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Exploring Qualitative Hypothesis Testing: The Case of Suicides in Three Novels¹

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Abstract

This article uses a novel form of qualitative hypothesis testing to connect narrative analysis in sociology and interpretive aspects of the sociology of suicide. The expected relationships between pairs of propositions explaining suicide are compared with observed findings derived from analytical readings of three novels including narratives of suicide: Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*, and Percy's *The Second Coming*. In a number of cases observed relationships diverged from those expected. Narratives may fruitfully be examined in sociological analysis, as they seem capable of absorbing logical tensions without losing coherence. The implications of the findings are discussed, along with suggestions for future research. An appendix includes synopses of the three novels examined.

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The importance of narratives, as both self-expression and acts of interpretation, has long been a focus in sociology. Recently, Abbott (2007) has even called for a rejection of positivistic assumptions, in favor of an approach that integrates narrative and explanation in sociological analysis. Suicide has also been a central topic in the development of sociology. Although Durkheim (1951 [1897]) used the topic as a way to advance positivistic sociology, other sociologists (e.g., Charmaz, 1980; Douglas, 1966; Muschert, 2006; and Taylor 1978) have concentrated on narrative aspects of suicide behaviors. In this article, narratives of suicide serve as a topic for an exploratory study of a form of qualitative hypothesis testing.

There is a rich history of narrative analysis in sociology. Indeed, some scholars argue that humans are equipped with little else than the ability to narrate their own existences (see Kermode, 1967, p. 64). Similarly, Lemert (1993, pp. 1-24) and Porpora (1987, p. 68) argue that the narrative impulse is tied with the ability to exert agency in human behavior. One influential sociological discussion of the topic was Brown's (1987) *Society as Text*, especially in Chapter 6: "Social Reality as Narrative Text." More recently, a rich tradition of using literature in narrative in sociology has emerged as Corse (1995), Corse & Westervelt (2002), DeVault (1990), Griswold (1987, 1990, 1993, 2001), and Muschert (2006) have utilized literary narratives as data in sociological analysis. Although these scholars use narratives in their analysis, they do not assert that reality *is* itself narrative. Rather, they explore the metaphor, insofar as reality can be viewed as analogous to narrative.

It is necessary to specify what is meant by narrative. All texts are not created equal, in that all narratives are texts, but not all texts are narratives. A narrative is an account of a character and events in time. For example, "The king died and the queen died," is not a narrative, because it does not include any motion in time. However the following would be a narrative due to its inclusion of time, "The king died and the queen died of grief" (Brown, 1987, p. 143). Much of traditional sociology sees the world as divided into symbolic and objective, arguing that there exists an objective world, and that humans interpret the world

through symbolic/linguistic structures. In contrast, Brown argues that the realities which people think are objective are themselves subjective. He writes, “the realities to which symbols refer are also symbolic - that is, that they are intended by human actors and apprehended within some shared frame of vision” (p. 118). Similarly, DeVault (1990) and Muschert (2006) argue that readers of narratives have interpretive moments in which they become co-creators in the act of understanding.

What is at stake here is the metaphor used in representations of the social world. Narrative analysis reveals intention on the part of the agent and subject, without ignoring that some parts of human actions and intentions might be determined by forces outside of the control of the individual. The fact that there are also structural influences exerted on the text requires that a social structural analysis also be considered. In focusing on the primacy of human authorship and interpretation, while considering the inherent structural factors, the duality of structure-agency present in sociology can be transcended through narrative. This article takes a novel approach in examining literary narratives as a source of data in sociological analysis, while advancing a new form of qualitative hypothesis testing.

The Nature of the Inquiry

In sociology, suicide behavior has occupied a prominent position, primarily because it seems to sit on the border between the individual and the social structural. Durkheim (1951 [1897]) chose suicide as the topic for his classic work, in part to study suicide as a phenomenon independent of individual will. Thus, he disregarded the motivations of the individuals who commit suicide. It ought to be important to understand *why* people do the things they do, and not just to understand the rate at which they do them. Suicide rates, as with any macrosocial statistic, reflect the sum of individual actions. For there to be a suicide rate there must be individual acts of suicide.

