

imagine that the sky is beginning to glow, and as it becomes a deeper and deeper red, I catch a faint odor of something beginning to burn.

And I am afraid.

Fiction: Surprise! It's Judgment Day

The stage suggests a cloud bank. Across the length of the stage is a high wall that appears to be of white brick. In the center of the wall is a pair of golden doors, which are closed. Off to the right is a golden throne. Seated on the throne is a figure with white hair and beard. He is wearing a jeweled crown, and his legs are crossed beneath a thick white robe.

Martin enters from the left, rubbing his eyes. He is dressed in a white hospital gown.

MARTIN: Well, I'll be damned. So, the fairy tales were true, after all.

GOD: In a sense.

Martin glances toward the bearded figure and groans.

MARTIN: Go ahead. Tell me you're Saint Peter and make my day.

GOD: Now, now, Professor Martin. Any Sunday school child could do better than that. What would Saint Peter be doing on Heaven's throne?

MARTIN: You're not God?

GOD: I am.

MARTIN: So much for all the theologians' warnings against anthropomorphism.

GOD: Oh, this is just a momentary form, a matter of convenience. Your convenience, I might add. I could have spoken out of a whirlwind or a burning bush. But I felt I owed you a face-to-face confrontation.

MARTIN: Confrontation? That suits me just fine. I wouldn't mind getting a word in before I get the fire and brimstone.

 The CD, Ch. 3, *Surprise! It's Judgment Day*, (1), contains further questions about this story.

GOD: Fire and brimstone? Let's not go jumping to conclusions, shall we? Tell me, what do you think of all this?

MARTIN: Regrettable. And, quite frankly, pretty tacky. The cloud, the throne, the beard. Any hack Hollywood director could have done better. I would have given you more credit.

GOD: But not much.

MARTIN: No, not much.

GOD: Let's just say that I thought this bit of pop religion would put you more at ease. A little joke of mine, though at whose expense I'm not quite sure. But this is not my usual form, I can assure you.

MARTIN: No, you don't exactly look like the Unmoved Mover in that outfit. Saint Thomas Aquinas would have been shocked. Well, now God with a sense of humor. I would have expected you to be more pompous. But no doubt it's gallows humor, and you own the gallows.

GOD: Do you remember how you got here?

MARTIN: Yes, I think so. I remember the car accident. I remember the doctor telling me that I had fractured my skull. I remember being taken into surgery. I suppose the rest of it was like the old joke: I was at death's door and the doctor pulled me through.

GOD: You were quite impressive as you were getting the anesthetic. I believe you muttered some quotation from Robinson Jeffers about there being no harps and habitations beyond the stars. And something from Camus about the benign indifference of the universe. And, oh yes, that line from Socrates: "Eternity is but a single night." As you can see, Professor Martin, eternity is quite well lit.

MARTIN: Go ahead and laugh. I guess you're entitled. But their words have more dignity than yours. Damn it, this shouldn't be true. You know it shouldn't. It defies all reason. A God who displaces humankind from Paradise for exercising an understandable curiosity, who lets himself be crucified to save some, but insists on punishing others eternally, all in the name of some barbaric penal code that he created but claims he must follow—no, it's too absurd.

GOD: What? Are you going to make of me some ranting fundamentalist? It seems you like easy targets.

MARTIN: Are you telling me you're an ecumenicalist? Glimpses of God behind the myths and half-truths of all religions? Well, score one for the

liberal theologians. It doesn't matter. Liberalize yourself all you want. Reason says you shouldn't exist.

GOD: Some philosophers have thought otherwise.

MARTIN: Yes. You had some brilliant defenders—once. But now their arguments are merely historical curiosities. Anselm and Descartes claimed that the definition of a perfect God necessarily implies that He exists. A perfect God lacks nothing and hence does not lack existence. But that line of argument would equally prove the existence of a perfect turtle and a perfect daiquiri. Aquinas, following Aristotle, claimed that reason indicates there must be a First Cause, a First Mover, who created the world, set it in motion, and sustains its existence. But there is nothing obviously false in the idea of a material world that is self-sufficient and has been eternally in motion. You're not going to try to defend those arguments of Anselm and Aquinas, are you?

GOD: No, Professor Martin. Nor will I try to defend the argument that a vast, intricate universe of elegantly formulable laws could not exist without intelligent creation or control. Though I must admit I've always liked that one.

MARTIN: In any case, the issue of design ultimately indicates that a respectable God could not exist: The laws of the universe may be mathematically elegant, but they crush and they kill. No respectable God would allow people to suffer as they do.

