

## **Writing Reality**

Why Authors do Very Bad Things and Go Mad

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Drunks, drug addicts, and madmen. No, I am not talking about criminals, I am talking about writers. Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, Hunter S. Thompson... all went crazy and killed themselves. To be a writer, seemingly, is a dangerous vocation. The question is: why? Is it their perilous proximity to reality, or the need to live in the moment in order to access it in the first place? In this essay I will explore what it means to be a writer. I will examine both the differences and commonalities between narrative and lived experiences from the 'Standard View' that there is a dualism between the two, to the critique of that view, referred to as the 'Revised View', which maintains that stories are created out of pre-existing narratives.

### **The Standard View**

Writers of the Standard can be viewed as essential to maintain a functioning society, the former adopting vocations such as personal organizer, doctor, physicist, and of course, therapist.

#### *Writer as Personal Organizer*

The writer brings the order of narrative to the chaos of lived experience. This Standard View of the relationship between stories and life is expressed in Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending*, in which he writes that "in making sense of the world we feel a need to experience that concordance of beginning, middle, and end which is the essence of our explanatory fictions."<sup>1</sup> In other words, reality exists as chaos and writers structure it into separate and complete narratives to make sense out of that chaos. These narratives are constructed into series of events (plot) with a clear beginning and a clear end, thus organizing a world lacking in such a comforting structure.

It can, of course, be argued that life can only be compartmentalized when one looks back. Baby-books, scrap-books, and photo-albums; organizing one's life is a way of living. And when life still becomes confusing or overwhelming we find ourselves on Freud's couch retelling the drama of our lives until it is rearranged into manageable narratives "that was a dark chapter of my life" we confide. "Now I'll start a new one, a better one" we claim. We create these fictions about our lives to make sense of them, but this is not our true experience.

Life, as we know through many a self-indulgent, self-published novel, does not necessarily make a good story. However, it seems the only way to go forward (existing within

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<sup>1</sup> Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending*. p. 37

the norms of society) when living an existence with no definitive meaning or purpose. Kermode sums this up nicely: “it is not that we are connoisseurs of chaos, but that we are surrounded by it, and equipped for co-existence with it only by our fictive powers.”<sup>2</sup>

He purposes that it is the simple ‘first there was A, then there was B, followed by C’ sequence that is so satisfying in a world of confusion. “Simple fictions,” he writes “are the opium of the people.”<sup>3</sup> One could argue that these “simple fictions” that give our lives meaning are the religions of the world, and that when Karl Marx declared that “religion is the opium of the masses”<sup>4</sup> he was talking about the reassuring structure of religious narrative. In modern day, I believe, it is television that is the opiate of the masses (rough day at work and the first thing we do when we get home is turn on our favorite sit-com).

### *Writer as Family Doctor*

Thus, writer can be seen as physician, and the structure of the narratives they create as prescribed sedatives to calm against the fear of meaninglessness. The ancient Greeks understood the disordered reality out of which writers construct their narratives as the natural human condition of suffering. Though they may not have believed that there is a reason why we suffer or an answer to the question of why the world is the way it is, to them, the quest for one was a necessary survival technique; an antidote to insanity, if you will. According to Aristotle, storytelling was an ideal platform for this pursuit. The theatre played an important role within Greek society, much as television and film does within ours today.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses the importance of mimesis, or the “imitation of an action.”<sup>5</sup> Through mimesis we have the ability to transcend the act of representing things as they are, and represent things as they ought to be. Consequently, plays have the power to take the wrongs of the world that come about through its chaotic nature, and bring justice to them. In other words, the writer of those plays has the power to consign moral values along with a sense of closure to an otherwise cruel and senseless universe. Stephen Halliwell writes “successful

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<sup>2</sup> Kermode, Frank. *Sense of an Ending*. p. 14

<sup>3</sup> Kermode, Frank. *Sense of an Ending*. p. 15

<sup>4</sup> Marx, Karl. *The Communist Manifesto*, 1985. p. 108

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle. *Poetics*. p. 11

mimesis is significant in Aristotle's eyes... because it fulfills man's potential to understand reality by reconstituting it in some of the materials over which he has control.”<sup>6</sup>

Emotion is one of those things over which we have little control, once arisen, it can exist as an overwhelming force with seemingly no limits. According to Aristotle, the imaginary scenarios of the theatrical play offer a means of elevating ourselves of such excess emotion and, thus, controlling our actions in the real world. Here, the writer's role in society is clearly to facilitate the expulsion of our excess emotions. A perfect example of this is the purging of the soul “with pity and fear”<sup>7</sup> which is Aristotle's description of catharsis as it functions within a tragic narrative. Basically, Aristotle is saying, watch (or read about) a guy gouging his own eyes out because he slept with his mother and killed his father<sup>8</sup> and you won't feel the need for such violence and immoral behavior in your own life. Here the Aristotelian understanding is, again, medical in nature, and the writer's prescription can be likened to a colon cleansing for the soul.