In contrast, some contemporary sociological perspectives on suicide have focused on the

subjective meanings attributed to the act. For example, see Douglas (1966, pp. 249-75) examined the interpretation of the behavior from the point of view of the suicidal person, and Taylor (1978) focused on the social contexts surrounding the behavior. Charmaz (1980, pp. 233-79) argued that suicide needs to be studied by examining the interpretations that suicidal individuals offer for their behaviors. Thus, the examination of narratives of suicide serves as an apt topic for examining the relationship for an exploration into a way to transcend the divide between individualist and structuralist approaches. "Narrative enables us to understand the actions of others and endow them with meaning" (Brown, 1987, p. 165). Grasping the reasons behind the act represents an additional level of understanding, because such motivations are subjective to the individual's life experience.

Although the examination of narrative accounts of suicide does not allow for the construction of nomothetic rules that explain suicide, the loose framework does yield rewards. The description of a character's suicide in a novel provides us with perhaps the best view into an individual's motives for suicide. Many novels deal with individual characters in their social contexts, and may provide an understanding of the micro social events that might cause suicide. The basic research question is: What influences characters to kill themselves? The data are three novels: Sylvia Plath's (1971) *The Bell Jar* [TBJ], Graham Greene's (1972) *The Heart of the Matter* [THOTM], and Walker Percy's (1980) *The Second Coming* [TSC]. Each contains the suicide or attempted suicide of a character, although TSC contains two separate suicide events. Synopses of the novels appear in the Appendix.

The novels were selected using a convenience sampling process. Plath's novel is included because she not only wrote about suicide, but she also attempted it many times, before she succeeding in 1963. Sylvia Plath is one of the foci in Alvarez's (1972) *The Savage God*, a

classic in piece which includes analysis of suicide in literature. Greene's and Percy's novels are chosen because excerpts of them are included in the edited volume, *On Suicide: Great Writers on the Ultimate Question* (Miller, 1992). The number of novels examined is small when compared to the body of literature on suicide, as the current research is exploratory. It is not clear how well the three chosen novels represent the body of novels which include suicide, thus caution is advised in extending these findings to the larger body of suicide narratives.

Analysis

The analysis uses eleven propositions related to the social etiology of suicide, as outlined in Table 1. Each of the propositions is a plausible explanation for what might motivate a person

Table 1: Testable Propositions for the Social Etiology of Suicide

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- 1a. Anomic Suicide: If the individual is insufficiently externally regulated into the social system, suicide may result (Durkheim, 1951).
 - 1b. Altruistic Suicide: If the individual is excessively internally integrated into the social norms, suicide may result (Durkheim, 1951).
 - 1c. Egoistic Suicide: If the individual has insufficiently internally integrated the social norms, suicide may result (Durkheim, 1951).
 2. Non-relational Suicide: Individuals exhibit a tendency toward suicide when they have no social relationships which are in good working order. Conversely, suicide is contraindicated as long as the person has at least one social relationship.
 - 3a. Ardent Suicide: Suicide can be the result of taking one's life too seriously.
 - 3b. Sardonic Suicide: Suicide can be the result of not taking one's life seriously enough.
 4. Mental Illness: Suicide might be the result of mental illness.
 - 5a. Liebestod: German for "love of death," an individual will commit suicide if convinced that it would be better if they didn't exist.
 - 5b. Existential Suicide: An individual might commit suicide as a result of believing that they do not exist.
 6. Rational Choice Suicide: "As soon as the terrors of life reach the point where they outweigh the terrors of death, a man will put an end to his life. . . . This is offset by the physical pain of death. Without this pain, everyone would kill himself" (Schopenhauer cited in Alvarez [1972, p. 138]).
 7. Experimental Suicide: People will kill themselves if they regard suicide as an experiment put to nature.
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to engage in suicide. Propositions are frequently derived from classical social thinkers (e.g., Durkheim and Schopenhauer), and refer to an individual's subjective relationship to the social environment. This set of propositions is by no means suggested as comprehensive, and is primarily used for the purposes of illustrating the analytical point.

