

From Hell's Heart

The stack of papers cowered meekly under a critical stare as the students filed in and took their desks. Whether or not she saw them in her periphery wasn't obvious, but the first few in seemed as intent to avoid her gaze as were their papers. Only the starting bell could have produced such a stark contrast to the silence of her methodical scribbling, but before a second had passed a voice arose both shrill and fierce.

"All right people get out your dictionaries and turn to the word 'Truth'." The plump elderly woman moved to the front with an awkward gate spry with the zest of authority. Seeing that students were still settling in she motivated them by slamming her palm repeatedly on a nearby desk. "Hey! Quiet!" she screamed. Teenage discourse gave way to anxious silence and the bustle of bodies to and from the book shelf. Slicing the tension, she began the prodding so necessary to move the lesson along: "Alex, tell me what it says."

"The state or character of being true," abashed a murmur in quiet, unwitting defiance. The silence that followed betrayed both the sincerity of an adolescent mind and the irritation of a seasoned educator.

"No, I want a good definition. What's the next one?"

"The true or actual state of a matter," he offered. The earnestness of such a fruitless response niggled at a sense of control under that was the constant threat of sarcasm and cynicism. Restraining herself she made a terse retort.

"Next."

A short silence betrayed the ambiguity of her command, but oblivious of her intention the boy continued, "A fact or belief that is accepted as true."

"Good," she blurted in compromise, "a fact accepted as true." Waddling down the aisle she searched for the inspiration to enlighten the students further, but curiously it was absent. Grasping for words she snatched an open dictionary off a nearby desk and began reading. "Ok, ok, let me see here."

"That which is in accordance with reality," the boy continued.

"That which is in accordance with reality!" she erupted with vigour. Beaming widely she searched again for the inspiration to move the lesson forward, but again it was nowhere to be found. Confused, she searched her mind for the intent of the lesson, but it too had mysteriously vanished. "Ok!" she belted before slowly trailing off, "I want you to write me a paragraph about truth in Hamlet... For homework."

A deferent silence was soon violated by one of the more obstreperous pupils. "Isn't the truth of a play impossible to know? How can you be sure that you know the truth that Shakespeare intended?"

At this she beamed, delighted by the chance to fill an empty vessel with the elixir of understanding. "You're assuming that an author intends anything at all when writing, and that is a fallacy." Sensing confusion she continued, "Authors don't write to communicate a singular intended meaning, they write to allow meaning to manifest itself within the reader."

With the eyes of everyone but the perplexed and the insolent glazing over, a second dissenting voice rang out.

“But if we mean things when we use words, how can the author of a play not also mean something with their words?”

Knowing that the question sat on the the edge of an abyss beyond established doctrines, she struck swiftly and brutally. “Meaning,” she piped pausing for emphasis, “is a fact or belief that is accepted as true, and when one accepts a meaning as true it therefore becomes true.” Scanning the faces of the recalcitrant mob she sensed that the stirrings of insurgency had yet to be quelled, so she struck again. “And if a meaning exists within a reader then it is in accordance with reality and thereby becomes ‘truth’ by definition.”

The faces of those few still paying attention twisted and writhed in the eddies of her logic. Believing the silence to mean that dissent had been quelled, she strode triumphantly back down the aisle toward the front. “Now, moving on to your projects. I am going to be brutally honest with you. Most of you are failing miserably.” A hand shot up at the back of the room, but with outstretched palm she silenced the rebelliousness knave to whom it belonged. “I will say that again,” she voiced, gratified by the irony that she could now stare plainly at this particular delinquent, “You are failing miserably!”

The hand of the first defiant young pupil shot up again. “But if every person’s idea of meaning were true then there would be no objective reality. And if all interpretations are true then each of us should receive perfect marks for interpretation, but we don’t.”

Incensed that she should have to revisit something so clearly explained, her reply was curt and shrill. “Some meanings are more valid than others,” she shrieked. With brow and jowl tensed

hard she stared into the rows of youngsters, but despite her glare the opprobrious firebrand railed again.

“But doesn’t that mean we are forced to accept popular interpretations?”

“Never! I can’t stand reading the mainstream interpretations of literature, they show so very little deep thinking. I much prefer the schools of thought on the fringe of literary criticism.”

Each answer only seemed to make the pupil more restless, “Then doesn’t that mean we must know which interpretation you prefer and accept it to get full marks? Isn’t that unfair?”

