

Finding the True Enemy

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Lurking in every shadow, an elusive adversary, worthy of the most noble and valiant, menaces those who seek to find it. It does not bother those who choose to ignore it, but instead bothers those who wish to discover new curiosities; and it did not bother those in the past as much as it bothers us now. As long as humans have the desire to discover the unknown, the search for knowledge will continue as it has for millennia. But this crusade to solve all mysteries has frequently led to problems. With society's knowledge stored in books, schools have been built where learning and research can take place, which eventually leads to more books being written. Besides being troublesome to students who study for years of their lives to absorb this immense pool of life histories, not all knowledge leads to books that are beneficial for society. Not knowing what we do not know cannot hurt, for we are living proof that we can live with what we have. Yet, maybe Robert Browning was correct when he said, "Ignorance is not innocence but sin," as the ignorant lacks a defining part of humanity. Just as society sometimes benefits from new discoveries, individuals can also benefit from gaining new knowledge. But, probably as often as one benefits, one will be hurt by this enemy who shows itself when we seek the precious truths in our lives.

Thomas Hardy in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* described several characters who had to face the powerful demon of truth. One character hurt by knowledge that would have best remained unknown was Michael Henchard. Michael's unnecessary awareness of his environment caused many of the acts leading to his downfall. The selling of Susan, Michael's wife, in the first chapter, although partially due to Michael imbibing liquor, could not have happened if Michael had not known that other cultures had sold their wives before him. "It has been done elsewhere — and why not here?" (*Mayor*, p. 20) thought Michael moments before he sold his wife. With the combination of a seemingly innocuous bit of knowledge and a simple spark, such as liquor, a dangerous monster is created. Sometimes, though, knowledge is not as subtle or as innocuous as the customs of other peoples. After the reunion of Susan and Michael and the subsequent death of Susan, Michael came into possession of a very dangerous truth. Susan had left a sealed letter to Michael concerning their daughter, Elizabeth, to be opened and read at a future date. Prematurely reading the letter, Michael learned that he was not the true father of Elizabeth. This discovery changed what would have been a fatherly attitude toward Elizabeth to a hostile and cold demeanor, driving Elizabeth out of his house. Without reading the letter from Susan, the relationship between Michael and his imagined daughter could have been much better. The truth in this case was unnecessary. "Had he obeyed the wise directions outside her letter

this pain would have been spared him for long—possibly for ever” (*Mayor*, p. 130). Michael’s financial demise also resulted from the onslaught of the truth. But unlike the reading of the letter, his financial doom came about from his active search for the truth. Michael approached someone whom he believed to possess the desired knowledge of the future weather and the outcome of the future harvest. Unfortunately, this insight into the future provided nothing but trouble for Michael, as he sank one level deeper into his problems.

Henchard had backed bad weather, and apparently lost. He had mistaken the turn of the flood for the turn of the ebb. His dealings had been so extensive that settlement could not long be postponed, and to settle he was obliged to sell off corn that he had bought only a few weeks before at figures higher by many shillings a quarter.... Thus he lost heavily. (*Mayor*, p. 186)

Michael could have easily continued living his life without knowing how one particular harvest would turn out, but his curiosity had to be satisfied. And in satisfying his curiosity, Michael received much more pain than any possible benefits from knowing the truth.

Also in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, was the revealing of truths unimportant to the present, yet which brought chaos to individual lives. It was as if the key to the lock on Pandora’s box fell into the wrong hands, bringing misery, suffering, and pain to Casterbridge. That the key fit the lock was by itself harmless, but the evils that came as a result cannot be considered as harmless. The death of Lucetta Templeman occurred after she learned that her once secret amorous encounters with Michael Henchard would be revealed to her husband, Donald Farfrae. Her death was not directly caused by the actions of anyone, but as the unfortunate psychological response to information that worked itself into the recesses of Lucetta’s mind. The townspeople had no practical reason to need to know Lucetta’s past, and Donald could not have been too concerned about Lucetta’s past behavior when Lucetta had shown her devotion to Donald. With Lucetta, it would have been better if everyone had just forgotten or ignored the facts about her past. Likewise, Michael Henchard had a hidden past that had little bearing on the present. While the opening of the box did not harm him as severely as it did Lucetta, Michael was not immune to the pressures of society. Both the revealing of the secret of his past relationship with Lucetta and the secret of his selling his wife, Susan, contributed to Michael’s downfall. These events from the past should have remained locked within the box, where they could not have caused any trouble. Throw the key away and society will be spared the evils that lie within.

