uncertain parts of reality gets neglected. Therefore, once again we showed that fiction's epistemological strengths are not shared by nonfiction—they are unique.

While doing this, we also teased out some other qualities of death that prove its trickiness to tackle through nonfiction. Death causes deep emotional experiences in witnesses that make their internal experiences of the world not quite match up with historical reality; death makes its

witnesses have trouble communicating their emotions through factual account alone; death is not just something that happens in absolutely the same way for everyone; death unfolds over time; death is mysterious; death is multifaceted. We can add all of these characteristics to our list that we started in Part I of this thesis, and of course, we will continue to see more in Part III.

Part III: The Therapeutics of Storytelling

"What is this? Can it be that it is Death?" And the inner voice answered: "Yes, it is Death."

"Why these sufferings?" And the voice answered, "For no reason—they just are so"

-Leo Tolstoy, The Death of Ivan Ilych

So far, this thesis has only examined the epistemological reasons why we might want to incorporate fictional stories into discussions about death. Naturally, this is especially important to philosophers, who often place the pursuit of knowledge before all else. But moreover, we should remember that we are not just philosophers—we are also humans. Although traditionally, essayists have often taken the attitude of leaving it to their readers to react however they will to their essays, we will argue that this approach is somewhat irresponsible when dealing with traumatic subjects such as death. Death can be a truly difficult subject to discuss in cold and clinical style of argumentative nonfiction—in fact, we might even be able to find fault with this thesis itself for bringing a dispassionate approach to analyzing some potentially disturbing material. Therefore, this final part of the thesis will try to show some of the ethical considerations that philosophers should have for their readers, and how storytelling might be able to help us cope with difficult truths as we discover them.

In Chapter 8, we will look at the way that storytelling can help organize the thoughts and feelings of storytellers and audiences alike, even when there may be no more clear arguments to be made about a subject. As every discussion in philosophy always leaves certain questions unanswered, we will argue that it is important for writers to help their audiences get a certain

amount of closure in discussions. This sort of closure cannot be achieved easily through nonfiction, but stories can provide it.

Chapter 9 will look learning certain truths or even just discussing a truth that someone already knows can be a seriously upsetting experience. We will argue that stories can help validate and acknowledge our disturbance as we discuss death, which is much more difficult for nonfiction writers to do. Thus, we will show that stories bring ethical value as they comfort us and acknowledge our humanity, helping us along in more difficult discussions.

Chapter 8: With Nothing More to Say

We have just seen in Chapter 7 how stories can capture the mysterious side of death. An intimately related fact is how stories can try to capture its absurdity as well. These are intimately related strengths of storytelling, as both strengths result from the fact that storytellers are never forced to make claims when there are none to make. In fact, the relationship between the mystery and absurdity of death in stories is so strong, that storytellers often seem to present death both as having a lesson which is not quite accessible to us yet and as having no lesson at all.

For example, in "The Mortal Remains," Thigpen comments that over the years, he has seen many dying people try to make sense of their lives. When asked if they ever do make sense of it all, Thigpen replies, "How would I know? I'm only watching" (Coen & Coen), and the coach stops and everyone continues on with their evening. In this brief line, the Coen brothers subvert the expectation that much of the story was building to: the expectation that the mysterious and wise Thigpen has something to teach us about the meaning of life from all of his contact with death. In fact, as the Coen Brothers suggest, it seems like such a lesson is actually totally inaccessible to us, or we will never be able to fully dismiss our doubt about the

conclusions we make about our lives before our deaths. Yet, this is not to say that Thigpen has taught us nothing at all; he has actually presented truth about the fact that no definite conclusions can ever be made. Rather, this is a truth in its own right. Upon hearing this sort of statement, we as an audience can feel validated in knowing that the Coen Brothers don't have the answers, and neither will we. By acknowledging the limits of our knowledge, we can feel better about them, which is clearly useful to us in a discussion about death. There are so many unknowns in such a discussion that it is not unlikely that the audience could become distressed thinking about death. The Coen Brothers ethically do a service to their audience by reaffirming that is just the way things are, helping us come to terms faster with our own limits.

