

# Story, Not Narrative

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Abstract: A story educates morally, both involving readers emotionally and engaging the mind through analogy. The idea of “constructed narratives”—propaganda contrived in despair of intelligible truth—interprets the revelation of truth through story as mere angling for power. Rene Girard and his interpreter Gil Bailie recognize that the mechanism behind this competitive contempt for truth-telling springs from a “sovereign self,” so alienated and unstable as to fear any sort of control exercised by others, even benevolent teaching or friendly example. Hostility to family connections, especially parenthood, haunts the increasingly common, atomized sovereign selves of our culture. Story intended as truth-telling art rather than power narrative can nevertheless break through by its immediacy, allowing rational truth an opening that evades the fear. A short story about abortion, by Ernest Hemingway, provides one classroom-tried example; other classic literature offers similar opportunities.

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LET ME TELL YOU A STORY; I'll contrast it to constructing a narrative, in the twenty-first century sense involving suspicion of coherent accounts of history or the human condition.<sup>1</sup> The story first:

Israel's king David stays in Jerusalem during a war. From his roof walk one afternoon, he sees a woman bathing—Bathsheba, the wife of his soldier Uriah. She's beautiful; he summons her. Pretty soon, she sends him a message: he has gotten her pregnant. He calls Uriah away from the war with an excuse about gathering intelligence. Three times David tries to get Uriah to sleep with his wife, even getting him drunk; but Uriah is too disciplined for that. So David sends a message to his general: order Uriah into a battle situation that he can't survive. The general obeys; Uriah is killed. David marries Bathsheba, who joins his harem of half a dozen wives. She bears David a son.

The prophet Nathan then speaks to David: “‘There were two men in a certain city, one rich and one poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his morsel, and drink of his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared it for the man who had come to him.’ Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, ‘As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he has done this thing, and because he had no pity.’”

Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man’” (RSV 2 Sam 12:1–7).

David recognizes the evil. He accepts the shame and the Lord's punishment. Like David, a story's audience must develop humility and good will, as C.S. Lewis says, “entering fully into the opinions, and therefore also the attitudes, feelings and total experience, of other men [to] learn from them. . . . like an honest examiner, who is prepared to give the highest marks to

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<sup>1</sup> James E. Caron, “The Quantum Paradox of Truthiness: Satire, Activism, and the Postmodern Condition” *Studies in American Humor*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Special Issue: *American Satire and the Postmodern Condition* (2016), pp. 153-181, p. 154.

the telling, felicitous and well-documented exposition of views he dissents from or even abominates.”<sup>2</sup> Stories evoke emotional experience; David sympathizes with the owner of the pet lamb, who represents Uriah. Yet story also calls rationality into play; once his sympathies are properly aroused, David can recognize himself as the rich oppressor and disapprove of his own actions. The intellectual essence of story is seeing likeness: “Thou art the man.”

A story called David out of himself, revealing a truth hidden by egotism. Stories differ from what is now called “constructing a narrative.” The word *narrative* is more general than *fiction*; it includes accounts of facts. Constructed narratives presume the inaccessibility, irrelevance, or nonexistence of truth; indifferent to self-consistency, they often deny rationally accessible experience. Stories work by analogy, like science or medicine: because coal miners breathe like canaries, a dead coalmine canary means the miners are in trouble. Analogy fails without self-consistency in the things being compared. I can compare the driving distances between two cities here and two cities in Iceland—but not if a volcano in Iceland is continuously changing the shape of the land. Today’s corruption of “narrative” includes unprovable claims such as “trans women are women.” The shifting identity allows “transgender” rapists to be imprisoned as women, raping and impregnating prisoners.<sup>3</sup>

In *The Apocalypse of the Sovereign Self*, Gil Bailie observes, “We live today in a world where the word *truth* has been largely replaced by the word *narrative*.”<sup>4</sup> Justice Anthony Kennedy enshrined self-construction into law

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, ed. Marcia Brooks, Stephen Hutcheson et. al. (Faded Page eBook #20140725, posted July 22, 2014) <http://www.pgdpcanada.net>, 86–87.

<sup>3</sup> For two examples out of many: Calvin Freiburger, “Ex-prison guard speaks out against California allowing ‘transgender’ sex offenders in women’s prisons” *LifeSiteNews*, Thu May 9, 2024 - 2:55 pm EDT <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/ex-prison-guard-california-transgender-sex-offenders-womens-prisons/>; Raymond Wolfe, “California’s transgender policies led to sexual assaults, harassment of female prisoners, lawsuit says,” *LifeSiteNews*, Thu Nov 18, 2021 - 9:46 pm EST.

