

Reality, Illusion, and Foolish Pride

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In the plays *The Cherry Orchard* by Anton Chekhov, *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen, and *Galileo* by Bertolt Brecht, the protagonists' mental beliefs combine reality and illusion that both shape the plot of each respective story. The ability of the characters to reject or accept an illusion, along with the foolish pride that motivated their decision, leads to their personal downfall.

In *The Cherry Orchard*, by Anton Chekhov, Gayev and Miss Ranevsky, along with the majority of their family, refuse to believe that their estate is close to bankruptcy. Instead of accepting the reality of their problem, they continue to live their lives under the illusion that they are doing well financially. The family continues with its frivolous ways until there is no money left (the final night they have in the house before it is auctioned, they throw an extravagant party, laughing in the face of impending financial ruin). Even when Lopakhin attempts to rescue the family with ideas that could lead to some of the estate being retained, they dismiss his ideas under the illusion that the situation is not so desperate that they need to compromise any of their dignity.

Lopakhin: As you know, your cherry orchard's being sold to pay your debts. The auction is on the twenty second of August. But there's no need to worry, my dear. You can sleep soundly. There's a way out. Here's my plan. Listen carefully, please. Your estate is only about twelve miles from town, and the railway is not very far away. Now all you have to do is break up your cherry orchard and the land along the river into building plots and lease them out for country cottages. You'll then have an income of at least twenty-five thousand a year.

Gayev: I'm sorry, but what utter nonsense!

(Later in the Dialogue)

Mrs. Ranevsky: Cut down? My dear man, I'm very sorry but I don't think you know what you're talking about....

Lopakhin: If we can't think of anything and if we can't come to any decision, it won't only be your cherry orchard, but your whole estate that will be sold at auction on the twenty-second of August. Make up your mind. I tell you there is no other way. (Page 621-622)<sup>2</sup>

This inability on the behalf of the family to realize the seriousness of their situation is due to their refusal to accept reality. If they had recognized the situation they were in, and dealt with it, (they may have been able to save some of their money, or even curbed their spending) they could have saved themselves. Unfortunately, once things got bad for them financially, they refused to accept that fact that circumstances had changed, and instead continued to live as though nothing were wrong.

They adopted this illusion as a savior of their pride, and the illusion eventually became reality for the family. Their pride wouldn't allow for anything else. They were too proud to accept that their social status, and financial status was in jeopardy, so they chose to live a life of illusion. In their imaginary situation, they were going to be fine. It is easier to believe something when you really want it to be true. Unfortunately, outside situations don't change, even if you can fool yourself into thinking they don't exist.

The illusion that they used to run their lives became the source of their downfall. Since they grasped at their illusion so tightly, in vain hopes that it would replace reality, they failed to deal practically with their problem, until it got to the point where they had to. They were kicked out onto the street, and had all of their material things taken from them. The most important thing they had -- their status -- was gone.

In *A Doll's House*, by Henrik Ibsen, property and status are again destined to be lost. The illusion is twisted. At the beginning of the play, Nora leads a life under the illusion that everything was perfect. She lives for eight years with the knowledge that she has broken the law, and betrayed her husband. Though it was necessary, the psychological toll it took on her and the family was hardly worthwhile.

Along with Nora's flaws, her husband was also at fault. He couldn't accept what Nora had done, and wouldn't have been able to deal with the extreme changes which she had undergone. His pride wouldn't let him accept that he needed a woman to help him; that he couldn't handle everything alone without the help of another person (This *Æsthetic* male's ideal has led to the downfall of many men). His self-confidence would not have been strong enough to take that kind of blow to his ego.

If she had forced her husband into handling the situation, by having him borrow money himself, everything would have turned out fine. She, instead, took out the loan on her own, and didn't even clue in her husband. She tried to avoid having his pride injured by forcing him to borrow money, even though it was necessary to save his life.

From this experience she grew. She learned about human nature, and about the value of money, and had even learned a lesson of practicality. Instead of clueing in her husband about what she had done, (the final step in the maturation process she had undergone -- being able to accept blame) she kept quiet and left him ignorant. She lived her life in an illusion, pretending to be the old Nora that she was, and not the new and changed woman she had developed into. She didn't let the person she had become permeate all the aspects of her life. She let the illusion of the old Nora continue well after she had become a new person. Eventually she evolved into a person who couldn't stand to be married to Helmer anymore.

Helmer: Nora, I would gladly work for you night and day, and endure sorrow and hardship for your sake. But no man can be expected to sacrifice his honor, even for the person he loves.

Nora: Millions of women have done it.

Helmer: Oh, you think and talk like a stupid child.

Nora: That may be. But you neither think nor talk like the man I could share my life with...as I am now, I am no wife for you. (Page 587)

If she had continued to grow, and mature, and had accepted the kind of person she became, then perhaps she would have gained the courage to tell her husband what she had done. She would not have had to leave. She could have educated him gradually instead of immediately surrendering any hope by leaving everything she has ever known. Nora's failure to accept what she had really become led to the end of her life with Helmer, and her downfall in society. It was also Helmer's downfall socially and emotionally.

*Galileo*, by Bertolt Brecht, is rather different from both of the previously mentioned situations in that the protagonist puts forth a façade of living with an illusion (that he had truly recanted, and truly believed his theories to be false), when in reality he didn't believe it. His denial of this illusion led to his collapse.

Granted, on the exterior, his collapse seems relatively minimal (he ends up with a popular status among the people of his city, and throughout Europe), but he is disgusted with himself. The feeling that other people have towards him does not lead him to believe that he did the right thing. Instead, if he had been steadfast to what he thought, instead of buckling to the illusions that everyone had of him (that he was a person who immediately realized he was wrong, and valued the church more than his theories) he would have been much happier, although he'd be dead too. He leads the rest of his life echoing the idea in his head that he was weak and useless.

Galileo: ...At that particular time, had one man put up a fight, it could have had wide repercussions. I have come to believe that I was never in real danger; for some years I was as strong as the authorities, and I surrendered my knowledge to the powers that be, to use it, no, not to use it, to abuse it, as it suits their ends. I have betrayed my profession. Any man who does what I have done must not be tolerated in the ranks of science. (p.809).

Some people look at Galileo as a coward for what he did, since he did not stand up for what he believed, even though his life was on the line. I disagree. He is more of a hero for what he did than if he had let himself become a martyr. He let the church believe what they wanted to about him, but internally, he remained the same. He instead lived the rest of his life supporting a fallacy. He had to pretend that a fundamental part of his belief system did not exist. Galileo, being a proud and stubborn man found this to be the most difficult task of his life.

His pride refused to let him accept the illusion (that his theory was completely wrong) over reality. If he had, he would have been a happier person, and the conflict that he lived with every day would be resolved.

He ends up in a better state superficially, but internally, his refusal to accept an illusion has led to his intense dislike for himself and his moral base. If he could have somehow reconciled his beliefs with the life he actually led, he wouldn't have ended up as bitter or sad a person as he did.

Throughout each of these plays, the main character (or characters) faced a reality that they cease to accept, and instead live in an illusion (except in the case of Galileo, in which case the reverse is true). The refusal to accept a reality or illusion led to the characters' fall in status and/or emotional well being.

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