Being able to simply acknowledge this meaninglessness which clouds encounters with death is what gives storytelling remarkable healing powers. The therapeutic power of being able to simply present the truth that we are unable to draw conclusions can be found in *The Things They Carried*, as it is filled to the brim with stories of deaths which its author is still trying to make sense of years later. For example, one story which Tim O'Brien circles back to over and over is the story of how his friend Kiowa drowned in mud and water one night as they were crossing a field. O'Brien describes how the experience left him feeling guilty; to get across to his audience the emotional truth of the guilt he feels at the experience, O'Brien recounts how he tried to pull Kiowa out of the mud and how he failed because the stench was too much. After Kiowa's death, O'Brien blames himself the most, but he also notes how the blame can be given to the Lieutenant for making the dangerous call to cross the river, or the president for going to war in the first place, or even the rain, or someone who forgot to vote. His fellow soldier puts it simply: "Nobody's fault. Everybody's" (O'Brien p. 168).

The question of who to blame ends up feeling like an absurd question, with no clear answer, but a question which O'Brien is pulled back to time and again. For O'Brien as a writer, like anyone experiencing loss, it is profoundly healing to tell these stories and simply be able to acknowledge the truth of how meaningless death and loss can be, letting him find a state of semi-peace wherein he can at least come to terms with the fact that he may never find a lesson from his losses. For anyone who has experienced loss as an audience, reading this sort of story can have the same effect. We are reminded that we may never be able to make sense of the loss completely, or take any definitive or clear lessons away. However, we still feel like we have organized our thoughts a bit more, or made sense of things even if we can't exactly express what we have learned.

Thus, we see one therapeutic power of fiction in the face of absurdity. Stories allows us to organize and order our thoughts to a certain degree when it feels like there is no real conclusion to be made. We can be like René at the end of "The Mortal Remains," who at least gets a moment to look around himself and shrug before he passes to the other side. We find a small bit of closure in at least acknowledging that we may never have certain important questions answered.

This is of value in philosophical discussion, because there is always uncertainty running alongside the discovery of truths. The Coen Brothers do come down decisively on many issues throughout *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*. However, they still recognize that they have left certain issues unresolved, which is why they end on René's shrug. They are trying to help us as an audience deal with our uncertainties by acknowledging and validating them as they arise, so that the truths that we learn don't have to be at the expense of finding new anxieties and uncertainties because of our discussion.

Thus, we have seen in this chapter why storytelling is important as a comforter when it comes to having discussions in which we feel like we have nothing more to say or we can't draw any more conclusions. We might summarize our findings by saying that fiction can give us closure in the face of the absurdity and uncertainty of death because they (1) help us organize our thoughts about death a bit more, even if we can't express a propositional conclusion that we've drawn about death, and (2) they validate our feelings of anxiety or uncertainty that may arise as we uncover new questions, and try to help us get closure on them.

Chapter 9: Comfort & Connection

Stories also have ethical value because they can help address the isolation and distress that death and discussions of death bring. We must, as we have said, recognize that some truths are difficult to process emotionally. Taking a heartless approach of not acknowledging the issues that philosophical discussions might lead to—the approach that many nonfiction writers take—is irresponsible. Rather, we should use stories to combat the emotional issues that our discussions cause as they arise.

Let us take the example of *The Death of Ivan Ilych.* Ivan feels totally alone as he is dying. Tolstoy writes, "There was no deceiving himself: something terrible, new, and more important than anything before in his life was taking place within him of which he alone was aware. Those around him did not or would not understand it, but thought that everything in the world was going on as usual" (Tolstoy, p. 42). Ivan's isolation is not just physical; he is also emotionally and intellectually alone. People refuse to spend time with him because he reminds them of mortality, and most people refuse to empathize with him or even intellectually engage with the

idea of death for the same reason. We can see that for Ivan, his mortality and his disease are utterly isolating.