### *Writer as Physicist*

So the writer delves into the world of chaos and creates order from it in the form of narratives with a beginning, middle, and end, as well as plays an essential role as mediator of our chaotic emotions. But, as if this is not enough, the writer of the Standard View not only takes from reality, but influences it when their fictions turn myth, as a result writing reality as we know it.

In *Sense of an Ending*, Kermode argues that “fictions generate into myths whenever we actually believe them... that is whenever they're not consciously held to be fictive.”<sup>9</sup> A perfect example of can be found, again, in religious texts. It is widely believed by scholars of the Judeo-Christian tradition such as Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, and Morton Smith, that many of the stories of the Bible were borrowed directly from Babylonian narratives, particularly the creation story of Genesis and the great flood in Noah's Arc. Even within the New Testament, elements of the story of Jesus' birth, the miracles performed by him, and his resurrection can all be found in myths belonging to other Mesopotamian cultures. Most likely when written they were

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<sup>6</sup> Halliwell, Stephen. p. 54

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle. *Poetics*. p. 18

<sup>8</sup> Sophocles. *Oedipus the King*.

<sup>9</sup> Kermode, Frank. *Sense of an Ending*. p. 69

understood to be fiction, and were used to illustrate the importance of Jesus and thus liken him to other great heroes of the antiquities such as Adonis, Perseus, Odysseus, and Gilgamesh.

As we know, these fictions have become myth over the last two thousand years. People who believe these stories to be true, who read the Bible literally, live out their lives in the reality created by these ancient writers. A good modern example of this can be found in the religion of Scientology. It is rumored that the founder of the religion, L. Ron Hubbard, who was first a science fiction writer, created the religion because of a bet. The belief system, which was first a fiction from his imagination (including revelations about aliens!) is now perceived as truth by thousands and has made billions of dollars. That was a writer who knew what he was doing.

### *Writer as Therapist*

L. Ron Hubbard, Karl Marx, and the writers of the Bible are not the only writers who have given meaning to the lives of the masses. All writers do this whether they realize it or not. Paul Ricoeur makes this case in *The Conflict of Interpretation: Essays in Hermeneutics* “we make meaning out of the world by making stories about it.”<sup>10</sup> This may be where our desire for leaving behind a legacy after death originates. Kermode proposes that this attempt to subvert the end makes the middle of our life story tolerable. In other words, if we have accomplished something great or contributed to society in some way then we will be remembered, and if this memory lives on then our lives will not be over after all. More importantly, our lives will have not been in vain. This is most likely why so many people write auto-biographies. The narrative of our lived experience left for future generations to read gives a meaning and purpose to our existence.

In Walter Kaufmann’s *Tragedy and Philosophy* he summarizes Plato’s insight that small children are attracted to puppet shows, older children to comedies, people in general to tragedy, and old men are drawn to epic poems. This is because the different developmental stages of our lives correspond to the progress we make towards our quest for meaning. At certain points narratives are simply escapism from the chaos of the world, at others they are a means of controlling our fear of death, and lastly they are the epic quest for meaning. Kermode sums up the role of the poet of the Standard View: “it is expected that they should help us make sense of

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<sup>10</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. *The Conflict of Interpretation: Essays in Hermeneutics*. p. 5

our lives.”<sup>11</sup> Through catharsis the audience can change, through myth the world can change. Literary fictions thus find out about the changing world on our behalf.

Personal organizer, doctor, physicist, and therapist; with all of these pressures and expectations, it's no wonder the writers of the Standard View go off their rocker. This writer leaves reality to delve into the unorganized chaos of the real world, often living outside the norms of society where there are no limits or boundaries to find the truth about reality, define, translate, and structure it into narrative which gives meaning to the lives of the masses.

But if the masses can read them, then the writer must be using a language that they can understand. And if she is using such language, then she must belong to a society that speaks it. And if she was born into to such a society where language already exists then she must have been told stories, taught narratives, learned histories, all before she ever picked up a pen. This is where the Standard View becomes problematic. How can a writer step outside the confines of the narratives that make up their past and future, and experience the world in terms other than through the language which they were taught to experience it as?

### **The Revised View**

The writer of the Revised View speaks the language of audience and is therefore using narratives that she already knows. In other words, she is only re-telling pre-existing narratives and, therefore, assumes roles such as linguist, insider, and (especially) liar.

#### *Writer as Linguist*

In his book *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur writes that “human reality is always mediated by human time, language and narrative.”<sup>12</sup> Wallace Stevens states that “man is made out of words.”<sup>13</sup> By this he means that each word connected to other words. If you doubt this, pick up a dictionary. In this view, the writer is incapable of escaping the confines of language to experience the chaos of reality that the writer of the Standard View makes sense of. The writer of the Revised View writes stories about the story of life. This circular process of creation is

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<sup>11</sup> Kermode, Frank. *Sense of an Ending*. p. 83

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ricoeur. *Time and Narrative*. p. 11

<sup>13</sup> Stevens, Wallace.

summed up by Ricoeur: “Narratives [imagination] and the world [reality] are both upstream and downstream from each other.”<sup>14</sup>