<sup>4</sup> Gil Bailie, *The Apocalypse of the Sovereign Self: Recovering the Christian Mystery of Personhood* (New York: Angelico Press, 2023), 41.

as a “right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe and of the mystery of human life.”<sup>5</sup> Since *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, waves of fashion and hysteria have crumbled the seawalls of reason and truthfulness, egregiously in defiance of biology. Babies’ humanity can be denied if mothers or medical profiteers consider them salable fertility or experimental material—or just label them unwanted. *Logos*, reasoned argument, has eroded from under science and medicine, collapsing public trust. With physical human relationships redefined, incest cannot be reprehended.<sup>6</sup> Political alliances redefine murder and arson.<sup>7</sup> Moral freedom suffers when “sincerity lapses into indeterminacy” (Bailie, 163). A free choice cannot be made based upon delusions or deliberate lies—but “Lying is a result of different social worlds” (Bailie, 163). Rene Girard observed how unstable selfhood undermines the idea of truth; it manifests mimetic impulses with no rational curb.

Bailie explains Girard’s work about necessary human imitative instincts. Children eat what their parents eat; they enjoy, and fear, walk and speak by imitation. Imitation dominates all human social life, as much as physical needs. Children must imitate parents, or they won’t survive; but similar power invests whoever directs my desires. Teaching and leading are fun. In good friendships, friends lead each other, each gratifying the other by affirming what his friend enjoys. Trouble comes when we compete for those things—or, more perilously, for the pleasure of being the leader. Small children don’t compete with their parents; no one competes with people obviously far stronger or more skilled. Little Leaguers would feel honored to play a professional team, and not disappointed to lose. Losing to another team

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<sup>5</sup> Anthony Kennedy, *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Lizzie Dearden, “German ethics council calls for incest between siblings to be legalised by Government,” *Independent*, Wednesday 24 September 2014 15:45 BST, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/german-ethics-council-calls-for-incest-between-siblings-to-be-legalised-by-government-9753506.html>

<sup>7</sup> Both arson and murder were famously redefined as “mostly peaceful protests” on CNN during the Black Lives Matter riots of 2020. James S. Robbins, “Rioting is beginning to turn people off to BLM and protests while Biden has no solution,” <https://www.timesonline.com/story/opinion/2020/09/02/riots-turning-many-away-social-justice/5682852002/>

in their league would bother them. We compete with people at our own level. But what if we consider everyone at our level everywhere—everyone a rival, or a threat?

The pleasure of leading can incite an envious desire to always be the originator of others' desires. The status of being a trend-setter can overwhelm the desire for mere things. Trendsetters must somehow stand out and be recognized; they depend on followers' affirmations. Public opinion gains veto power over one's deepest sense of worth. Like a child in his abortive mother's womb, the person is defined by others' opinions. It is terrifying to such a fragile ego to be held to a standard that others can hold them to: "Don't be girlish!" "Respect your parents!" "Your children are your responsibility!" "Be loyal to your country!"

It is both easy and miserable to base one's self-understanding on others' esteem. To preserve sovereignty, or at least the cherished illusion of controlling one's own preferences, the sovereign self frantically insists that people recognize personal claims less accessible to observation than a private religious revelation (Bailie, 163, 82). Laws against the new crime of "misgendering" evidence with what desperate rage the accusers defend fragile other-defined self-images. "[T]raumatized by the least questioning of their mimetically acquired convictions about identity," they sincerely believe that they are erased by pronouns that don't affirm their biologically false self-definitions (Bailie, 149). They feel they will lose their very being if they do not scorn tradition and knowledge proven over millennia. Stories are one repository of that wisdom.

Traditional cultural wisdom directs desires productively; rejecting tradition fuels uncertainty and rivalry. Mistrust erupts everywhere: maybe "equal justice under law" is just an oppressor's slogan; maybe doctors are evil fatphobes. Academic truth claims must be masks for power narratives. Irrational accusations attack factual history and cancel experimental observation. What Bailie calls "white-coated and white-collar nihilists" practice "soft nihilism of expanding 'rights' to behavior formerly thought mad, perverted or dishonest, and sell destructive medical procedures in the name of 'personal freedom'" (Bailie, 243). Rejecting these narratives evokes not an appeal to truth but enraged personal opposition—because the only authority is a rival will, not a stable standard.

