

## The Incompetence of Language & The Incompetence of Truth

The specific way in which language and being verbal fails a human being is a complicated and complex thing to describe. When someone searches for the words to convey how they feel and don't always use words or perfect linguistics to describe the feeling to themselves, they are often only using words to express themselves to another person, as a form of communication instead of a form of understanding. One does not have to clarify and simplify one's thoughts to fit it into the confines of a word- one just simply understands. Language is a barrier of human understanding and the best way to bridge that gap is with patience and learning how to best communicate when all the words you know don't seem to do justice to what's in your head.

In *The Things They Carried*, a Vietnam War memoir by Tim O'Brien, O'Brien uses dreamy storytelling and a running monologue about his craft to both highlight and avoid the gaps in his language that fall short of the experience. He describes stories as "for those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for an eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story" (O'Brien 38). O'Brien often uses storytelling as a sort of code for tactile experiences. When all the words fail him, the things he cannot remember, he remembers how it *felt*. Maybe he remembers textures, maybe he remembers physical pain, or maybe he just remembers flashes that ran through his mind and it all ties together into a story, not words. The story is how he fits his understanding into words and that is the significance of his storytelling- it's the best way to share his human understanding of what happened to him.

In *Slaughterhouse Five*, Kurt Vonnegut's response to the firebombing of Dresden, it is the words that he does not say that the true meaning of his message comes. Because there are not words to describe the alienation of the war, the story diverges to things that seem random and unimportant. The fact that Vonnegut never describes the war and the firebombing to its fullest illustrates the moment when his words failed. However, using the Tralfamdorians and other seemingly unimportant events, he has illustrated effectively how the war has interrupted Billy Pilgrim's life and how war will continue to interrupt all life.

Language is imprecise and can often be cruel when it is unyielding or easily misunderstood, but it is the easiest way to make a connection with another human being. Eventually, if you establish a strong enough connection, the words become only a trapping for the meaning beneath and the subtext of the conversation is often enough for a person to nearly match the thoughts in your head, merely because they know you and your behavior so well. However, the true goal of communication seems to be complete and total understanding of a person's true being- a total immersion of the senses in their senses and a complete understanding of what they think about- and that can never be done, therefore words will often be inadequate and frustrate those who use them.

The difference between a truth and a lie seem easy to detect, especially to the young who see things in black and white. However, when a person gets older and examines the exact nature of truth more closely, they discover a world of half-truths, misinterpretation, and the tangle of human perception and truth. They learn that a lot of what is considered truth about human nature is merely accepted truth and cannot truly be measured or even defined. In Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*,

the narrator closely examines truth through a murder in his town and William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* examines similar themes through the journey of a family across rural Mississippi. The writing of Faulkner and Garcia Marquez reveal that truth of a situation does not always reveal everything that humans are trying to communicate.

The structure is an unusual feature in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. The order in which information is presented to the reader is not only a plot device, but also a literary device utilized to add layers of understanding and make a comment on human perception and truth. The novel is structured in a circular pattern, constantly going back to the death of Santiago Nasar, while adding details and contradictions to the many layers along the way. The final statement about perception is that layers of memory can be used to cover up public shame and guilt and entire groups of people can use memory as a tool to forget their responsibility as humans. However, some people remember things differently as part of a conscious psychological mechanism so that they "forget" the most upsetting and incriminating details so that they do not have to suffer the mental and emotional consequences at hand. An example of this is when Colonel Aponte believes he is completely in the right and has already saved Santiago's life when, "the truth is that he didn't think of Santiago Nasar again until he saw him on the docks" (Marquez 57). Instead, by not warning Nasar, he denies the truth of the situation and contributes to Nasar's death by not telling him what would happen to him. The order of the narrative shows how perception can be warped and distorted by humans and shows the damaging effects of denying a part of what actually happened. All of the people involved get stuck in one particular mode of thought and get stuck dwelling on what happened because they have blocked out so much of the truth of what actually happened from their memories.

This becomes their truth, though it is not the complete truth. The contradictions do not serve to find the truth, but show at what point both the search for truth and the truth itself actually fail. The last sentence in the novel is, "Then he went into his house through the back door that had been open since six and fell on his face in the kitchen" (Marquez 120). This illustrates the failure of truth because the truth is that Santiago Nasar died and no one in his town intervened and stopped it from happening. The town, and the reader at some points, becomes distracted with the search for the minor truths surrounding his death that they become distracted from the real truth. In the conclusion of the novel, it becomes evident that the narrator did not find all the truths surrounding Nasar's death and the town has not accepted the real truth, thus illustrating that truth is inexact. Also, the contradictions reveal that each person in the town has his own idea of the little truths that surround Nasar's death, such as if it was raining or where he was before the murder actually occurred. Because they accept these as the truth and there is no uniform, the investigator is never sure of all the details surrounding Nasar's death, illustrating the failure of truth as well as how truth does not accurately communicate the entire scope of human understanding.

Faulkner also uses the structure of his novel as a trap to capture the truth. He uses different perspectives in order to find the truth of a situation and does not choose only one narrator's perspective. The reader finds comfort in his most uniform narrator, Darl. However, though the reader is most comfortable with Darl, Faulkner makes the reader question Darl's legitimacy as a narrator when he is transported to a mental institution at the end of the novel. Darl's stream of consciousness reads, "Darl is our brother, our brother Darl. Our brother Darl is in a cage in Jackson where, his grimed hands lying light

in quiet interstices, looking out he foams” (Faulkner 254). By making the narrator the reader trusts be the most mentally unstable, Faulkner is making a statement about the ease of accepted truth and how perception cannot be accepted as the complete truth. However, while he mixes up the reader’s perceptions and makes them question what they accept as truth, he also gives total truth that makes little sense such as Vardaman’s insistence that “[his] mother is a fish” (Faulkner 84). While Faulkner does not mean to imply that Vardaman perceives his mother as a literal fish, he is saying that Vardaman accepts the truth of death in this way, even though most people would not accept his interpretation of death as the truth. The structure of *As I Lay Dying* is similar to *Chronicle* in the way that it also circles back to events, merely because it is written entirely in the style of internal monologue. However, in this structure, there is always a change in perception and a quest to find what is closest to- if not- the truth. The contradictions also reveal the basic failure of truth. Because Faulkner offers the opportunity to immerse one’s self totally in the character, it is revealed that each has accepted his own truth, individual of each other, and it is hard for them to change their own truths to match someone else’s. This is a failure because if not everyone accepts one specific truth, then there is no universal truth and it can never be measured or accurately represented.

Faulkner and Marquez touch on the quest for truth and find that no truth is definite and the truth of a situation is not always the best or most accurate way to represent the situation. Both authors use untraditional and nonlinear structure to show the reader the layers of truth in human understanding. Human understanding of truth involves a lot of complex things including the emotion attached with memories and

communication and the way in which each person perceives a situation. The truth will never be enough to appease human beings. Human nature requires us to look for *more* than the truth surrounding everything that we do.

When words fail, the truth of a situation is never accurately represented. Part of the struggle of human existence is trying to describe the truth of your life and in order to have a fulfilling modern life, you must expect that you will never describe the truth of your situation-or the greater human situation as a whole- but you should spend your life trying to get as close as possible