Expected Relationships

While each of the propositions may be plausible in itself, not all pairings are likely to occur. By examining the relationship between pairs of propositions, it is possible to outline a set of expected outcomes regarding which propositions are congruent, neutral, or incongruent with each other. By comparing expected and observed relationships, it is possible to employ a novel form of qualitative hypothesis test.

The expected relationships are between pairs of propositions. For example, it is expected that propositions 1b and 1c cannot be simultaneously supported, because these propositions are strongly incongruous (--). Specifically, it is impossible for a character simultaneously to be egoistic and altruistic. On the other hand, it is expected that propositions 1b and 5a will be supported at the same time, because these propositions are highly congruous (++). Specifically, it is likely that *Liebestod* (5a) is experienced at the same time that as altruism (1b). Conversely, it is unlikely that a person will have *Liebestod* (5a) if she is not also altruistic (1b). It would be a logical contradiction if the two do not occur together. In this way, it is possible to construct a set of expected outcomes to which it is possible to compare what is observed in the novels. Table 2 offers an interpretation for how the propositions relate to one another, in a total of 55 relationships.²

Observed Relationships

Analysis involved reading the three selected novels, while examining the characters' suicide behaviors in relationship to the eleven propositions. Table 3 shows the results of the

² Two of Durkheim's relationships are complicated, because Durkheim observed of mixed-type suicides (1951 [1897]: 277-94). It is possible that the state of anomie and altruism remain separate, in which case the types exhibit no inherent contradiction. However, it is also possible for there to be "anomic-altruistic suicide," in which case they are likely to correlate. Hence the "0/+" designation in the chart for 1a and 1b. The same hold true for the states of anomie and egoism, which can either remain separate or occur together in the form of "ego-anomic suicide." Again, we see the "0/+" designation for 1a and 1c.

analytical reading of the novels. Most of the relationships between propositions played out as expected. For example, propositions 1b (altruism) and 1c (egoism) were expected to be strongly incongruent (--). The observed relationship in THOTM does affirm the expected results, because its suicide event affirms 1b while negating 1c, as the character is altruistic but not egoistic.

Table 2: Compatibility of Pairs of Propositions

Propositions											
	1a	1b	1c	2	3a	3b	4	5a	5b	6	7
1a											
1b	0/+										
1c	0/+	--									
2	0	-	-								
3a	0	-	+	0							
3b	0	+	+	0	--						
4	0	0	0	+	0	0					
5a	0	++	0	0	+	+	0				
5b	0	0	0	0	--	++	0	--			
6	0	0	0	0	+	-	0	+	-		
7	0	-	+	0	-	+	0	0	+	0	

- ++ Propositions expected highly likely to correlate.
- + Propositions expected to correlate.
- 0 Propositions expected to be neutral.
- Propositions expected to be incongruous.
- Propositions expected to be strongly incongruous.

Table 3: Ability of Suicides in Narratives to Satisfy Propositions

Propositions	TBJ	THOTM	TSC (Father)	TSC (Will)
1a – Anomie	+	-	0	0
1b - Altruism	0	+	-	-
1c – Egoism	-	-	+	+
2 – Non-Relation	+	+	-	+
3a - Ardent	+	+	-	-
3b - Sardonic	-	-	+	+
4 – Mental Illness	+	0	0	+
5a - <i>Liebestod</i>	0	+	-	
-				
5b - Existential	-	-	+	+
6 – Rational Choice	+	+	0	0
7 - Experimental	0	0	0	+

+ Novel satisfies proposition.