Yet, for a reader of such a story, we actually find ourselves in the opposite case of Ivan. We are engaged with the author in a dialogue about mortality which is both emotional and intellectual. We learn that others experience mortality and relate to death just like us. Fiction allows us to break the isolation of death by coming into intimate contact with our own thoughts about death, as well as the thoughts of other authors. Through storytelling, we can become similar to Julian at the end of his story. We lay down with a leper; we can connect with others not just in spite of, but because of our shared mortality.

In addition to connecting us to others by reminding us that others share our emotional reactions to certain truths, stories can also connect us by representing a group that may be thought of as the "other." Consider how we previously discussed the story of Norman Bowker from *The Things They Carried*, who spends years in isolation after the Vietnam War, driving in circles all day, and eventually kills himself. Like we saw when analyzing the case of Ivan, readers of this story who have gone through experiences of depression, isolation, trauma, and especially war might read this story and feel more comforted by their situation, because they recognize the "self" in this character. They understand that they can connect to O'Brien as another person who has gone through something similar, and they feel comforted in the fact that it is normal and human to deal with these sorts of issues after war.

But we also may recall from our conversation around "self" and "other" in fiction that fiction can also help people who might normally think of war veterans as the "other" slowly recognize them more as the "self." That is to say, a reader of *The Things They Carried* may be

able to get an experience that partially substitutes for the experience of war and the trauma that comes from it.

What this means for veterans such as O'Brien and Bowker is that they don't just feel connected knowing that other veterans share their experience. They also feel comforted knowing that their story is being told, and that others may finally be able to see from their perspective. Perhaps this is why O'Brien says, "I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth" (O'Brien, p. 170). It is important for the marginalized and understood to see their perspectives acknowledged and understood when others are discussing them. Thus, storytelling can both break the isolation that a war veteran has with others within the same group as them, i.e., other veterans, and it can also break the isolation between war veterans and non-veterans.

Stories can also comfort us about our mortality through creative means. For example, because stories are less goal-oriented than nonfiction, they can take a detour into helping give perspective about mortality to their readers. O'Brien does something like this in *The Things They Carried*, where he explains that our physical mortality isn't everything, because we can keep people alive within a story.

He recounts how as a nine-year-old boy, a girl he loved named Linda died of cancer, and he also recounts how he would tell stories to himself about her to keep her memory alive. He explains that "in a story I can steal her soul. I can revive, at least briefly, that which is absolute and unchanging. In a story, miracles can happen. Linda can smile and sit up. She can reach out, touch my wrist, and say, "Timmy, stop crying" (O'Brien, p. 224). O'Brien goes on to explain that one day when he was younger, he was imagining that Linda was still alive, and asking her what it is like to be dead. She replies, "Well, right now, I'm not dead. But when I am, it's like... I don't

know, I guess it's like being inside a book that nobody's reading... An old one. It's up on a library shelf, so you're safe and everything, but the book hasn't been checked out for a long, long time. All you can do is wait. Just hope somebody'll pick it up and start reading" (O'Brien, p. 232).

We can see that in this story, O'Brien is able to provide the audience with some perspective about mortality. We are invited to consider a variety of ways that people can stay with us after they die, including through memory and imagination. Because the entire book up until this point has been filled with death, O'Brien recognizes that the audience may be disturbed by all of the talk of death, and that they may want to feel uplifted in some way at the end. In a story, which is less goal-oriented, he has the option to diverge from his other discussions to do just this—to uplift us about the fact that death isn't everything.

Thus, in this chapter we have examined a few of the ways that stories comfort and connect us when dealing with difficult discussions, such as discussions around mortality. First, they can remind us that others react to unpleasant truths in the same way as we do. Second, they help us connect with people who might not share a common history or experience with us, helping the marginalized and isolated make valuable social connections. Third, they can take detours from the set path of what they are discussing in order to address the audience's concerns and reframe their perspectives. They do all of this better than nonfiction, which is why fictional stories make it ethically easier to talk about death.

