

And yet the issue of truth and/or lies in the works of major writers is obvious, if relatively unexplored. It would be easy to list examples, beginning with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and working down to the present day. The theme of truth and/or falsehood tends to arise whenever morality is a major concern of any literary work, and the complexities of the theme are manifold. They include lying malevolently to others; lying to oneself; “virtuous lying” (to deceive an evil person or persons); “white lies” (to try to protect others from painful truths); lying to protect oneself from discrimination or other kinds of harm; and so on. In fact, once one thinks about it, it is surprising just how often truth and lies do figure as major themes in so many “great” works of literature.

To illustrate this point, one need only turn to some works by Shakespeare, including five of his most important tragedies and, even more narrowly, the four tragedies (*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*) usually considered his very best. And, more narrowly still, consider just the opening scenes of these five plays. Often issues of lying and truth-telling appear almost immediately, sometimes in the very first lines. And then they tend to reverberate throughout these texts, playing major roles in the entire works. It would be easy to compile similar lists from other works by Shakespeare, including his comedies, as well as from other works by other “major authors.” For the time being, however, consider simply five of Shakespeare’s most famous tragic works.

### ***Julius Caesar***

One example of the prominence of issues of truth-telling and/or lying appears in *Julius Caesar*. And, as is typical, they appear almost immediately after the play’s main figures enter the stage. No sooner does Caesar himself appear than a “Soothsayer” (i.e., literally a “truth-teller”) approaches and warns him to “Beware the Ides of March” (2.1.21).<sup>2</sup> We, of course, know from our knowledge of history that the Soothsayer is in fact speaking the truth: that date will indeed be the one on which Caesar is assassinated. But Caesar, of course, has no way of knowing this; for all he knows, this man is merely, as he says, “a dreamer” (or even a deliberate liar;

hidden truths or “secrets” and turns them into “open lies in which the nation can believe” (73, 84). Vejdovsky notes the aptness of the play’s premier locations: San Francisco—a “pivotal locus for U.S. gay cultural expression”—for the first part, *Millennium Approaches* (1991), and Los Angeles for the second part, *Perestroika*. He thinks the play achieved “America’s cultural coming out” by having Joe (a married, conservative, Mormon Republican) confess “his homosexuality to his mother” (73).

After noting the play’s “phenomenal” critical success (74), Vejdovsky turns to the play itself. *Angels in America* features (he continues) many characters comprising “male and female, gay and straight and bisexual, Jewish and Mormon and WASP, angelic and human, historical and fictional”; consequently it “complicates the identity of each character, disputes the validity of binary oppositions, and explicitly places the play in the current American conflict over identity politics.” It also revisits American history, “with emphasis on McCarthyism, immigration, Western expansion, and the myth of the melting pot” (75). An “apocalyptic historical sense” permeates the play, which was written shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall and as the Cold War was unraveling. Among other contemporary events and issues, Vejdovsky singles out the AIDS epidemic. He contends that AIDS is portrayed as a “defining element” of American history, comparable to that of Black Death in European history. This choice “places the gay community at the [play’s] center” and makes the group the “depository of a special kind of knowledge and potential for regeneration” (76). After further discussion, Vejdovsky briefly comments on the HBO adaptation of the play (by Mike Nichols). By contrast with the play (he contends), which “sought to disclose many a hidden truth about the ideological and historical construction of the United States,” the movie undoes it and shows America once again as the “embodiment of the melting pot” (83).

### **Robert Vorlicky, “Dirty Laundry on the Line: Staging the Nation in Contemporary U.S. Drama and Performance”**

This essay considers contemporary trends in stage representations of the nation’s “dirty” secrets. Vorlicky begins by noting some

favorable. At Portsmouth, Fanny believes Henry to be “altogether improved,” and far gentler, more obliging, attentive, and agreeable (319). Moreover, his “behaviour to her father could not offend, and there was something particularly kind and proper in the notice he took of Susan. He was decidedly improved” (319). In other instances, Fanny observes Henry’s regard for others and his anxiety for her health and comfort, all leading her to believe that he may truly love her and may even be successful in his proposal (325, 344). That Henry may actually be in love speaks to the role Mansfield Park has played as the prime “stage” of the novel. When Henry leaves Mansfield and visits Fanny at Portsmouth, he has effectively left the principal seat of acting, and his affections appear more real and genuine. Nevertheless, his invitation to bring Fanny back to Mansfield suggests yet another attempt at bringing her back onto the novel’s theatrical stage (326), and Fanny remains unconvinced that his character has truly changed. This becomes evident when Sir Thomas’s scheme ultimately backfires.

The characters of *Mansfield Park* may not die upon the stage, but the several tragedies at the end, in rapid succession, mirror act 5 in *Hamlet*. Tom’s near-death illness (334), the affair between Maria and Henry (345), Julia’s elopement with Yates (347), Edmund’s disappointment in Mary (357–61), and Mrs. Norris’s leaving of Mansfield and joining Maria—“their tempers [becoming] their mutual punishment” (365)—all carry a striking finality with them. And that they occur in sudden and quick blows suggests as much. The two elopements are, moreover, partly attributed to Sir Thomas’s scheme and Fanny’s refusal to take Henry’s hand. Mrs. Norris cannot help but blame Fanny for ungratefully refusing Henry and thus allowing for the situation between him and Maria to occur (365). Likewise, Mary, offstage, can exclaim, “Simple girl!—I shall never forgive her. Had she accepted him as he ought, they might now have been on the point of marriage, and Henry would have been too happy and too busy to want any other object” (358).

