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Honesty and Truth in Father Comes Home From the Wars

Parks’ Father Comes Home From the Wars is a story that tells the departure and the return of a slave from the Revolutionary War. It ceaselessly throws impossible choices before its characters who, caught between old loyalties and new bonds, are forced to make decisions with no good resolution. The difficult nature of these choices means that characters must choose whether to tell the truth when they’ve hurt others: Hero, for example, in three acts must face his betrayal of Homer, his release of Smith, and his marriage to Alberta. In this sense, truth becomes a central pillar of the drama within the work, tension building as the characters come to realize the acts of others. These deceptions are not all the same, however; most prominently, the release of Smith is profoundly different in tone and characterization than any of Hero's other actions. An analysis of the characters' relationships to truth and honesty yields the idea that honesty – that is, not lying about any physical or material state – in Father Comes Home From the Wars is an entirely separate affair from acting truthfully in a manner that is consistent with implied loyalty and unspoken bonds, allowing for a better understanding of the behavior and internal beliefs of the people in the play.

The two ideas of honesty and truth first diverge in Part 1, when Hero was completely honest when recalling the circumstances of him informing the Boss-Master of Homer's escape. He delays and he omits, but he does not lie. The closest thing to an untruth is Hero's claim that he doesn't "recall the circumstances of that day / With this day here crowding in [his] head," (Parks 48), which is fully truthful and yet still signifies guilt, especially when paired with the next dialogue that he has: "Believe it. It's true," (Parks 50). The syntax is different between the two lines; Homer's exposition of Hero's betrayal transforms Hero's speech from long and indirect dismissals to short and direct admissions of wrongdoing. Hero's initial long, winding deflection is almost desperate, wanting for anything but to have to reckon with the consequences of his actions, implicitly acknowledging his wrong just as fully as the simple admission that comes after. That guilt resurfaces in his hasty justifications too, with his claims that "Boss gave me a hundred reasons why [he] should tell," (Parks 50) when he cannot name a single one of those hundred, stammering only, "Boss told me- / He talked up close inside my ear and he said- / He said-" (Parks 50) without even being prompted for such a reason. Such a lack of prompting suggests that Hero is not only trying to satisfy any of the others with his explanation but rather also attempting to placate himself and his guilt for telling his Master the truth. This idea that Hero needs to placate his conscience signifies that he, through telling his Boss-Master the truth, acted against his own internal beliefs, and in that sense, was untrue to himself. Furthermore, Hero’s defenses are all tangible things that can be assigned an objective truth value – that he cannot focus or cannot remember or that Boss-Master had promised him rewards for his defection from the other slaves. The others protest in another way, however: “Freedom in exchange for breaking the bond of trust. / And you said yes,” (Parks 50). That bond of trust does not refer to the same type of honesty that Hero represents, but rather a deeper sense of truth and honesty generated by their internal beliefs that nobody should’ve told on Homer. That truth is implicit instead of explicit, and so from an external material perspective Hero is still honest; however, from an internal perspective of any of the characters, Hero is untrue to their morals. Hero never explicitly lied here. He is still, however, in violation of a deeper type of truth.

Hero, now Ulysses, is still technically honest as before in Part 3 when he's returned from the war married to someone his old almost-wife has never met. He discloses everything to Penny – explicitly honest, as always - in the same desperate style as in Part 1. The difference now is that Ulysses actually can find those reasons he had so much trouble expounding in the first part: “You and me, Penny, we don’t have no kids. Can’t, right? … Alberta, she’ll help you around here. …. And with Homer heading out, we’ll need an extra hand,” (Parks 148-149). And these are also all true observations about their material conditions, but these reasons don’t seem enough for Ulysses or Penny – he fires them out one after another, understanding that they all fall flat. The amount of speaking that he does overwhelms the amount that Penny does, who has only paltry, uncompleted thoughts in response to Ulysses’s barrage of technical truths: “But, I’m – me,” and “Hero. I mean-” (Parks 149). Her response is also markedly different from Ulysses’s as well; while his reasoning is predicated on tangible, material truths, hers is an objection stemming from their intangible bond, not deflections to future work or children but rather their relationship as it exists in the moment between the two of them. Compared to her, who is completely disinterested in the type of truth that Ulysses speaks, his only answers are just as much a deflection and just as unwarranted as his answers to Homer and the Old Man previously. As before, we see Ulysses in violation of an unspoken truth, one that had promised Penny that he would be faithful to her during the War. Unlike Penny, Ulysses only addresses this truth indirectly when he tells Penny the truth about where Alberta will sleep: “She’ll sleep with me. / (Rest) / I went to the War and I came back here, I had to, but I didn’t have to, but I did,” (Parks 149). That rest in-between lines is the closest Ulysses ever comes to Hero’s admission of guilt, with the same slowdown in their speech before an acceleration into messy, meaningless excuses filled with shorter and shorter clauses. Critically, however, Ulysses never does admit his wrong. Ulysses, after all, is a different character from Hero. He has returned from the war with a distinguished new name and confidence to match, and signaled by the fact that there are no more vocalized admissions of guilt as Hero had done. This final truth told to Penny is also the only one that Ulysses will use to also signify something beyond material truths as well; it is an inadvertent admission that Penny no longer holds the position that she once held to Hero, a position that their loyalty had promised to each other, and therefore a statement that while being an explicit truth still is dishonest.