Conclusion

In summary, this part of the thesis showed us some of the ethical powers of storytelling. We reflected on the therapeutic powers of discussing uncertainty and absurdity for both authors and readers, which we argued was especially important for philosophy, which often raises so

much more questions in the course of answering a few. Thus, we saw that stories can provide a sense of closure which argumentative fiction cannot. We also saw that writing can comfort us about our own mortality, which can otherwise be a disturbing or isolating subject. Finally, we examined how stories can also connect us to others, whether or not they have shared background experience with us. Thus, we saw that generally, stories can help ease our minds while we discuss difficult and emotionally-charged subjects.

Essayists, in contrast to storytellers, may worry about the emotional trauma that discussions of death may rouse in their readers when talking about these sorts of charged subjects. Readers of nonfiction who are members of a marginalized or misunderstood group (such as veterans) may find it hard to sit through dispassionate discussions of the sort of trauma that they have been through (such as death at war). But clearly, these are the people we want to include in our philosophical discussions more than anyone else. Therefore, we should use the therapeutic powers of stories to help make everyone feel comfortable in our philosophical discussions of traumatic subjects, and to comfort ourselves as we uncover uncertainties and unpleasant truths.

We should also, as always, pay attention to a few more aspects of death that makes it a difficult subject for traditional nonfiction essayists to write about ethically and respectfully. Trying to process and make sense of death, especially in the context of war, can be difficult to do—it can seem absurd and meaningless. Death and mortality can be emotionally charged subjects that bring up past trauma and isolate people from others, both intellectually and emotionally. And as we've seen, the trauma of being exposed to death can make survivors feel deeply shunned and misunderstood. It will be important to keep these aspects in mind as we

wrap up our thoughts and try to use death as the epitome of all the different subjects that storytelling is best suited for.

Conclusion

"In the course of my life I have often had the same dream, appearing in different forms at different times, but always saying the same thing: 'Socrates, practice and cultivate the arts'"

- Plato, Phaedo

After all we've seen in this thesis, it should be clear that fictional stories are invaluable to the project of philosophers. We should make more of a conscious effort to include them in philosophy classrooms and as the focal point of philosophical discussions. But then, where does that leave the role of nonfiction? Should philosophy transition to entirely relying on the form of fiction for its analyses?

Clearly, the answer is no. Despite all of the unique benefits of fiction, nonfiction has clear benefits of its own. Thus, before ending this thesis, we should examine the role of nonfiction in philosophical discussions and try to envision a future in which we incorporate both stories and nonfiction harmoniously.

In order to do that, we will find it useful to take a look over all of the characteristics of death that we have looked at thus far and one last time, get a general sense for why the subject of death lends itself to being talked about through stories.

Difficulties Discussing Death:

In Chapter 1 of this thesis, we looked at the lessons which Paneloux learns in *The Plague* and which Achilles learns in the *Iliad*. We found that both these characters were profoundly shaped by their encounters with death, learning through experience rather than reason. Thus, the

first characteristic of death we should consider is that (1) it teaches lessons through experience rather than reason.

In Chapter 2, we examined how in "The Mortal Remains," from *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*, Thigpen makes a claim that we like to believe that death happens to others, and not us. We reaffirmed this by looking at the numbness of character in *The Death of Ivan Ilych* to the idea that they are mortal. And so, we can add that death (2) is usually processed at an emotional distance which makes it hard to learn lessons about it.

In Chapter 3, we looked at two scenes from *BoJack Horseman* and *Heart of Darkness*. We saw that both of these characters, when confronted with their own mortality, looked back on their lives with regret. We also noticed that these characters were unmasked by death, but only when it was too late for that to have meaningful change in their lives. We therefore saw that death (3) often teaches when it is already too late.