More than all of this, however, is the role that masking plays to reveal the truth about several characters. Masking serves ultimately as the undoing of Henry, the most layered masker in all of Austen.

in “moods and frowns and wrinkles strange” (ll. 7, 8), expressions the beloved seems incapable of. Thus, the speaker concludes that his beloved’s beauty may portray something other than it is, much like the moment in the Garden of Eden: “How like Eve’s apple doth thy beauty grow / If thy sweet virtue answer not thy show!” (ll. 13–14). *Sonnet* 93 particularly becomes important when read in the context of *Sonnet* 94. In *Sonnet* 94, the tone shifts, and the speaker instructs the beloved to be like those who “husband nature’s riches from expense” and are “lords and owners of their faces” (ll. 6, 7). The beloved should not, like a summer flower infected by weeds, let deception destroy natural beauty, “For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds; / Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds” (ll. 13–14).

Perhaps no lyric poet of this era expresses more concern about the beloved’s truthfulness than John Donne, whose *Songs and Sonnets* are riddled with lines disclaiming the false nature of either himself or the speaker’s lover. Donne’s poems often betray an anxious concern about whether even love itself can transcend lies and deception. “The Indifferent” stresses this theme. The speaker lists several types of women he can love, among whom include “her who masks and plays” and “Her who believes, and her who tries” (ll. 3, 5). The stanza concludes with the speaker declaring, “I can love her, and her, and you, and you, / I can love any, so she be not true” (ll. 8–9). The tone shifts in stanza two, and the poet asks his beloved if no other “vice” than faithfulness will content her and wonders “doth a fear that men are true torment you?” (ll. 10, 13). The speaker, it seems, wants permission to be faithless, suggesting, “Let me, and do you, twenty know” (l. 15). Yet he is concerned that his beloved wants to keep him all to herself: “Must I, who come to travail thorough you, / Grow your fix’d subject, because you are true?” (ll. 17–18). The poetic voice shifts once again in the third stanza. Venus has heard the speaker’s song, “And by love’s sweetest part, variety, she swore, / She heard not this till now” (ll. 20–21). Venus thus examines the state of lovers, returning with news that there exist two or three heretics who “think to ’stablish dangerous constancy” (l. 25). But Venus assures the speaker that she has told

Conrad's novel . . . integrates the skepticism of the Modernist novel with the jingoistic convictions of the adventure novel to create an ambivalence in regards to the discourse of imperialism in Britain. This ambivalence probably explained the confounded minds of those British subjects who tried to fathom the complex and varied crises with which the British Empire struggled during the last decades of the nineteenth century. (362)

In important ways, Brown is not a fantasy but something the novel's original readers needed to acknowledge as their own. He arrives uninvited, he takes what he wants, he kills a few people, and he leaves. He arrives in Patusan with all of the maliciousness of the colonial endeavor stripped of the euphemizing gentility that was used historically to mask it.

Brown serves as a useful foil to the other Europeans in *Lord Jim*, and his triumph over his antithesis, Dain Waris, is rich with significance, but the rest of the novel seems to quietly demonstrate the basic superiority of natives over colonizers. In at least one significant way in both *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, Marlow seems to inadvertently elevate natives above colonizers in spite of his racism. Marlow is not Conrad's only narrator whose subjective truth does not correspond with the more objective truth established in the text. John McClure points out that the narrator's remarks in *Almayer's Folly* "are consistently undermined by the actions and observations of the characters he disparages" (156).

### **True Virtue in *Lord Jim***

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow expresses his wonder at the restraint of his cannibal crew in not killing and eating the boat's European passengers (85–86), but John Rickard points out that the text makes it clear through Marlow that restraint is precisely the thing that Kurtz and his ilk lack. *Lord Jim* elevates at least one native above Marlow, but in a less direct way. I do not mean Dain Waris, who, if we are being honest, is held to a pretty low standard. I mean a character who receives not one kind or charitable word from Marlow, yet who nevertheless exhibits an admirable, unwavering loyalty to Jim. I am referring to Tamb' Itam, Jim's taciturn Malay bodyguard,

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And, also in 1979, he further prophesied a phenomenon that is of real relevance today:

There is more than one way to burn a book. And the world is full of people running about with lit matches. Every minority, be it Baptist/Unitarian, Irish/Italian/Octogenarian/Zen Buddhist, Zionist/Seventh-day Adventist, Women's Lib/Republican, Mattachine/Four Square Gospel feels it has the will, the right, the duty to douse the kerosene, light the fuse. [ . . . ] Fire-Captain Beatty, in my novel *Fahrenheit 451*, described how the books were burned first by minorities, each ripping a page or a paragraph from this book, then that, until the day came when the books were empty and the minds shut and the libraries closed forever. ("Coda" 209)

In 1994, forty years after publication of the novel and fifteen after publication of the "Coda," he said in an interview that at that time the messages of his novel were even more urgent than in 1953 and, indeed, ever before:

it [the novel] works even better because we have political correctness now. Political correctness is the real enemy these days. The black groups want to control our thinking and you can't say certain things. The homosexual groups don't want you to criticize them. It's thought control and freedom of speech control. (qtd. in Gaslor, 1994)

In 1999, observing so-called "digital natives," he feared that young children might now be delayed in the age at which they learned to read and might, therefore, not be able to take advantage of books like his that warn against censorship, even arguing that freedom of thought should be encouraged even "at the kindergarten and first grade level. And if you don't do the work there and teach people to read, they are not going to read *Fahrenheit*" (qtd. in Klein 189).

In 2009, in one of his last interviews, he emphasized that, above all, libraries should not be closed. He himself had not attended a university, but although he considered all teachers important, he thought libraries were even more important. He called the library a place full of great writers, who are also great teachers. It is a place