Othello by William Shakespeare also contains characters who struggled with knowing things better left unknown. With the insinuations of Iago, Othello discovered the possibility of the unfaithfulness of his faithful wife Desdemona. Just like Michael Henchard who treated Elizabeth unkindly after reading the letter, Othello treated his

wife as if she were a whore. The difference between Henchard and Othello was that Henchard knew the truth, while Othello knew an untruth. However, the effects were no different, as these pieces of information that could have remained hidden became unveiled. Remaining in the darkness would have been much easier for Othello, who believed, “‘Tis better to be much abused than but to know’t a little” (*Othello*, p. 55). Similar to how Lucetta died from an insignificant truth, Desdemona died from an insignificant lie. The truth was what was needed to solve the problems in *Othello*, while the truth was the problem in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Before anyone knew the truth about the scheming Iago, Iago was able to plant lies into the minds of the characters, leading to several deaths. It was the disclosure of Iago’s true nature that brought harmony to the society in *Othello*. In contrast, it was the truth that wrought havoc to the town of Casterbridge.

Ignorance may be the most potent weapon against misery. Matthew Prior once wrote, “From ignorance our comfort flows, the only wretched are the wise.” Just as the child who has no comprehension of the meaning of death will be much happier than the one who lives in fear of death, ignorance brings joy to the innocent. After selling his wife, Michael prospered for many years as a businessman and as a mayor, during which he had no knowledge of the existence of Susan, Elizabeth, or Donald. His troubles began when the illusion of his independence and infallibility vanished, leaving nothing but harsh reality. Both Michael and Othello recognized the pain associated with knowledge. Othello lamented his loss of innocence and the agony that followed:

“I had been happy if the general camp, Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body, so I had nothing known. O, now for ever farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content! Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars that make ambition virtue! O, farewell! Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump, the spirit-stirring drum, th’ ear-piercing fife, the royal banner, and all quality, pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war! And O you mortal engines whose rude throats th’ immortal Jove’s dread clamors counterfeit, farewell! Othello’s occupation’s gone!” (*Othello*, p. 56)

Similarly, Michael’s downfall came with much suffering, culminating with his death. Although Michael felt that he could not help himself, he tried to help others by keeping the hurtful truth from them. Michael refrained from revealing his past relationship with Lucetta to Donald, and Michael did not tell Elizabeth the truth about her father. Michael also tried to keep his departure from Casterbridge and his death a secret and unknown to others. In his will, he wrote, “that Elizabeth-Jane Farfrae be not told of my death, or made to grieve on account of me” (*Mayor*, p. 326). These were well-intentioned attempts by Michael to hold the truth away from others. In *Othello*, however, Iago’s imposed ignorance on the other characters had the opposite purpose as that of Michael’s purpose. As there exists both good and bad knowledge, there must necessarily also be good and bad ignorance. Although Michael and

Othello might have been happier being completely ignorant, good knowledge does exist and can be as powerful as good ignorance. What Michael needed was self-knowledge, or a knowledge of his own character flaws and weaknesses. Michael's ignorance of himself was as major of a factor in his demise as the knowledge that he did have. On the other hand, Othello was dangerously ignorant of the character flaws of others. If Othello had known Iago or Desdemona better, the tragedies that occurred might have been prevented. In general, both stories contained characters who either knew the wrong things or did not know the right things. This wrong mix or balance between ignorance and knowledge manifested itself in the calamities that befell the characters.

The negative effects of knowledge, whether true or not true, can be seen from these two stories. Ignorance has many positive benefits, especially since knowledge is many times not needed. "He that is robbed, not wanting what is stol'n, let him not know't, and he's not robbed at all" (*Othello*, pp. 55-56). Many times the pursuit of knowledge is followed with the belief in the betterment of society. However, one must wonder at the effectiveness of this pursuit. "Men's natures wrangle with inferior things, though great ones are their object" (*Othello*, p. 61). Even if there is a reasonable reason for following the road to enlightenment, the pain and suffering that is sometimes contrived by the truth monster make the road extremely bumpy and hazardous. Perhaps there is nothing to fear more than unwanted knowledge, which destroys our protective innocence. Although people today certainly have received many benefits from centuries of knowledge that has accumulated, in areas such as medicine, science, and technology, people today also have to face the continual threat of things like nuclear missiles that people centuries ago could not even imagine. The true challenge comes in finding the truths that benefit society and the individual, while ignoring the multitude of other truths and lies that do much more harm than good.