Chapter 4 analyzed several scenes from *The Things They Carried*, noticing how death during wartime is especially traumatic and emotional to process. Looking at O'Brien, we explored how he felt the need to use fiction after the Vietnam War to communicate what he saw there. We noticed that exposure to death (4) makes inner experience harder to capture and communicate through a strictly historical account of the trauma.

Chapter 5 examined "The Tale of Saint Julian Hospitator" from *Three Tales*. We saw in that story how Julian's relationship with his own mortality was always evolving with his personal experiences. Thus, his dynamic relationship with mortality could only be captured through a form which show change happening in "real time." In other words, death (5) is associated with change over a period of time.

Chapter 6 looked at a scene from *The Things They Carried* again, in which Norman Bowker killed himself over the fact that he couldn't pull his comrade out of a field of mud in Vietnam because of the smell. We talked about how this discussion of death was able to capture all of the strange details of life which cannot be captured by speaking in absolutes. Death proved to (6) be a result of strange coincidences as much as a result of absolute rules.

Chapter 7 returned to "The Legend of Saint Julian Hospitator," examining how death is personified in the character of the leper. Specifically, we looked at all of the paradoxical qualities simultaneously expressed within the face of the leper, such as ugliness and majesty. We saw in this description that death (7) is mysterious and multifaceted.

Chapter 8 started to look at the absurdity of death in war. Looking at *The Things They Carried*, we saw that it is hard for people to make sense of it, especially when you cannot take any clear lessons away. Yet, stories about death are able to continue to provide therapy for readers and writers alike by helping us organize thoughts even without anything definitive that we're trying to prove. Thus, death (8) can be absurd and hard to make sense of.

Chapter 9 ended our discussion by trying to contrast the character of Ivan Ilych with the experience of the audience reading *The Death of Ivan Ilych*. We also pulled in several stories from *The Things They Carried* to display how both exposure to death and consideration of mortality can isolate people. Thus, we saw death (unsurprisingly) as (9) disturbing and isolating.

The Role of Fiction in Philosophy

As we went through every chapter, we showed how each of the above qualities of death posed challenges to nonfiction writers which could be overcome through the use of fictional stories. We examined how fiction does so. Summarizing, we could say that stories can:

1. Substitute for some real-life experience in a more accessible, less traumatic way, giving us the chance to learn certain lessons before it's too late.
2. Remind us of the limits of our experience and our knowledge.
3. Communicate the inner experience of others effectively, which may also help smaller, misunderstood groups of people feel more represented.
4. Help us discuss events and relationships that change and evolve over time.
5. Remind us that life is not determined just by absolute rules, but also by strange coincidences.
6. Help us organize our thoughts even when we feel like we can't make clear sense of a mystery or absurdity of life.
7. Provoke us to think meditatively rather than with a specific goal, helping us learn lessons we may not have ever thought of looking for in the first place.
8. Connect and comfort us as we deal with tough issues.

We might be able to envision, then, what sort of subjects of discussion other than death stories might lend themselves towards.

First, we can propose that they are useful for understanding the experience of the "other." So many debates and discussions that our country faces today around the subjects of race, sex, immigration, etc. revolve around our ability to make judgments about another group of people whose experience may fundamentally differ from our own. We have seen that stories allow us to step into the experience of the "other" and start to recognize them more as the "self," or at the very least, stories can remind us that we might not fully understand the other, making us more willing to seek out that understanding and listen to them. Therefore, we might consider the

importance of including fictional narratives of say, immigrants, in political philosophy classes on the ethics of immigration policy.

Second, we can propose that stories should be used to help us confront subjects of extreme emotional severity. Some of the most important discussions that college kids (and frankly, the world at large) need to have more deeply are around difficult issues such as sexual assault, suicide, violent racism, etc. Often, relying on nonfiction writing alone can make it extremely difficult to approach these subjects, as readers can often either emotionally distance themselves too much to engage with material truly, or otherwise be too upset by the content of the material and how cold and clinically it is treated. There has already been a recent push to include more "content warnings" in our writing, showing the widespread desire to address the latter of these issues. As we have seen, fictional stories could address both of these issues, as stories have the ability to reach the hearts of the emotionally numb and the ability to comfort those in distress. Thus, we should try to include stories in philosophy discussions that can both challenge and heal.

