Anthony Goldhammer

Engl 101

Professor Dunne

22 September 2022

Uncertainty in “The Knowers”

In the text of "The Knowers" by Helen Philips, the main character Ellie defines a choice everyone in her world must make: If they want to know or not know the date of their death. The government somehow claims to have perfected the technology of predicting the end of anybody, and for a small price, they would tell you. This technology is life-changing, and it doesn't only affect Ellie and her husband. It gives everyone insight into their lives, letting them know their fate. The outcome of Ellie's life was changed because her decisions, mood, and relationships were affected by her becoming a Knower. This knowledge is what eventually led to her death.

Ellie's life was changed forever from the moment she became a Knower. The moment she got the date of her death, it was the only thing she could think about; she stated: "April 17th, 2043: a tattoo inside my brain" (Philips). Using this, the government completely changed her outlook on life. Her every movement and thought was supposedly leading her up to a date that a simple government machine could easily predict. The device is portrayed as an ATM in an old bureaucratic office with pale yellow walls. Everything used to describe this building was negative, to build a distrust or suspicion of this process. An example of this is the quote, "Pale yellow walls that either smelled like urine or brought it so strongly to mind that one's own associations created the odor …the archaic infrastructure rots away beneath our feet… about the humming machine that looked like a low-budget ATM (could they really do no better?)." (Philips). It's never once stated how they gained this technology or why, only that the government will provide it to you for a low price.

Becoming a knower changed her life in many ways. One way that it had a significant effect is on her relationships. The tension in their household grew immensely From the moment she got home after going to the bureaucratic office. Tem was immediately distraught and shaken, not knowing what to do or say, whether he would want to know or not. This is especially shown by the fact that one of the first things Tem said to Ellie when she got back was, "Fuck you," he said. "I'm sorry, but fuck you" (Philips). It made him extremely upset to the point where he didn't even want to know about it. Since he was told the date of her death (April 17th), every time the date came around, she could see a change in how Tem looked at her. She could see both "Tenderness and Fury" (Philips) in his eyes. These little things she noticed about him in her life are used to show a change in her life and further emphasize the effects of her "Knowing."

Knowing can also be assumed that it affected her relationship with her children. They were hardly brought up throughout the story, perhaps to show that an effect on her was dissociation, as they were hardly a part of her life story. An example of this is: "no one noticed that I wasn't cheering or exclaiming. The child I'd miss by four months. The ache was vast, vast. I couldn't speak. I watched them, their hugs and high-fives, as though from behind a glass wall" (Philips). As shown in this quote, it clearly affected her relationships and how she interacted with people. Knowing, in a way, took away control of her life and placed her in a glass box as a mere observer of something that, in the end, she had no control over anymore.

Another effect on her that knowing had was her major life choices. Knowing gave her many more opportunities than she had before. She knew when she had to fear death. It made her do things she usually wouldn't have, like in the quote: "I'd gone to the grocery store during times of quarantine. I'd volunteered at the hospital, driven in blizzards, ridden roller coasters so rickety Tem wouldn't let the kids on them" (Philips). This affected the outcome of her life in many ways. For example, since she knew she would live until her given death date, Ellie avoided going to a place where she would've died if she hadn't known. Or perhaps the opposite, On the day of her death, the choices she made because she knew could have possibly been different than those if she didn't, which could have led her to her death.

Another thing that altered the course of Ellie's life from knowing is her mood and how it affected her everyday thinking. Her mood fluctuates and changes throughout the story from denial, regret, happiness, and sadness. All of which would have been different if she had never become a Knower. These emotions made her think differently about every situation. An example is this quote: "In those early years, I'd sink into a black mood come mid-April. I'd lie in bed for a couple of days, clinging to the sheets, my heart a big swollen wound" (Philips). This suggests that knowing affected her emotions due to the fact that if she hadn't known, she would not have been sad every April. This furthers the idea that her death was changed because she decided to become a Knower by showing that Knowing itself also changed parts of her life.

Another way she was changed after Knowing was through her mental health. She was constantly stressing over this date, and It recurred in her mind every minute of every day. It drove her to denial, insanity. According to this quote, we can see how it made her feel as she felt her impending doom was closing in upon her: "I stood there in the bathroom, hunched over the sink, clinging to the sink, staring at my face in the mirror until it no longer felt like my face. This would develop into a distasteful and disorienting but addictive habit over the course of the next three and a half months" (Philips). Becoming a Knower also could have affected her ways not shown throughout the text, perhaps through self-harm, or lack of eating, due to the stress and fear she was facing of this upcoming date.

Knowing completely changed Ellie's life once she learned of her death date. A simple machine created by the government could change the course of Ellie's life and possibly many others. The government's motives and reasoning for giving out this technology are unknown, As well as how they were able to create it. No one knows the true meaning behind what it is. All we know is that learning about her death date could have been the thing that led her to it. If she had not known about her death date in the first place, she would have lived a very different life.

Her relationships would have been entirely different. Also, she would have been more present in her everyday life without being so preoccupied. Her choices would have been different, as she wouldn't know when or not to fear death. Ellie's mood would have changed completely, as she would not have been randomly sad, troubled, or depressed. She would have had improved mental health, not worrying about one day in the far future forever. These things combined changed Ellie's and many others' lives. This proves that "knowing" changes everything, giving away the control of their fate to that pale, yellow bureaucratic office.

Works Cited

Helen Philips. “The Knowers” Rpt. in *The Carolina Reader*, edited by Nicole Plyler Fisk and

Kathleen Carroll, 2022.