Questioning her partiality gave her the excuse she needed to produce an ear piercing blast, “Excuse me! That’s enough! If you want to debate reality then do it down the hall in the philosophy classroom!”

Long ago passionate zeal had swelled in her breast when she was confronted with such intellectual challenges, but over her 37 years in the classroom it had slowly been replaced by a bitter gall. Rather unexpectedly, she actually came to rely on this gall, because as it swelled in her chest it endowed her with a fire of motivation that she could project upon the rows of students. But this time, as she relished it filling her chest something felt awry. Rather than the furious hellfire she was so accustomed to, a pressure in her heart began to pain and repulse her and with a sudden twinge she felt paralyzed by apathy and disdain. Staring out among the confused young creatures she couldn’t help but think how each group seemed so much more degenerate than the last. Each group displayed deficits in its thinking that grew in both size and scope and every year dwarfed those of the previous year. “Deficit thinking,” she thought, someone really ought to look

into that, but the deficits of this particular lot had become far too great a weight for her. Breathing slowly, she gazed spitefully out over the silent mass for a long while as she awaited the will to continue her lesson. But as the moments passed she realized that it too had left her. She was now filled with the fear that this state may never leave, and she knew that if it did not there would she would never be able to continue on in the classroom. As the fear mounted she strained to summon the energy to ward it off, and with great effort she managed to drag the lesson to completion.

As night set upon the school the woman remained behind in her classroom long after the students had taken refuge in the comfort of friends and family. Sitting at her desk, she stared into a computer screen that struggled under the weight of 1,400 e-mails. "Damn it!" she shouted, slamming her hand on the desk, but this time the tactic did nothing to entice her companion. With a sigh of defeat she slumped back into her chair, put her feet on the desk and stared into the rainbow wheel spinning in playful mockery of her. Drawn further and further into the wheel she began to feel her head bob and a deep slumber soon seized her.

When she opened her eyes again she looked up to see a middle-aged man with long, brown, shoulder length hair, and a small goatee. He was dressed somewhat oddly in a black button up shirt through which a white collar protruded. He stared intently back at her with a friendly smile, "Hello, it's a pleasure to finally meet you," he greeted.

She looked around groggily and rubbed her eyes, searching her memory for some parent-teacher appointment she had forgotten. "Ahh, hello," she moaned, "I'm sorry, but I don't believe we've met."

“My name is René,” he beamed, “but you can call me Mr. Descartes.”

She searched her mind for a Descartes on one of her class lists but knew well she had stopped memorizing names long ago. “Um, what can I do for you Mr. Descartes?”

“You are Mrs. Rue, are you not?” he inquired cheerfully.

“No, you’re looking for the philosophy department, it’s down the hall. This is English.” Looking up at his gentle smile she realized she would need to entice him along, so she unleashed the professional small talk that had driven away so many romantic interests. “No, we’re more into the analysis of literature, it’s a rather different sort of science altogether.”

Appearing perplexed by her comment he raised an eyebrow, “Isn’t the search for truth rather prevalent in all academic disciplines?”

Still somewhat dazed she was suddenly jolted awake by his challenge. “Yes, but there simply is no singular truth in literature,” she stated plainly.

“But surely literature has meaning, for all good writers must start with the intention to impart meaning to their words.”

A tinge of excitement perked her up and she moved hastily to quash his ignorance. “Actually, that’s just a widely believed fallacy. Writers don’t intend to give their words meaning, they simply write and allow the reader to supply meaning.”

“But surely you must make some attempt to interpret what the author’s intended meaning is,” he challenged amusedly.

“Not at all! even if it could be known, any intended meaning just wouldn’t be relevant in the scholarship of today.” Somewhat startled by his continued objections she moved to save him from damaging his dignity any further, “It’s all rather complicated and it would take a while to explain.”

He smiled pleasantly with no sign of dismay. “Perhaps you could enlighten me?”

Seeing that he simply wouldn’t take the hint, she reached within herself and found the fire that had deliciously sautéed so many adolescent minds. “There are some meanings that are interpreted literally but as these meanings accumulate there are so many possible meanings that any singular meaning is obliterated.”

With furled brow he objected commandingly, “But could not the fault lie with the reader? Could not the reader be entirely ignorant of a factor that narrows the possible meanings to one?”

Raising her index finger she attempted to interject, “Ah,…”

“Could not the reader simply overlook a fact that helps give a singular intended meaning its form and force?”

With gall now beginning to well and fester inside her she moved to reassert herself, but was again cut off.