Third, and finally, we can propose that stories are useful for leading us in meditative thinking on complex and mysterious subjects. In other words, if we feel like we want to investigate an issue more deeply, but we do not know exactly what we want to say, or if there even is anything to say, we can start by reflecting on a story, which can give us a broad set of ideas to reflect upon and help us begin organizing thought. For example, if we are generally interested in exploring the subject of, say, aesthetics, we might reflect on a story exploring what it means to be an artist to ignite our ideas.

Obviously, this list of uses for fictional stories is by no means exhaustive. As we have seen, the value of stories is extremely complex, and more work still needs to be done teasing

out the other ways that stories could benefit philosophical discussions. But suffice it to say that these three uses of fiction are a good starting point for understanding how fiction might fit into philosophy classrooms.

The Role of Nonfiction in Philosophy

But despite all of these uses for fiction, we cannot forget the importance of nonfiction for philosophers. Although this thesis has done a lot to criticize its use, we should still remember that it too carries many advantages over fictional stories. If it wasn't for that fact, this thesis wouldn't be written as a nonfictional argument. For one, nonfiction provides ease—arguably, it is much easier to write nonfiction than fiction if you are just trying to communicate one idea. For another, nonfiction becomes important when precision is key. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, it can be especially useful when discussing subjects like epistemology, political philosophy, and metaphysics, when we want to make sure without a doubt that our words are not misinterpreted.

Even when talking about subjects such as death, nonfiction does still have a meaningful role. To dismiss an essay like "The Myth of Sisyphus" entirely would be unreasonable—it still provides philosophical insight into the topic of death and suicide, just through a different perspective. Perhaps this is why Camus wished to write essays like "The Myth of Sisyphus" in addition to his novels like *The Stranger*. He could have wanted to approach similar subjects through different lenses because he recognized that each form has unique epistemological and ethical value to provide.

But rather than digressing too far into the strengths of nonfiction, which could be a thesis in its own right, let's generally settle on saying that nonfiction helps us make clear, efficient

analysis of a narrow topic, and therefore have their own role to play alongside fictional stories in philosophical discussion.

Unifying Fiction and Nonfiction

So how should we envision how philosophers and philosophy classrooms should incorporate fiction and nonfiction harmoniously, so that we get the best discussions possible?

One answer could be to use fiction as an opener which precedes the reading of nonfiction. For example, we might read through a story of a person suffering from disease in order to prepare us for reading essays on bioethics. This method makes sense because it instantly provides us with the sorts of lessons that logic alone might not teach us, making sure we bring as much knowledge to our more pointed nonfiction discussions as we can. Furthermore, if we don't know exactly what we might want to discuss in our nonfictional analyses, the meditative thinking that fiction helps us with figuring it out. Finally, reading fiction before nonfiction makes sense because it can help us open up emotionally, and it can help us become receptive to

Or, instead of using a balance of both fiction and nonfiction in our discussions, we might also consider heavily relying on using fiction to talk about some subjects and primarily using nonfiction to talk about others. This could make sense if we deem that discussions around some subjects such as war or sexual assault are too emotionally charged to easily discuss in the terms of nonfiction, while other subjects like epistemology require so much precision to discuss that it doesn't make sense to use nonfiction.

What is most important to remember is that there is no reason that philosophy should be confined to one form. Socrates, one of the first and most influential philosophers, never wrote anything himself, and was a believer that one-on-one dialogues had epistemological and ethical

value. Philosophy professors throughout the country encourage larger-scale oral discussions in their classrooms and participate in conferences themselves. Fiction is already occasionally incorporated into teaching philosophy, but it hasn't found a clearly defined role. Now is the time to establish that role for stories, so that we reap the epistemological and ethical benefits that storytelling provides us with, whether we are discussing death or any other subject.

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