0 Novel neutral or inconclusive toward proposition.

- Novel contradicts proposition.

Sometimes there was a discrepancy between the expected and observed relationships. The cases which are most interesting for the present analysis are those in which the expected relationship between propositions is inconsistent with the relationship that is generally expected. As the analysis bore itself out, those propositions likely to occur together (+) and those unlikely to occur together (-) proved to be the areas of most interest. Table 4 outlines the cases in which the expected and observed findings were inconsistent.

Table 4: Observed Discrepancies in the Narratives

Relationship	Expected Relationship	Observed Relationship	Condition of Conflict
<u><i>The Bell Jar</i></u>			
1c, 3a	+ (congruent)	- (1c), + (3a)	Incongruent when predicted congruent
<u><i>The Heart of the Matter</i></u>			
1b, 2	- (incongruent)	+ (1b), + (2)	Congruent when predicted incongruent
1b, 3a	- (incongruent)	+ (1b), + (31)	Congruent when predicted incongruent
1b, 3b	+ (congruent)	+ (1b), - (3b)	Incongruent when predicted congruent.
1c, 3a	+ (congruent)	- (1c), + (3a)	Incongruous when predicted congruent
3b, 5a	+ (congruent)	- (3b), + (5a)	Incongruent when predicted congruent
<u><i>The Second Coming (Father's Case)</i></u>			
1b, 2	- (incongruent)	- (1b), - (2)	Congruent when predicted incongruent
1b, 3a	- (incongruent)	- (1b), - (3a)	Congruent when predicted incongruent
1b, 3b	+ (congruent)	- (1b), + (3b)	Incongruent when predicted congruent.
1c, 3a	+ (congruent)	+ (1c), - (3a)	Incongruent when predicted congruent.
3b, 5a	+ (congruent)	+ (3b), - (5a)	Incongruent when predicted congruent.
<u><i>The Second Coming (Will's Case)</i></u>			
1b, 3a	- (incongruent)	- (1b), - (3a)	Congruent when predicted incongruent
1b, 3b	+ (congruent)	- (1b), + (3b)	Incongruent when predicted congruent.
1c, 3a	+ (congruent)	+ (1c), - (3a)	Incongruent when predicted congruent.
3b, 5a	+ (congruent)	+ (3b), - (5a)	Incongruent when predicted congruent.

In TBJ, there was one observed discrepancy, as detailed in Table 4. Propositions 1c (egoism) and 3a (ardency) were predicted to be congruent, but the observation is that TBJ offers evidence to the contrary. Thus, there is a logical in the suicide narrative in TBJ, because the

narrative offers evidence to negate 1c, while offering evidence to affirm 3a. In sum, it is observed that TBJ supports 54 of the 55 expected relationships, but fails to support 1 of the 55.

Similarly, the other narratives also affirm most of the expected relationships between propositions, although there are more contradictions in the other narratives than in TBJ. Table 4 also outlines the discrepant relationships in THOTM, TSC (Father's Case), and TSC (Will's Case), which fail to confirm 5, 5, and 4 of the 55 expected relationships between propositions, respectively.

Discussion

A reading of the three novels, searching for the causes of the suicides reveals that these narratives are capable of containing conceptual contradictions while remaining coherent. While the list of propositions used in this analysis is by no means exhaustive of the potential propositions scholars might attach to suicide acts, it is interesting to note that there were some logical discrepancies that appeared in relationship to the events conveyed in the three narratives. In fact, the narratives remain coherent while they contain logical discrepancies. All of the discrepancies occurred where the relationships were likely to be congruent (+) or incongruent (-). None of the discrepancies discovered in this analysis appeared where the expected relationships between the propositions were strongly congruent (++) or strongly incongruent (--). This might suggest that there is a limit to how contradictory the motivations and causes of a narrative event can be before the narrative becomes incoherent in its interpretation. Narratives may allow for logical tensions, and this suggests that although narrative forms are limited by logical principles, they may not be entirely fettered by them.