“Why, in my day, writers wrote under the constant threat of retribution for their works, and it wasn’t uncommon for the most significant forms of meaning to be present in carefully constructed frameworks of symbol, insinuation and allusion. Surely you can’t deny that such works have an intended meaning?”

His words began to grate her ears, and as the gall that surged inside her began to spill over the banks of its normal place it provoked the same paralysis she had felt earlier that day. This time, however, the pain was made worse as authors like Swift, Orwell, Spenser, and Dryden invaded her mind, and unable to speak under the strain she suffered in unbearable silence. As her agony became more and more intolerable she longed more than anything to be free, but as the man continued on in a calm, rational voice the pain only worsened.

“If one is not careful to consider the possible intentions of the author then the most important meanings could be lost to oblivion. And who’s to say what English authors might have been saying over the centuries if these systems of symbolic meaning caught on? There could be undiscovered meanings under your very nose, perhaps even in the most studied works of English literature, meanings that you have simply dismissed because you assume that they are impossible to convey.” He stared at her now wondering why such a pugnacious creature had not yet responded. “Are you all right?” he sought concernedly.

Still helpless to rebut she could only stare into his face. Any will she had to teach him had vanished, and she feared that if it ever returned it would be accompanied by a form of malice so bitter that it would surely kill her. Her mind wandered as far as it could as she stared past him, past the walls plastered with terrible adolescent writing, and off into the void of space beyond it all. Suddenly a great pain seized her and she convulsed violently from head to toe. With body rigid, she screamed silently as pain shot through her limbs, and as her will to resist slowly went limp so too did her body. With the pain beginning to subside she felt as though some part of herself she never knew existed was now in control and almost unwittingly she spoke, “Am I dreaming?”

“Ahh, I think not,” came a troubled reply from the wide-eyed onlooker.

“Mr. Descarte...,” she continued in wonderment, “the great philosopher... I am dreaming!”

“No madam, I assure you that I am as real as you are. And yes madam, I am René Descartes.”

“I think, therefore I am?” she uttered amusedly.

“Yes, madam, that one sentence is the culmination of much deliberation. It has echoed the halls of great universities for centuries now.”

A sort of bemused intrigue filled her as she she recalled the logic of the saying. Almost reflexively words entered her mouth, “Do you really believe all that thinking was really necessary?” she queried with a tone of irony.

“I beg your pardon madam?”

“All that thinking just to prove to yourself that you exist?”

Surprise filled his response, “Absolutely madam, for how else could I be sure?”

His wonder imparted in her just a touch of spite and her sense of control returned slightly. “In order to to prove that you were not deceived, by a malevolent demon, into believing that you exist when perhaps you may not,” she continued with a grimace, “a malevolent demon whose supernatural powers were imparted upon him by an omnipotent God whose very testaments assure you that you exist... you have performed one of the most pointless

exercises in logic known to man.” Her eyes met those of a man perturbed by her critique. Undeterred she intensified her words, “The very question presupposes that the demon who is deceiving you does not have the power to fool something that is without sense into believing that it is truly sentient, which cannot be precluded given that you have drawn the parameters of reality into question.”

He began balking a response but with her energy now beginning to return she cut him short, “You assume that if such monolithic beings shaped the fabric of reality that you would have any power to apprehend what they intended to conceal from you,” she declared in censure.

Descartes snapped back with healthy conviction, “You overstate your argument, for I would be able to prove to myself that I exist.”

Provoked by the insubordinate sophist, the will to crush him now began to seep through her and with it came the energy to do so. “But even if you’re right, you may still know so little about the nature of your existence that your logic may very well prove nothing more than that you exist before the hand of Lucifer is withdrawn from your puppet-like edifice and your existence is extinguished.” She breathed heavily now as vitality coursed through her, and staring him down she let loose the full ferociousness of her conclusion, “You may believe that you exist, that you are sentient, when in fact you are nothing more than a boil on the devil’s ass: one that he has seen fit to give sense yet deprived of reason enough to know that it is actually nothing more than an extension of him.” The words tasted bittersweet as she realized how pointless it was to argue without the benefit of an objective reality.

Returning her glare he snarled back contemptuously, "I would still know that I exist!"

Glaring at him in intense hatred she lashed out bitterly, "I THINK THEREFORE HE IS!" she screamed.