The resulting “imitative hostility” (Girard, 65–68) begets “social alienation fitfully—and all too temporarily—relieved by the fire and faux solidarity of collective animosity and mob violence” (Baillie, 7), often masked as a “splurge of altruism which absolves one of all personal responsibility” (Baillie, 185). The claims to altruism are false, but they do demonstrate that human psychology goes beyond mimesis. Humans universally praise and blame. We crave plausible justification. Girard gave the name of “myths” to constructed narratives that justify hostility against a competitor—or the random victim who focuses a mob’s rage.<sup>8</sup> Rather than inhabiting the scapegoat’s point of view as well as the attacker’s, a myth—now called a narrative—tells people what to feel, whom to condemn. Journalists, who are supposed to narrate actual events, get work and Pulitzer Prizes by constructing provably untrue narratives. (See, for example, *The 1619 Project*.) Myths turn aggressors into victims, or they blame the persecuted for their status. C.S. Lewis loved grand archetypal literary myths; but he knew that many “stories which an anthropologist would classify as myths . . . whatever they may have meant to ancient or savage man, are to us meaningless and shocking; shocking not only by their cruelty and obscenity but by their apparent silliness—almost what seems insanity.”<sup>9</sup> Such insanity, such mimetic myth, imbues current laws. Logos, objective reason, is the only escape from it. Fortunately, as Aristotle observed at the opening of his *Metaphysics*, all humans desire to know. We do not desire falsehood and uncertainty. A path to knowledge, evading the sovereign self’s defenses, is through analogies in stories.

Girardian myths or constructions seem like stories, but their purpose is opposed to the human good of stories. How can one differentiate one from the other, as they both evoke sympathy? What is the knowledge literature gives? Anything like Percy Shelley’s ambition to remake morality is a danger sign. His fellow poet John Keats rightly resented “any poetry that has a

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<sup>8</sup> Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 118.

<sup>9</sup> C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, ed. Marcia Brooks, Stephen Hutcheson et. al (Faded Page eBook #20140725, posted July 22, 2014) <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>. Ch V, “Myth.”

palpable design on you.”<sup>10</sup> Wordsworth called for respecting the aged and infirm. Dickens opposed workhouse prisons for the poor. Katsuo Ishiguro warned about organ harvesting. Are these all power-hungry calculating narrative constructions? Nathan’s story actually challenged a king. But here is the difference: Nathan was risking his life for a truth that he knew David would recognize analogically. Stories come from shared experience, such as the fact that parents and children remain related, even if, like Oedipus, the child is rejected. Jocasta learned that women can get pregnant without planning. We experience that the human person comes with a body. A girl’s body teaches her that whatever her hairstyle or medical interventions, she can’t run, or throw, or lift like a boy; narratives don’t change that.

However, lies also exploit shared experience. Propaganda sometimes appears amidst sharp, even insightful observations about typical behavior. Story draws on the unity of shared experience; even if sincere, a narrative of self-construction is about division, because it is allergic to truth. A sure sign of unhealthy narrative is when, as C.S. Lewis puts it, “The commonest events are twisted, often not without ingenuity, into evidence for the treasured belief.” He adds, dismissively, “Delusion, except by some accident, is of no literary interest” (51). Story becomes Girardian myth by substituting desire or scapegoating for truth, or manifesting shattered confidence in any social reality not dependent upon one’s will.

My warning about constructivism is not a warning against views one does not share, or a condemnation of allegory, where events illustrate an idea. Allegory still expects an analogical recognition of events, even if the idea merely manifests the author’s human weakness. Robert Frost’s “Nothing Gold Can Stay” allegorizes the changing colors of nature at dawn and in early spring in the service of, I think, a wrongheaded pessimism about human virtue; but in it I recognize universally human grief and disenchantment presented without manipulation. He has not grown jaded toward every good that does not serve his sentiment. Teachers should present texts that do not easily lend themselves to what C.S. Lewis called “egoistic castle-building.” In reading for feminist or racial or otherwise political content, Lewis says, “we meet only ourselves. But one of the chief operations of art is to remove

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<sup>10</sup> Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds (February 3, 1818). - Letters (1817-1820) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/35698/35698-h/35698-h.htm>, 67.

our gaze from that mirrored face, to deliver us from that solitude” (86). It is hard these days to exclude as we must, pornography, racial hatred, and propaganda against so-called “heteronormative” families from books offered to children. More subtle is the push to replace fiction with technology, social analysis, or political philosophy. Literary reading done well opens students to the truth of embodied, integrated experience in a world whose rules they have not made. On this can be built the compassion and respect for suffering essential to both beginning and end-of-life issues. An obsession with reading for power narratives leaves one, in the end, utterly alone with one’s suspicions. The capacity for recognizing likeness underlies mimetic desire, but it also underlies love and offers an opportunity for seeking a wider good without violence.