Although narratives certainly are not the equivalent of social reality, a narrative approach (and the narrative metaphor itself) seems to be fruitful ways of conceptualizing social aspects of

suicide behaviors. There are of course limitations, and researchers should be aware that metaphorically similar ideas may not be necessarily interchangeable. The ability of narrative, and the metaphor of society as narrative, to contain potential contradictions without becoming incoherent is an advantage for studying the social world. Indeed, there are schools of sociology, many of them in post-structuralism, which include contradictions as inherent portions. Social reality is more complex than any narrative text; however narrative may be a metaphor for studying the social world. Since narratives may contain potential contradictions without becoming incoherent, narratives may be fruitfully applied to the study of social behavior.

The findings of this research suggest areas for potential future research, as further qualitative hypothesis testing of narrative texts might yield fruitful results. Continuation of the current research might employ a more extensive inquiry into the etiology of suicide, to form a more comprehensive set of propositions for hypothesis testing. Further, the method might be applied to a larger set on narratives or to different substantive issues.

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Appendix

Synopsis of *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath (1971)

Esther Greenwood, a young woman from the suburbs of Boston, Massachusetts, gains a summer internship at a prominent magazine in New York City under Editor Jay Cee. At the time of the Rosenbergs' execution Esther is exhilarated by the rush of Manhattan, but her experiences also frighten and disorient her. She appreciates the hedonism of her friend Doreen, but also identifies with the piety of Betsy (dubbed "Pollyanna Cowgirl" by Doreen, because she's from Kansas), a 'goody-goody' sorority girl who always does the right thing. She has a benefactress in Philomena Guinea, a formerly successful fiction writer, who will also later during Esther's hospitalization pay for some of her treatments.

After struggling to cope with life in New York City during her internship, Esther returns to her Massachusetts home in low spirits. During her stay in New York City, she had hoped to return to another scholarly opportunity to attend a writing course taught by a world-famous author, but after being rejected, she decides instead to spend the summer potentially writing a novel, although she feels she hasn't enough life experience to write convincingly. All of her identity has been centered around doing well academically; she has no idea what to make of her life once she leaves school, and the choices presented to her (motherhood, as exemplified by the prolific child-bearer and vacuous Dodo Conway, or stereotypical female careers such as stenography) do not appeal.

Esther becomes increasingly depressed, and finds she is unable to sleep. Her mother encourages, or perhaps forces her to see a psychiatrist, who then hastily diagnoses her with a mental illness and administers electroshock therapy. Also, this first therapist is noted by his sex, and also his good looks, which Esther somehow resents. By this time, Esther is suffering from intense insomnia and is traumatized by the therapy, which was improperly administered. When she tells her mother she refuses to go back, her mother smugly announces "I knew you'd decide to be all right."

Esther's mental state worsens. She describes her depression as a feeling of being trapped under a bell jar, struggling for breath. She makes several half-fledged attempts at suicide, including swimming far out to sea, before making a serious attempt. She leaves out a note that says she is taking a long walk, then crawls into the cellar and swallows almost 50 sleeping pills that have been prescribed for her insomnia. After an interminable amount of time, she is discovered under her house after a rather dramatic episode in the newspapers has presumed her kidnapping and death. She survives, is sent to a different mental hospital, and meets Dr. Nolan, a female therapist, who prescribes electroshock therapy and ensures that it will be properly administered. Esther describes the ECT as beneficial in that it has a sort of antidepressant effect, lifting the metaphorical bell jar in which she has felt trapped and stifled. Her stay at the private institution is funded by her benefactress, Philomena Guinea.

Under Dr. Nolan, Esther improves and various life-changing events — such as losing her virginity and her final understanding of death through the suicide of her friend Joan — help her regain her sanity. The novel ends with her entering the room for her interview which would decide whether she was free from the hospital or not. The reader does not find out the outcome of the interview, and the novel ends with the words: "I stepped into the room." (Source: *The Bell Jar*. Retrieved May 17, 2008, from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia Web site: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Bell_Jar.)