The two glared at one another intensely for moments that seemed like hours before the sound of a singular applause suddenly invaded the room. Both figures turned to see a tall, thin figure clapping in their direction from the classroom door. Dressed in black fur pants, strange black boots cleft at the toe, and a pinstriped suit jacket that opened onto a bare chest, the strange attire provoked a rage in her that was already simmering. "Well done!" the figure announced, "It's so good to see the troops in good spirits." As he approached the first row of desks his boots clicked in a slow methodical rhythm. His stature seemed to enlarge itself with every step. With eyes locked intensely on the two onlookers, he sat himself sideways in the front row, swivelled around and put his boots upon a desk. Conveying both familiarity and guile upon them with a look, he smirked and leaned back into the blue plastic chair of a student.

Descartes spoke quickly and anxiously, "Sir, I was just..." but fell silent as the figure waved with utter disinterest.

As she stared in censure at the being before her she could now see that the strange black boots did not appear like boots at all, but instead like great black hooves. Moving her gaze along it appeared that his fur pants were, in fact, more like the fur coat of a great black beast. As she began to examine his head she started back slightly when two spiral horns broke the skin and trails of blood trickled down them as they grew outward. No man was this, she realized, but a terrible beast.

“I thought you’d show our guest a bit more respect,” it uttered in a commanding tone, “Well, I see you’ve gotten to know her at least.” With a slightly amused look in its eyes, the beast pulled a phone from somewhere in his fur and looked down at it in fixation. “She’s officer material you know,” it voiced while absorbed in the light of the phone. Silence filled the two stunned onlookers, and as if the beast suddenly realized it were being rude it looked up at the woman with apologetic eyes and spoke in a tone seemingly sincere, “I’m sorry, you don’t mind do you?”

With mouth open in disbelief, she shook her head, but as though the years of ruthless glaring had imprinted themselves upon her face it could see that she did.

“It’s a Blackberry,” it divulged in a tone of amused irony. “I just find it so hard to keep up with the times.”

“Sir,” piped Descartes, “what brings you here?”

“Every now and again I like to set eyes on the heavy hitters,” came a matter of fact reply. “She’s done almost as much damage from this one room as you have in centuries,” it stated with a smile.

The beast turned back to her with a pleased look of admiration. Alarmed, she stood tensely and stared at it in fear, but as it stared back she knew that she was expected to speak. Almost instinctively, she blurted the one and only thing on her mind: “You and she.” Meeting only a blank stare she spoke again with an anxious smile, “It’s you and she, not you and her,” she corrected.

The beast smirked slowly, but as the smirk grew wider a deep chuckle began to emanate outward betraying a rapture that filled her with both terror and confusion. As the creature threw back his

head and the chuckle became a howl her heart leapt into her throat and suddenly she was thrust awake. Back in her chair now, she stared past the computer screen panting and sweating. As her wits began to return she realized that the sun had risen and light had begun pouring into the classroom. Stopping to listen, she could hear the bustle of students in the hallway. A noise outside the class caused her to swivel around swiftly, and as the door slowly creaked open she stared at it intensely. Her pulse quickened and try as she might she couldn't wrench the dream from her mind, but when the door finally opened she sighed in relief when all it revealed was a meek young girl holding a copy of Hamlet.

“Good morning,” the voice chimed, “I was hoping I could talk to you about the play.”

Feeling a knot form in the pit of her stomach she felt a sudden dismay come over her. “I'm not sure I...” she offered meekly before trailing off.

“I've been doing some research, and I think I found something that no one has ever seen before,” voiced the girl bashfully. Not sure what to say or whether she had the will to say it, the woman stared plainly. “I think that the play is actually a satirical allegory that lampoons Queen Elizabeth, Mary and Philip II” she voiced plainly.

The utter ridiculousness of the words washed over her like a soothing balm, and as she stared at this young underachiever she began to feel she might be able to answer. “Umm...,” she managed.

The girl continued in hopeful offering, “And the character of young Hamlet actually symbolizes both Martin Luther and Queen Elizabeth!”

Staring now at a student so clearly destined for a second rate college, a second wave of relief soothed and reassured her that there was still a place for her here in the classroom, and that there would be for some time. Knowing that she would have to be delicate with such a frail young creature she smiled sweetly, “That’s nice dear.” The student smiled back innocently and held her book to her chest anxious for something further. “I’m terribly busy at the moment, and literature is such a complicated thing. Why don’t you do some more research and see if you don’t change your mind?” As the first bell rang the girl rushed out and the woman turned back to her computer feeling a little better. As her students began filing in she searched anxiously inside herself for the courage to teach. She was relieved to find that bitter gall was beginning to well comfortably in its usual place.