

Self Purgatory

From the beginning of time, there has been opposition in all things. Life accompanied by death, Cain betraying Abel, a day smothered by night. So for every hero there is a Hitler, a Moriarty, or a dystopia. This is truth in both literature and reality, for a story without opposition is best untold because it lacks realism and is void of purpose. Daily trials come, and people have engraved the belief of happily ever after into their souls. To feed this hope, they watch movies or read novels that hold the realism of their, but the controlled fantasy they yearn for. But not everything ends to our heart's content, and it is often times the stories that end without sound resolve, the stories that end with our own heart in turmoil and conflict, that force use to realize some truth. Tim O'Brien, in *The Things They Carried*, provided the guidelines for which we should judge a story:

“If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil.”

It is thus seen that evil should not only be encountered in a story, but the whole focus. Evil does not leave, it thrives and consumes, it is reality and it is truth. And true evil isn't prominent; it is hidden and subtle, only revealing itself when it is too late for escape.

If evil is subtle and ensnares slowly, it must have an origin. And evil comes in many forms to one person as it does differently to another. There is the obvious evil in murder, but

even that can be justified as in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* when twin brothers, Pablo and Pedro Vicario, murder Santiago Nasar to regain their sister's honor. Culture after all demanded restitution. Or in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as Macbeth is celebrated as a war hero—celebrated for the murder of many men—but then turned evil when he murdered the king—one man. So is murder always evil, or just a symptom of corruption that begins within?

Evil is relative but corruption is measurable, and it is only measurable in the standard to one's past self. The question becomes no longer what or who constitutes as evil, but what is corruption and who is corruptible? Corruption is the distortion of someone from a pure state, or really from their old state, to a state they had previously decided not to be. It is the concept that we become what we hate most; we become a part of what we try to escape. It is Winston's realization that he "had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother." He loved the entity he had so ferociously loathed and fought the whole novel through. It is Leah Price recognizing her Father in herself, and it is Nathan's self condemnation. In all cases, previous and dominant beliefs are established in their own hearts, and corruption led them to betraying those very things that had shaped and defined their identity.

Taking into consideration the subtle nature of corruption, we must assume that it grows from a seed self nourished. Planted by an outside force, we try to become "the innocent flower, but be[come] the serpent under't." Betrayal stems from the subconscious, but roots into reality. We deny its presence but feed it daily and the question becomes why? Someone does not set out to wholly alter their identity, but rather a seed is planted that leads them to betraying their own nature; a parasitic seed of guilt, of fear, of desire to escape, and of pride, a seed that only breeds a flower to death.

Guilt is a corrosive trap that many fall captive to. Guilt is a feeling that demands personal restitution. It is Nathan Price's obsession to bring salvation unto others in an effort to recompense the men whose deaths in the war he blames himself for. His wife Orleanna recounted: "His first words to me were to speak how fiercely he felt the eye of God upon him." He could not have stopped himself from getting hurt and left behind as his overzealous commander led the rest of the unit to their deaths, but still he blamed himself and his own guilt feigned as the judgment of God. Guilt made him blind. He could not see the Congolese people as they were but only as savages needed to be christened, and he could not see the desperation in his family's eyes, not even when his youngest daughter was killed by snakebite. And it was at that moment, while she was in a casket and he, instead of mourning, seized the opportunity to baptize Congolese children, it could be seen how corrupted he had let himself become. For Lady Macbeth corruption was seen the moment she was introduced in Macbeth. She discovered in a letter that Macbeth would be King but she doubted his ability to go through with the act of murdering the King to get his position. He was not man enough so she had to be, and in this decision she cried: "Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, and fill me from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty!" Though at that moment it seemed she did it out of selfish desire to become a queen, later Macbeth mentions something that reveals an ulterior motive. She was barren. There would never be a son for Macbeth to continue his name and she was to blame. So to continue his legacy he needed to be King to have his name ring through history. She failed him as a mother so she would make him have success. She was corrupted not by her desire to be queen, not even for Macbeth to be King, but to ease the guilt she suffered from.

Fear is penetrating as guilt is corrosive. Guilt is slow and tears at your soul whereas fear is quick and callously cuts deep within. Macbeth killed the King but there was still hope he had not completely lost his identity and that corruption was minor. But then he let fear seep in. Banquo was his friend from the beginning, a friend he had fought many battles alongside. But after killing the King Macbeth admits to himself: "To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus: our fears in Banquo stick deep, and in his royalty of nature reigns that which would be feared." He feared Banquo would reveal his secret and fulfill the prophesy that his children would be Kings. It was when Macbeth arranged for his friend's murder that we knew he was too deeply corrupted. For the soldiers of "The Things They Carried," fear influenced them in a different manner. In the darkness of the battlefield, they didn't fear the enemy, they feared their imagination. Imagination is where fear derives. They didn't fear death but imagination's portrait of an empty nothingness beyond the veil of life. They feared the means of death their imagination chose to explore. For them it was the anticipation, the knowing of the inevitable. These soldiers carried with them the ghosts of the past and the phantoms of what might be. They could escape the enemy in battle but not the enemy within.

Escape is a cycle that leads to obsession. It is a corrupting force felt by both Leah Price and Angela Vicario in parallel manners. First the desire to escape arose, then some sort of self-inflicted change, and last obsession and corruption. Leah loved her father, seeing him as truth and wanting only his approval. But she never received his affection. She found herself under his criticizing eye only to realize he was not the truth she wanted or believed in. She rebelled. Her faith had been broken and she would take no more. Nathan had told her not to join the hunt and she defied him conceitedly. The next day she purged herself with the blood of her kill, and her obsession became truth—which she found to be in Anatole the school teacher and politician. But

later on in her life she realized a part of her was much like her father. She had kept his hard hearted stubbornness she had fought so hard to escape. Angela sought escape from her mother and the expectations of women (something Leah also defied). Bayardo came and she was engaged. But she had the secret of her lost virginity. She sought to escape the dishonor that would come the night she was wed, but when that night came, she ceased to fear. She could have used the “tricks” other women had taught her to fake virginity, but she chose not to and was returned to her family to be beaten by her mother and to add dishonor to her family. She hated her mother but illogically became obsessed with Bayardo. Her mother had told her “Love can be learned” and it was. She had escaped but ended up by obsession to be the house wife her mother raised her to be. Both Leah and Angela had become part of what they had sought so desperately to escape.

From the beginning of time it was never a question of good and evil, but of choice. First there was ignorance, then knowledge, and then corruption. And corruption didn't come from a serpent in a tree, but from the agency of man. From guilt and fear, to escape and pride, it is all a choice. But choices add up, not in tally marks of good and bad, but in piles that slowly build to define and reshape identity. Do we build upon the values we hold dear and true? Or do we rationalize choices that go against the identity already built? Evil is something we recognize, an external enemy, but corruption is different. With every choice it seeks its gain, always inviting and ever patient, but even it we cannot blame. At the source of all corruption, it can be found that we are our greatest enemy.

Plan:

What is evil?

Corruption

Corruption=betrayal of self

The ways we betray ourselves

-guilt

-fear

-imagination

-escape

-pride

What we become and who we could've been

Nathan-war guilt

salvation

Lady Macbeth-legacy guilt

Legacy/weak

Angela-guilt from abandonment

Bayardo

Leah and Angela parallels

Truth/father's stubbornness

Orleanna-guilt for Ruth May

Adah

Things they carried-imagination and experiences. Guilt one character had for another's death.

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