GOD: So. We come to the heart of the matter.

MARTIN: Yes, indeed. As a moral assessment, one must say that if this world is designed, it is the work of a bumbler or a sadist. Which, by the way,

GOD: Not quite either, I hope.

MARTIN: But you did design the world?

GOD: Yes, I did. But look here, Professor Martin. I understand your anger, your impulse toward hyperbole. Still, it is hyperbole. What about my celebrated free-will defense? Free will is a great good, a necessary ingredient in the best of all possible worlds. And it would be contradictory for me to give people free will and, at the same time, guarantee that they never use that freedom to cause suffering.

MARTIN: As you must know, it is not an adequate defense. At most, it would only justify the suffering caused by people. It doesn't apply to

the suffering caused by natural events, like diseases, earthquakes, and floods. But, in any case, I don't concede you the free-will defense. Freedom costs too much, it has too many victims. Free will isn't worth the suffering.

GOD: Can you really be so flippant about it? Don't you feel an attraction toward freedom—or at least recognize that another person might? Don't you feel it is an issue about which rational individuals might disagree?

MARTIN: Perhaps. But I still say that freedom isn't worth the suffering. Nonetheless, one still must explain the suffering caused by natural events. If you try to justify it as a punishment for people's misuse of their freedom, then I say that your notion of punishment is barbaric.

GOD: Well, what about what you have called the "virtue defense"? Virtues are good, and a necessary ingredient in the best of all possible worlds. And the idea of virtue in a world without suffering is contradictory. It would be impossible to be courageous where there is no danger, to be generous where it costs nothing, to be sympathetic where no one is hurt.

MARTIN: Even if I conceded that argument, there doesn't have to be so much suffering.

GOD: What? A couple of teaspoons would have sufficed for the grandeur of the drama?

MARTIN: Nevertheless, I don't concede the argument. It turns virtue inside out. It makes virtue good in itself. But reflection shows that virtue is good only as a means—a means to happiness. What is the point of courage, generosity, sympathy, if not to alleviate suffering? To create suffering for the sake of sympathy is like kicking a man in the shins so you can feel sorry for him. It's absurd.

GOD: So if you had been in my place, you would have . . .

MARTIN: Made human beings happy. And left them happy.

GOD: But happiness is so bland.

MARTIN: To the outsider, perhaps. But to the person who is happy, it is sufficient.

GOD: And so you would have created a world without virtue?

MARTIN: Yes. A world in which virtue wasn't necessary.

GOD: And the intellectual virtues? You would discard them as well? The painful, heroic struggle for beauty and knowledge?

MARTIN: Yes, if they must conflict with happiness.

GOD: But they do, do they not? Anyway, if happiness is the good, then anything else becomes superfluous.

MARTIN: Yes.

GOD: Many people would view your values with contempt.

MARTIN: Yes, I understand that. One can look back over the centuries at, say, the Egyptian pyramids and think: This is good; this is where the human race excelled. But a closer look reveals the pain of the slaves who built them, and one should see that this was wrong. One is not entitled to excellence if unwilling people must suffer for it. And, in one way or another, some always do.

GOD: What a utilitarian you are!

MARTIN: Yes. With slight misgivings, but yes. The utilitarian is right, and you are wrong. And we haven't even mentioned hell yet, though I'm sure that we, or rather I, will be getting to that shortly. Hell is an atrocity beyond debate.

GOD: You really do want me to be a fundamentalist, don't you? There is no hell, Professor Martin. The thought of creating it crossed my mind once, but I never took the idea seriously. There was a kind of Hades, or Limbo, once, but I soon gave it up. No, now there is only Paradise.

MARTIN: Knowing you, that should be fun. Probably morning prayers, cold showers, and occasionally Black Plague, to keep us on our toes. But even if it is pleasant, you still have much to answer for. And it is unanswerable. Voltaire, Dostoevsky, and countless others whose views I accept saw that. They wouldn't be put off by your whales and whirlwinds, as Job was. Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov was right: Once one child suffers, this is a botched world, and nothing could ever make it right again.

GOD: Voltaire and Dostoevsky are here, by the way.

MARTIN: Ah! I shall enjoy talking with them. Or, if that is not possible, then listening, anyway.

GOD: There would be some difficulty in that. But to get back to the point that you insist on dramatizing: I do take full responsibility for this world that I've created. And I do not believe that I should have created it differently: The struggle for virtue, beauty, and knowledge: That is what I find most admirable. Though I admit that, as an outsider, I am open to

the accusation that I lack sympathy. However, I find the world interesting just as it is. I shall continue to insist on the spectacle.

