

“If human nature does alter, it will be because we begin to look at ourselves in a new way.”

In what ways, and by what means, do the works of writers you have studied make us “look at ourselves in a new way”?

What is human nature? According to an interesting article I have read, humanity can be interpreted in three ways: mechanistic, mystic and materialist views of humanity. A mechanistic view sees human beings largely as objects through which nature acts. A mystic view suggests that there are aspects of human existence not knowable to mere mortals. A materialist view sees humans as exceptional because humans, unlike any other beings, possess consciousness and agency. In Judaism, human nature is the ability to make our own choice and we will all be held responsible for our actions. From a scientific perspective, human nature is the behavior of human being physically, socially and mentally. There are many different interpretations of human nature and it will never have a specific definition. From my point of view, human nature is how human beings interpret themselves as. Therefore, human nature does alter when we begin to look at ourselves in a new way.

In this essay, I have chosen one play from “The Three Theban Plays” by Sophocles; “Oedipus the King” and “Death and the Maiden” by Ariel Dorfman. Looking at the two tragedies, I am going to illustrate how the writers make us “look at ourselves in a new way”.

Searching for the truth is a human nature; because everyone has curiosity. For example, babies feel curious when seeing new items and try to figure out what it is. However, searching for truth is not always beneficial. Sophocles certainly did prove his point through his play, “Oedipus the King”. Oedipus basically assassinated his father, Laius, acquire his crown and ironically his wife, Oedipus mother, Jocasta. However, Oedipus didn’t have any knowledge of this. To save the city from the plague, he was desperate to track down the murderer of Laius, not knowing that he was the murderer. Throughout the play, Sophocles employs the repetition of blindness to associate with the spiritual blindness of Oedipus to the truth. He was not only blinded to the truth, but also the consequences of discovering the truth. Moreover, the repetition of blindness foreshadows that Oedipus will blind himself at the end of the play when he recognize the truth and what he had done. He is sightless to the advice of people attempting to stop him going down the road of destruction. At the beginning of the play, I have already noticed the wide use of blindness in the dialogue:

*“Oedipus: I would be **blind** to misery not to pity my people kneeling at my feet” (Pg. 159 L14-15)*

*“Oedipus: You’ve lost your power, stone-**blind**, stone-deaf – senses, eyes **blind** as stone!” (Pg. 181 L421-422)*

From the quotes mentioned, I could see that the word “blind” often appears in the dialogues of Oedipus. He told his people of Thebes he wouldn’t be “blind to misery” and promised to save Thebes. However, he is blind to the truth and his identity instead. He insulted Tiresias’ blindness for revealing the prophecy and the truth about Oedipus’ identity which he doubted vigorously. Oedipus’ abuse to Tiresias has a huge contradiction to his own blindness to the outcome of the discovery. Although Tiresias is physically blind, he wasn’t blind to the truth and the effect of revealing it; whereas Oedipus wasn’t blind, but he couldn’t notice the purpose of Tiresias’ actions and ignore his warnings.

The repetition of blindness draws attention of the audience every time the characters say the word. This emphasizes the idea of humans are often blind to themselves, the others and also the truth behind things. When they seek to search for the truth, the outcome can be catastrophic:

“Messenger: He rips off her brooches, the long gold pins holding her robes -he digs them down the sockets of his eyes,” (Pg.237 L1402-1405)

“Messenger: And there we saw the woman hanging by the neck,spinning, swinging back and forth.” (Pg. 237 L1395-1397)

In the exodus of the play, the ending is a disaster, Jocasta hanged herself and Oedipus blinded himself. Truth can be harmful sometimes, therefore it is better to stay the same and be ignorant. At least we could be better off and happier because truth sometimes doesn’t give us any satisfaction at all. This made us to have a whole new perception about the exploration of truth. After studying the play, I would be more objective about my actions and be humble to the others’ advice, to prevent anything destructive happening. But on the other hand, Oedipus is a man of great quality, he had the courage to seek for the truth even though people persuaded him not to because the truth was dangerous. If we are satisfy about the current state and choose to be “blind” to many truths on the world, there would be no improvement and development at all. There is certainly no an ultimate answer to the question whether or not we should seek for the truth.

In “Death and the Maiden”, truth is also an important issue. The scene was set in Chile, which had just received democracy after years and years of dictatorship. Gerardo was appointed to be the Head of the Investigating Commission. The purpose of the commission establishes certain truths in a public way, to become part of official history. However, it only deals with the dead, not people suffered but still alive. Paulina, Gerardo’s wife, was one of them, she was put into torture and raped. Ariel Dorfman portrayed Paulina as a desperate person to find out the truth. Paulina is going to search for the truth by all means since she suffered so much pain and was haunted by the past. The only way to relieve her pain is to attain the truth. She had gained power by holding the gun and transformed into a totally different person. We can identify this by looking at the text:

“Paulina: Besides you that if the police do show their noses her I’ll put a bullet through his man’s head. And then I’ll put the gun in my mouth and pull the trigger.” (Pg. 18)

“Gerardo: My God, Paulina!she has never spoken like this in her life.”

According to the quotes above, the gun has given power to Paulina and she had dominance over the man. Paulina had turned into another person, even the way she speaks, that Gerardo didn’t recognize anymore. This indicates what truth can do; it can drive somebody mad and turns them into a different person. Paulina was so obsessed about the truth that she is willing to sacrifice anything:

“If he’s innocent? Then he’s really screwed.” (Pg. 29)

In order to know the truth, she is willing to give up her morals. Even though she wasn’t sure if Doctor Miranda was really one of the people who tortured her, she had already assumed he is guilty and enforced him to confess by threatening to kill him. Paulina didn’t even care if he is innocent or not, she just wanted a confession no matter what, because this is the only way she could reconcile her pain. Perhaps Miranda is guilty, the truth is so thrilling that even me as an audience wanted to know it so badly. In the end, nobody knows if justice has been achieved by Paulina’s outrageous actions.

The play also exemplify the idea of too much truth may be dangerous. On the way of searching the truth, Paulina didn’t realize that she is destroying many things, their relationships, and Gerardo’s trust to her etc. Gerardo had already warned her not to continue her pursuit of truth:

“Gerardo: People can die from an excessive dose of the truth, you know.” (Pg. 36)

Gerardo could foresee the disastrous outcome of the whole event and tried to stop Paulina continue to look for the truth. It is because Gerardo sensed that too much truth won’t do good to all of them.

The idea of too much truth is dangerous in “Death and the Maiden” links back to the idea of the catastrophic consequences of obtaining the truth from “Oedipus the King”. Paulina and Oedipus are very similar, they strife for the truth which they don’t know is destructive. Paulina destroyed the relationship between Gerardo and herself; whereas Oedipus devastated his kingdom, his family and most significantly, he blinded himself. Both tragedies raised our caution to the pursuit of truth, acknowledge us that truth is double-edged, it can favour but also destroy someone. Human can’t be too ignorant and also can’t know too much truth. *“It is better to settle for half.”* as Alfieri puts it in the play “A View from the Bridge”.