Synopsis of *The Heart of the Matter* by Graham Greene (1972)

Major Henry Scobie is a long-serving police inspector in a British colonial town on the West Coast of Africa during World War II, responsible for providing both local and wartime security as well as controlling smuggling. He is married to Louise, a solitary woman who loves literature and poetry but struggles to form social

relationships, but he does not love her. He feels responsible for her happiness, but is unable to love anyone, including himself. They had a daughter, Catherine, who died at school in England several years before. Louise calls Henry "Ticki," although it's apparent that he dislikes the nickname. Louise is a devout Catholic, and for her sake Henry converted to Catholicism. Although he believes in the teachings of Catholicism, his practice of his faith is largely superficial.

Scobie is passed over yet again for a promotion to Commissioner, causing Louise great distress, both for her personal ambition and her hopes that the local British community will begin to accept her. Louise asks Scobie to send her away to South Africa, and then to join her there in a few years when he can retire.

At the same time, a new inspector, named Wilson, arrives in the town. He is priggish and socially inept, and hides his passion for poetry for fear of ostracism from his colleagues. He and Louise strike up a friendship, which Wilson mistakes for love. Wilson rooms with another colleague named Harris, who has created a sport for himself of killing the cockroaches that appear in the apartment each night. He invites Wilson to join him, but in the first match, they end up quarrelling over the rules of engagement.

One of Scobie's duties is to lead the inspections of local passenger ships, particularly looking for smuggled diamonds, a needle-in-a-haystack problem that never yields results. A Portuguese ship, the *Esperança* (the Portuguese word for "hope"), comes into port, and a disgruntled steward reveals the location of a letter hidden in the captain's quarters. Scobie finds it, and because it is addressed to someone in Germany, he must confiscate it in case it should contain secret codes or other clandestine information. The captain says it's a letter to his daughter and begs Scobie to forget the incident, offering him a bribe of one hundred pounds when he learns that they share a faith. Scobie declines the bribe and takes the letter, but having opened and read it through (thus breaking the rules) and finding it innocuous, he decides not to submit it to the authorities, and burns it.

Scobie is called to a small inland town to deal with the suicide of the local inspector, a man named Pemberton, who was in his early twenties and left a note implying that his suicide was due to a loan he couldn't repay. Scobie suspects the involvement of the local agent of a Syrian man named Yusef, a local black marketeer. Yusef denies it, but warns Scobie that the British have sent a new inspector specifically to look for diamonds; Scobie claims this is a hoax and that he doesn't know of any such man. Scobie later dreams that he is in Pemberton's situation, even writing a similar note, but when he awakens, he tells himself that he could never commit suicide, as no cause is worth the eternal damnation that suicide would bring.

Scobie tries to secure a loan from the bank to pay the two hundred pound fee for Louise's passage, but is turned down. Yusef offers to lend Scobie the money at four percent per annum. Scobie initially declines, but after an incident where he mistakenly thinks Louise is contemplating suicide, he accepts the loan and sends Louise to South Africa. Wilson meets them at the pier and tries to interfere with their parting.

Shortly afterwards, the survivors of a shipwreck begin to arrive after forty days at sea in lifeboats. One young girl dies as Scobie tries to comfort her by pretending to be the girl's father, who was killed in the wreck. A nineteen-year-old woman named Helen Rolt also arrives in bad shape, clutching an album of postage stamps. She was married before the ship left its original port and is now a widow, and her wedding ring is too big for her finger. Scobie feels drawn to her, as much to the cherished album of stamps as to her physical presence.

He soon starts a passionate affair with her, all the time being aware that he is committing a grave sin - adultery. A letter he writes to Helen ends up in Yusef's hands, and the Syrian uses it to blackmail Scobie into sending a letter for him via the returning *Esperança*, thus avoiding the censors.