### *Writer as Insider*

The power of the writer in the inescapable lived-experience of language is his interpretive skills. This writer takes all of the narratives that make up the world and tell the audience which ones to believe. They are insiders with insight to the truth and we are outsiders who, as Seymour Chatman points out in *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*, “see but do not perceive.” He continues “Insiders read and perceive, but always in a different sense.”<sup>15</sup>

Kermode discusses writers differing views in *The Genesis of Secrecy*. He argues that narratives are obscure and therefore mean different things to different people; those who are outside, and those who are inside. He explains the unfollowable world as one which the writer: “can travel back and forth at will, divining congruencies, conjunctions, opposites; extracting secrets from its secrecy, making understood relations, an appropriate algebra. This is the way we satisfy ourselves with explanations of the unfollowable world- as if it were a structured narrative, of which more might always be said by trained readers of it, by insiders.”<sup>16</sup>

### *Writer as Liar*

Aliens are among us! The world is ending in three months! Jews are corrupting our society! Some lies are harmless, some are deadly. This is the power that the writer has. Kermode discusses the danger of the writer telling real life events through their own lens. It can even threaten life, or the entire human race, he argues. The Holocaust is an obvious example, but scrutinized to death. I will, therefore, examine the current issue of global warming. Many of those who deny that this is a phenomenon that is taking place are creationists who read the Bible literally. As tsunamis hit, hurricanes ravage, and polar bears starve to death as their habitat melts into the ocean, it is safe to say that this is a lie that is life-threatening to the core.

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<sup>14</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. *The Conflict of Interpretation: Essays in Hermeneutics*. p. 41

<sup>15</sup> Chatman, Seymour. *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. p. 58

<sup>16</sup> Kermode, Frank. *Genesis of Secrecy*. p. 33

Nietzsche proposes that the writer's societal impact corresponds to "how far the opinion is life-furthering, life-preserving, and species-preserving."<sup>17</sup> Kermode looks at the possible negative impact: "[the writer] may be encouraging people who hold the fictive view that death on a large scale is life-furthering and species-preserving."<sup>18</sup> Value systems are just another way of story telling. History is written by winners.

This is where the Revised View becomes problematic. There is a danger in this view where some stories happened and some didn't, but the writer gets to decide whether to tell the truth or a lie. There is, of course a difference between stories and lived experience. The Holocaust happened, Jews were gassed, children murdered. The truth of this matters, if we know about it, we may avoid making the same mistake again, so those victims didn't die in vain. The writer who is also a Holocaust denier can be dangerous. The writer who believes that they were abducted by aliens, less so. In lie vs. truth, there has to be a difference.

If the writer's of the Standard View were off their rocker, the writers of the Revised View have knocked the rocking chair over. Linguist, insider, and liar; these writers have to deal with the sorting their narratives out of a world where everything is connected to everything else, where narrative and lived experience are both "upstream and downstream for each other."<sup>19</sup> If this writer is stuck regurgitating pre-existing narratives to try and make it their own, the only way for them to escape the constructed world and enter the chaos of the world as it truly exists is to enter a state of pure contingency in which each moment is singular and separate from the one before and after it and the only constant is the human body. This state can only be achieved with intensive meditative practices, which generally don't fit in with a writer's lifestyle, or by ingesting large quantities of drugs, often of the hallucinogenic variety. Done too much, this can deprive us of our connection with the past that we need in order to function in the world. This sense of now-ness can lead to an existence without rule, morality, or society. In other words: the loony bin.

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<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Birth of Tragedy*. p. 17

<sup>18</sup> Kermode, Frank. *The Genesis of Secrecy: on the interpretation of narrative*. p. 22

<sup>19</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. *The Conflict of Interpretation: Essays in Hermeneutics*. p. 41



### **The Writer of this Essay's View**

The creation process in the Standard View is simple: the writer thinks it up, makes it up, and then the audience reads it. In the Revised View, however, the writer *is* the audience, simply restating narratives that already exist in new ways. This view contends that authors are unable to separate narrative from lived experience. Either view offers a compelling argument for writer's to go over the edge.

In my opinion, this is because (regardless of the view they prescribe to) the writer has to ask such questions as: what is reality? What is lived experience? What really happened and what did I make up? What was I taught in school that was a fiction? What if history were written by the losers? What is the meaning of life? Why am I here? Why is there something instead of nothing? Why, why, why, why, why.... ?

As the Greeks knew, there is no answer. This can cause writers to become quite frustrated or disappointed. Kermode expresses this sense of disappointment with the lack of an answer by likening the quest for meaning in the world to a book:

“both stand alone before them aware of their arbitrariness and impenetrability, knowing that they may be narratives only because of our impudent intervention, and susceptible of interpretation only through our hermetic tricks.”<sup>20</sup>

It is this circular logic and these unanswerable questions that turn writers to booze and rooms with white padded walls. In fact, I suspect that in writing this essay I have forfeited a little piece of my own sanity. Now that I think of it, I *have* had a shot or two of Writer's Tears Whiskey... I must be a writer.

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<sup>20</sup> Kermode, Frank. *The Conflict of Interpretation: Essays in Hermeneutics*. p. 80

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