

While taking the roll, the teacher says "raise your hand if you are absent." Those who are present will be quite nonplussed, won't they? For they know if one is true, the other cannot be true: people who can raise their hands are present and therefore they are not absent. This is a silly attempt at capturing the paradox.



A **paradox** is a statement that is self-contradictory because it contains two statements that may both be true but cannot be true at the same time. You cannot be absent and present at the same time, right? Similarly, if I say, "I am a compulsive liar," will you believe what I say? Does that make me an honest person who can own up to being a liar? So, I am not a liar? . . . Neither you nor I will be able to determine the truth of my statement. Now, how about "deep down, you're really shallow"? That is a "profoundly shallow" statement that makes us scratch our heads. In addition, "you shouldn't go in the water until you know how to swim." Let's wrap up this round with "never say never!"

Now to shift gears:

Example 1:

This is the best-known opening paragraph in literary history. Can you identify which novel begins with this paragraph?

It was the **best** of times, it was the **worst** of times, it was **the age of wisdom**, it was **the age of foolishness**, it was **the epoch of belief**, it was **the epoch of incredulity**, it was **the season of Light**, it was **the season of Darkness**, it was **the spring of hope**, it was **the winter of despair**, we had **everything before us**, we had **nothing before us**, we were all going **direct to Heaven**, we were all going **direct the other way**—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

Which historical period in human history do you think was so paradoxical?

Example 2:

Let's begin with Hamlet's dilemma in Act 4: he is the heir apparent (second only to King Claudius) and at the same time a murderer to be exiled. Faced with this paradoxical situation, Hamlet spews out ghoulish and misanthropic conceits about life and death. For example,

"The body is with the king, but the king is not with the body" (4.2.25)

In this line, Hamlet argues that Polonius's body shares the same fate as the fate of King Claudius's body even though Claudius, still alive, cannot join the fate of the dead Polonius.

"The king is a thing--of nothing" (4.2.26-27)

This is a very succinct example of a paradox even though this seems to reveal how low and abject Hamlet feels about life.

Hamlet implies that Claudius is alive for the time being, but he is to be reduced to nothing eventually. When dead, all humans—"the fat king and lean beggar"—are subjected to be food for maggots according to Hamlet. This is a truly nihilistic worldview, and we witness the nadir of Hamlet's soul (the rock bottom of his soul).

He was a scholar at the University of Wittenberg, the "mould of the [perfect] form" (3.1.153); however, he now wags his tongue at humanity saying, "you are all food for maggots and no more." Hamlet's soul is so dark and bleak and a statement like this will surely guarantee a prison cell in Alcatraz or the Tower of London. Whew, this stuff is too explosive.

"Not where he eats, but where he is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service--two dishes, but to one table. That's the end." (4.3.21-26)

In this gruesome conceit, Hamlet does not lose a beat in making fun of Polonius: due to his political ambition, Polonius turns out to be the best food for political maggots. Hamlet continues to claim that maggots are on the top of food chain because they can choose to eat either the king or a common beggar. In a way, humans fatten themselves only to fatten maggots and nobody can avoid this common end. How "jangled, out of tune, and harsh" the former "rose of the fair state" has become (3.1. 158,152)!

On a different note, the phrase "[a] certain convocation of politic worms" utilizes a pun on "the Diet of Worms," a politico-religious assembly that was held in Worms, Germany, in 1521 to contend with Martin Luther's Reformation movement. "A certain convocation of politic worms" is not only a pun but also a historical allusion. In addition, "fat" as opposed to "lean" and "king" as opposed to "beggar" constitute an antithesis.

"Father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh, and so, my mother." (4.3.54-55)

Hamlet insists that Claudius is Gertrude because the marriage vow makes the husband and wife one flesh. One plus one is one according to the bible. So, this paradox is also a biblical allusion.

*ghoulish: suggesting the horror of death and decay (a ghoul is an evil spirit that feeds on corpses)

**misanthropic: hating mankind in general

***conceit: a fanciful poetic image, especially an elaborate or exaggerated comparison

****nihilism: the philosophical belief that nothing actually exists or that existence is meaningless

Example 3:

Following is an excerpt from "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," a short story written in 1890 by Ambrose Bierce. Peyton Farquhar, a Southern planter, is suffering an acute anxiety and panic attack while

awaiting to be executed by the union army.

He closed his eyes in order to fix his last thoughts upon his wife and children. The water, touched to gold by the early sun, the brooding mists under the banks at some distance down the stream, the fort, the soldiers, the piece of drift--all had distracted him. And now he became conscious of a new disturbance. Striking through the thought of his dear ones was a sound which he could neither ignore nor understand, a sharp, distinct, metallic percussion like the stroke of a blacksmith's hammer upon the anvil; it had the same ringing quality. He wondered what it was, and whether immeasurably distant or nearby--it seemed both. Its recurrence was regular, but as slow as the tolling of a death knell. He awaited each stroke with impatience and--he knew not why--apprehension. The intervals of silence grew progressively longer, the delays became maddening. With their greater infrequency the sounds increased in strength and sharpness. They hurt his ear like the thrust of a knife; he feared he would shriek. What he heard was the ticking of his watch.

The extreme fear of death overstimulates Farquhar's senses, and in his imagination, the ticking of his watch becomes a blacksmith's hammer that pounds against his nerves. He imagines each time it ticks the sound stabs him like a knife. Its ticking sound is just like the bells crashing to signal somebody's death. In this way, he experiences his death before it happens. His fear makes life as deadly as death itself and he cannot bear the short amount of life left for him. His knowledge of the impending death makes him life unbearably painful. In such a situation, death may be more welcome than life and life worse than death. How paradoxically is it that death is more comforting than life?