

## ENGLISH: WHOSE REALITY

**We can evade 'reality,' but we cannot avoid the consequences of doing so.**

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*The following are the reminiscences of a one-time cadet journalist who is drafting an article that is to be published in a magazine for amateur writers.*

It seems years ago now but I remember every moment, every rebuttal and every argument the defence had thrown. The defendant was David Chanter – as he stood in the docks, he was clam as hell – the psychiatrist had testified that he was a league above the average man with an IQ of 173. He was a genius; no doubt. The occasional snide retort that came from his corner, whilst measured and intelligently planned, exuded a sense of arrogance that comes only from egotists who know they could execute the perfect murder. We had convinced ourselves that the man was a sadist. The evidence against him was minimal, a handful of eye-witness testimonies many of which were conflicting and a couple of finger prints they had found at his victim's home – who coincidentally was his ex-wife and whom he frequently visited. The prosecution was running on an empty tank.

Nevertheless, the trial continued and came in day after day with our pads and our pens, earnestly scribbling down notes to take home and forge into an article. Amazingly though, as the days turned into weeks, the seemingly indomitable, callous and murderous character of Chanter began to unravel. The tough exterior he wore was merely a façade – perhaps it was his way of tolerating himself. Perhaps he could never confront the reality of his murderous assault. No one could really be sure. Chanter though, was ultimately found guilty of first degree murder and as I am writing this, he is serving life sentence without the chance for parole in Pentridge maximum security prison. Often I am perplexed by people like Chanter who commit such atrocities and in an effort to evade the unbearable truth create superficial exteriors to shield themselves from pain.

In this world of convoluted and ambiguities, our thoughts manifest into words and these words in time, manifest into deeds. Chanter's motive for the murder remained a mystery to all but he as well as everyone following the trial knew no possible justification could be provided for taking another's life. Some thought it was his marriage breakup that served as an impetus for his violent drunken rampages. It was plausible because we humans are creatures of habit. Familiarity and surviving in the norm provides us with emotional solace and satisfaction. We desperately cling onto normalcy and routine for these are the aspects of life which require least adjusting to and pose minimal or no threat to our selfhood. Our need to adhere to a fixed routine is so demanding that even a slight disturbance or deviation from the norm may prove to be perturbing and unsettling. Chanter's divorce was unexpected, it came from the blue and while his marriage was becoming rocky, he chose to ignore the plight of his own situation because confronting it would bring discomfort.

Often when our reality is in stark contrast to another's we may feel threatened or repudiated. In the case of the allegory of the cave by Plato, the perceived reality of the caved dwellers governed primarily by the shadows and reflections of objects is in opposition with the actual reality which should be dictating their existence. When one individual, perhaps through some form of epiphany or self realization leaves the comforts and confines of his cave and thus liberating himself from daily routine, he is exposed to the real, tangible and objectified world of trees, animals and natural beauty. When this 'realised soul' re-enters the cave with this new found understanding, he is shunned and ultimately killed by those who once treasured him company. As Gregory David Roberts poignantly observes in his memoir, *Shantaram*, 'truth is a bully we pretend to like.' Sometimes however, the truth is much more daunting and confronting than initially anticipated and as this allegory elucidates, it is difficult to find a compromise between two or more conflicting realities. Discrepancies and variations in our interpretation

of the world around us are almost inevitable, owing primarily to the personal and diverse nature of human experience. So instead of attempting to resolve these discords, in some instances, it is easier to detach ourselves from a potentially awkward situation or completely reject any proposition that may cause pain and suffering.

In Robert Drewe's memoir, *The Shark Net*, a book I had stumbled across recently, Eric Edgar Cooke- 'the Nedland's monster,' is unable to neither confront nor accept the repeated rejections he is dealt at social gatherings. To mask his insecurities and to overcome the personal abuses of 'birdmouth' Cooke constructs an alternate reality of an attractive male who will seduce the women at the local dance. This alternate reality serves no beneficial purpose as it only propounds his personal pain which ultimately transpires into a violent rage. Cooke's attempt to consciously remove unwanted truths about his situation is referred to in Freudian psychoanalysis as suppression. Repression and denial are the other two forms of defence mechanisms which according to Sigmund Freud are used by humans to cope with undesirable revelations or potentially painful situations. Although Cooke tries desperately to compensate for his physical deformities by way of evading the true reality of his state, the culmination of childhood abuse, social rejection and personal insecurities lead to the devastating murderous rampage that transforms Perth from a peaceful, isolated city into a highly conservative and fearful one.

As John Donne once wrote, 'no man is an island unto himself.' Whether it be David Chanter or Eric Edgar Cooke, no individual is completely a product of genetics and nature. We are all influenced and impacted on by relationships, cultural ties, past experiences, the promises that were once made and once broken. Just as Cooke suffered abuse as a child, Chanter may also have been abused. But evidently, evading the harshness of reality by way of intricate facades that distance ourselves from the truth, may bring a fleeting sense of self satisfaction. This satisfaction however is short lived because our understanding of our own self can never be permanently shunned away from consciousness. Chanter's eventual conviction parallels Cooke's execution and reiterates the idea that 'man's past will always catch up with him.'