MARTIN: The spectacle—yes. Like some Roman emperor.

GOD: As you will. But you're a utilitarian. You believe in the greatest happiness. Shouldn't the happiness of an infinite God weigh heavily on your scales?

MARTIN: So the struggle goes on forever—for your entertainment.

GOD: Not just mine. Don't forget there are many people who don't accept your values. Perhaps I could justify the world as it is, as a concession to them. In any case, human beings may struggle forever, but not each person. An individual struggle that went on forever would lose all meaning and must lead to utter despair or boredom. There must be surcease, reward.

MARTIN: But how can you consistently manage that? There's a lovely little paradox that the believers must confront: If freedom and virtue are the ultimate good, and in turn require suffering, then how could heaven be blissful? Or, if somehow God could manage to create freedom and virtue without suffering, then why didn't God omit the suffering in the first place?

GOD: As I've said, the struggle is good, but it cannot go on forever. So the final result is a compromise between my set of values and yours. Professor Martin, the world is not to your liking, and I apologize for that. I could never convince you that this is the best of all possible worlds, and I shall not really try: But all I have taken from you is, in the words of my lesser poets, a drop of time in the sea of eternity. Don't be so hard on me for that. The rest of time is yours.

God flicks his hand, and the golden doors open slowly. Inside, figures in white hospital gowns walk about, slowly and somewhat mechanically. Martin studies them for several moments.

MARTIN: Their expressions don't change.

GOD: They always smile of course. Why not? They're happy, blissful. Ecstatic, in fact.

MARTIN: But there are just people and clouds. Where's the beauty of it?

GOD: In the eye of the beholder. Or, better, in the mind, since they don't look at much. I could create changing landscapes, I suppose, fill the

surroundings with great art and have beautiful music played. But it would not make any difference. At most, it would serve as a sop to my conscience, and I prefer to know what I do: They're perfectly happy, just as they are, and anything else would be extraneous, irrelevant. They're happy. Just as you shall be in a moment.

MARTIN: They're happy?

GOD: Yes.

MARTIN: And I shall join them?

GOD: Yes.

MARTIN: Wait a moment.

GOD: I don't see the point. We've reached our impasse. I felt that I owed you a chance to have your say, and that I owed you an explanation—even if you did not find it satisfactory.

MARTIN: It looks like death in there.

GOD: In a sense it is, of course. But really, our differences aside, there is not much else one can do with people forever. Would you rather I extinguished you?

MARTIN: No!

GOD: Well, then. By the way, I should tell you that I've enjoyed our talk. I really have. But there are others I must see: It is time for you to go inside now.

MARTIN: No wait!

Martin turns toward God with a panicked, pleading gesture. God points at Martin. Martin's body freezes for a moment, then releases, his arms falling to his sides. On Martin's face is an expression that seems genuinely happy, but unchanging.

GOD: Enter, Martin. Enter.

Martin turns and slowly walks through the gates, which close behind him. God stares thoughtfully toward the gates, shaking his head slightly: A young girl, Katherine, enters from stage left. She, too, is wearing a hospital gown. Upon seeing her, God quickly smoothes his beard and adopts a very dignified posture. Then he smiles at her.

KATHERINE: Oh, Father, is that you?

GOD: Yes, Katherine.

KATHERINE: Oh, Father, you are just as I always imagined you. Then you heard my prayer?

GOD: I always hear.

KATHERINE: And you forgave me?

GOD: Yes.

KATHERINE: Will I live in heaven?

GOD: Yes, my child. Heaven is yours.

At a gesture from God, the gates open again. Martin can be seen walking among the people inside.

KATHERINE: Oh, Father, they are all so happy! Oh, thank you, Father, thank you.

GOD: Bless you, my child.

Katherine rushes toward the gates. Just before she reaches them, God flicks his hand, and she adopts the mechanical walk of the others. The gates close. God lowers his head a bit, as if tired and a little disgusted. He looks up.

GOD: That seems to be all for now. Thank goodness! This place depresses me so.

God gets down from the throne and takes a couple of steps to the right. He stops and removes the crown, tossing it on the seat of the throne, where it lands with a clatter. He exits to the right, unbuttoning his robe.

Questions

1. a. Give two different explanations for what is happening to the narrator in "The Vision."
 - b. Would there be some decisive way to determine which of the two explanations is correct?
2. The vision says that the truth is in the feeling. In which way does feeling guide the narrator in the first part of the story? In the second part of the story?
3. How would you have reacted if you'd been in the narrator's place?
4. In "Surprise! It's Judgment Day," what is the complaint that Martin is bringing against God?