Let me show by example how literature can call students into an understanding of life issues. I’ll read from Ernest Hemingway, no firm moralist, but an honest artist dedicated to uncovering truth. A man speaks to his girlfriend in a railroad station bar about an “operation”:

"I'll go with you and I'll stay with you all the time. They just let the air in and then it's all perfectly natural."

"Then what will we do afterward?"

"We'll be fine afterward. Just like we were before."

"What makes you think so?"

"That's the only thing that bothers us. It's the only thing that's made us unhappy. . ."

"And you think then we'll be all right and be happy."

"I know we will. You don't have to be afraid. I've known lots of people that have done it."

"So have I," said the girl. "And afterward they were all so happy."

"Well," the man said, "if you don't want to you don't have to. I wouldn't have you do it if you didn't want to. But I know it's perfectly simple."

"And you really want to?"

"I think it's the best thing to do. But I don't want you to do it if you don't really want to."

"And if I do it you'll be happy and things will be like they were and you'll love me?"

"I love you now. You know I love you."

"I know. But if I do it, then it will be nice again if I say things are like white elephants, and you'll like it?"

"I'll love it. I love it now but I just can't think about it. You know how I get when I worry."<sup>11</sup>

My students could not easily guess what the couple was talking about; the characters never mention pregnancy, a baby, or abortion. Yet they knew that the man was a manipulative jerk, and that the relationship was doomed. Rational analysis revealed it was about abortion, but first they felt the horror of the man's indifference and the pressure on the woman—a good effect of mimesis. The flavor of the experience struck them as Nathan's story struck David, evading the abstraction of "abortion" to reveal the desperation, brutality, selfishness, and pity of the deed. They tasted the man's selfish urgency, the woman's violation and devaluation, and the isolation of them both.

Discussion revealed that everyone recognized the misery, and that there was satisfaction in understanding the couple's entanglement in evil, in trying to pretend something unreal on many levels. My students accessed truth first through imagined experience, not facts or analysis. The anthropological thickness, the mystery, evokes respect for the world in its fullness of being—and also desire for the full manifestation of some good. They wish the man would love truthfully. They wish the woman were not so cowed by him. They

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<sup>11</sup> Ernest Hemingway, "Hills Like White Elephants," <https://anthology.lib.virginia.edu/work/Hemingway/hemingway-hillsanthology.lib.virginia.edu/work/Hemingway/hemingway-hills>, 11.

discover solidarity in wanting the good for others, directed by fiction away from their uses and their own defenses.

Literary readers must learn to follow authors attentively, with discipline, but, Lewis observes, “The exercise of our faculties is in itself a pleasure. Successful obedience to what seems worth obeying and is not quite easily obeyed is a pleasure” (Lewis, 134) First, they see the evil, or the heroism, the dismay or the contentment. Inconsistent characters or events irritate them. Then they analyze why. A false portrayal disgusts the reader experienced with genuine literary encounter. Literature is not precisely education in life issues, or moral education, but literature can be practice in recognizing and willing the wider good. Readers who demand consistent character and setting can see that stable personhood, not chosen identity, is what makes sense; this challenges defensive illusions. To read without suspicion is easiest with honest fiction, whose aim is principally recognition of the truth of stories.

Life issues appear where there is honest storytelling, in texts as varied as *Middlemarch* and *A Raisin in the Sun*. *King Lear* meditates on fatherhood; so do the poems of Robert Hayden. Tolkien presents both proper and improper respect for ancestry, as Aragorn, the penniless hunter from the true line of kings, confronts a decayed culture wherein “Childless lords sat in aged halls musing on heraldry.” C.S. Lewis spoke of the likeness of literature to friendship, as an “escape from our self into the other. . . . transcending our own competitive particularity . . . to correct its provincialism and heal its loneliness” (Lewis, 139-40).

Substituting other, factual or analytic texts for the wisdom of story—to teach reading through manuals, word problems, environmental reports, or political analyses, minimizing fiction, as in the Common Core—wathers rather than develops that power of moral recognition essential to the truth and compassion.<sup>12</sup> Learning to read literature as literature calls us toward the coherency of order in the world we did not create, away from the desperation that constructs and accepts myths to defend the murderously sovereign self. Story is an opportunity for fostering love of all that is living.

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<sup>12</sup> Grant Bradley, “Students Need to Read 70% Nonfiction, Says Common Core” Sept 3, 2013, Publishing Solutions Group.