Compare Ulysses’s explicit honesty and implicit dishonesty to Homer’s explicit lie and implicit truth about what he wrote in the dust. While Ulysses tells Penny only the truth and can only find meaningless diversion afterward, Homer tells Penny a lie and shows no guilt, espousing no stammering deflective truths after it.

Homer: It says everything.

Penny: “Everything.” Is that how you write it? Looks pretty.

Homer:

Penny: (Parks 118)

There is a silence here, just as there is a silence between Ulysses and Penny, but this one is different; it is a signal of mutual understanding between the two instead of a signifier of guilt, upholding an implicit promise instead of breaking one. This is further evidenced by the way that they speak to each other afterward, where unlike the dialogue between Ulysses and Penny, there are no half-spoken unfinished thoughts or sprawling concatenations of loosely connected excuses. It is simple, relaxed: “No harm in asking. / Because you like the sound of no,” (Parks 118). And when this lie is exposed, there is still no such panicked deflection: “You’re not right somehow. You’re a good man Homer,” (Parks 122). This happens because while being explicitly a lie, the actions that Homer undertakes are consistent with the other knowledge that Penny and Homer share: that he is in love with her, and while Homer may have explicitly lied, he does not betray the understood dynamic between the two of them as Hero and Ulysses do. In that way, the act of honesty is separated from the idea of truth in Father Comes Home From the Wars; Homer can lie and still be true to himself and Penny, and Hero can be scrupulously honest and still be untrue to himself and those that he values.

Hero also tells a lie in the process of being true to himself as well when he finally releases Smith at the end of Part 2. He lies to the Colonel, telling him that, “[Smith] won’t run. I’ll see to it,” (Parks 100). This is the one lie that Hero tells. Everywhere else he is honest in the explicit sense of the word, but here he directly tells the Colonel something that is unequivocally a lie. There is a complicated dynamic between Smith and Hero, with Smith telling Hero that “We don’t want to fall too far behind him,” (Parks 101), a line that supposes that Smith has accepted Hero’s position as an obedient slave – the same position that lead to his betrayal of Homer - which forces Hero into the same dilemma of either being honest and oppressing a friend or lying and setting them free. Hero then makes the opposite decision from Part 1 and elects to set Smith free, taking in his reasoning the opposite stance as well. He speaks not of material truths but rather the uncertain position that he has in relation to freedom and slavery, qualifying his actions with “I don’t know if I’m qualified to give freedom to another man seeing as how I’m not a free man myself” (Parks 101). Whereas in the previous passages we see Hero trying to avoid this deeper relationship between himself and others by deflecting onto physical truths, here he actively grapples with his position and connections. He also is seeking repentance here, praying that “God willing I’ll make up for a horrible wrong I did,” (Parks 101) an allusion to his betrayal of Homer in Part 1. This shows is a definitive guilt on behalf of Hero towards the actions that he took in ratting out Homer, and confirms the previously mentioned idea that Hero needs to justify himself in his actions due to an underlying sense of guilt, despite his honesty. Compared to before, however, the nature of his justification has changed; previously he had focused on external rewards and convenient physical truths to seek the acceptance of those that he hurt, whereas now he focuses primarily on his conscience. That line is the distillation of the idea that was brought up in Part 1 that Hero feels a need to justify his actions to himself, and while he fails back then, he manages to overcome that failure previously and take action in freeing Smith, an action that is true to himself if his betrayal of Homer was untrue in the same way. Ultimately, he tries to compensate for his betrayal of telling the Master the truth by now lying to the Master: an act of explicit dishonesty and implicit truthfulness to correct an act of implicit falseness and explicit honesty.

Father Comes Home From the War posits more than a single concept of the truth. All the characters, Hero especially, have a complicated relationship with honesty where truthfulness in the concrete sense is fundamentally different in nature from truthfulness in relationships and to oneself. Hero, while always telling the truth, manages to continually act in a way that causes personal guilt and violations of unspoken bonds. Homer and Penny, on the other hand, are true to themselves, authentic in a way that Hero isn’t. They aren’t as technically honest as Hero is, but they don’t suffer from the same problems of perceived wrongdoing because they hold to a deeper conception of truth, one that stems from the implicit promises made between people in their interactions. The characters in the play operate along two ideals of truth, one characterized by correspondence to explicit, tangible facts and one by implicit, intangible understandings. By exploring where spoken and unspoken truths diverge and when they come into conflict, Parks illuminates the difference between these formulations of truthfulness and honesty, driving forward the tension in the play when those contrasting ideas of truth clash.

Works Cited

Parks, Suzan-Lori. Father Comes Home from the Wars: Parts 1, 2 & 3. Theatre Communications Group, 2015.