When Louise unexpectedly returns, Scobie struggles to keep her ignorant of his love affair. But he is unable to renounce Helen, even in the confessional, so the priest tells him to think it over again and postpones absolution. Still, in order to please his wife, Scobie goes to Mass with her and thus receives communion in state of "mortal sin" - one of the gravest sins for a Catholic to commit. Shortly after he witnesses Yusef's boy delivering a 'gift' to Scobie, Scobie's servant Ali is killed by wharf rats. We are led to believe that Yusef arranged this, although Scobie blames himself. In the body of his dead servant, Scobie sees the image of God.

Now desperate, Scobie decides to free everyone from himself - even God - so he commits suicide, being aware that this would end in damnation according to the teaching of the Church. But his efforts prove useless in the end - Louise had been not as naive as he had believed, the affair with Helen and the suicide are found out, and his wife is left behind wondering about the mercy and forgiveness of God. (Source: The Heart of the Matter. Retrieved May 20, 2008, from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia Web site: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_heart_of_the_matter.)

Synopsis of *The Second Coming* by Walker Percy

The Second Coming, involves two suicides. First, there is Will Barrett's father's suicide, both the failed

attempt and the successful suicide. Second, there is Will Barrett's going into the cave to answer, by way of his death or survival, the question of God's existence. Will proposes to sacrifice his life to answer the question of the existence of God.

Will Barrett's father attempted suicide twice, unsuccessfully the first time, successfully the second time. After his early retirement, Barrett realizes that his father's suicide attempt was one of the most important events in Barrett's life. While out hunting quail, Barrett and his father follow some stray birds into the woods, where Barrett's father attempts to shoot first the boy, and then himself. The attempted murder-suicide is a failure in that the father is unsuccessful in killing both the boy and himself. However, it is successful in that no one knows that it was an attempted murder-suicide. Rather they think that it was a hunting accident. Why did Will's father attempt this murder-suicide? Will recalls a conversation he had with his father, and the events of the day:

You are like me. We are two of a kind. I saw it last night. . .

I saw the way you lay in bed last night and slept or didn't sleep. You're one of us, I'm afraid.

You already know too much. It's too bad in a way.

Us? Who's us?

You'd be better off if you were one of them.

Who's them?

The ignorant armies that clash by night (Percy 1980:50 [italics in original]).

Although Will's father's murder-suicide attempt was unsuccessful, this experience was a definitive event in Will's life. Will realizes that, "[My father] was trying to warn me. He was trying to tell me that one day it would happen to me too, that I would come to the same place that he came to, and I have. . ." (Percy 1980:56). Will's father was insufficiently integrated into society, and his suicide was egoistic suicide. He expresses that he does not feel a connection with most other people in society, however he does feel a connection with his son, thinking that they are two of a kind. He is so sure that Will will likewise experience this distance between himself and others in society that he attempts to kill Will. Some time after the attempted murder-suicide, Will's father successfully kills himself by blowing his own brains out with a shot gun.

And it does come to pass that Will arrives at the same place where his father has been, egoism. After making a small fortune as a lawyer in New York City, Will retires to North Carolina. There, he arrives at the same social place that his father had come to, a lack of connection with others in society, and feeling that life is meaningless.

Will does not relate to the people around him:

My quarrel with the others can be summed up as a growing disgust with two classes of people. These two classes between them exhaust the classes of people in general. That is to say, there are only two classes of people, the believers and the unbelievers. The only difficulty is deciding which is the more feckless. . . [W]e are stuck with the two alternatives: (1) believers, who are intolerable, and (2) unbelievers who are insane. I may be a member of the second class, the unbelievers, and not doubt an even greater ass hole than they. . . (Percy 1980:173).

Although he is an unbeliever, Will asserts that he is not crazy. This is because unlike the other unbelievers, Will does ask the existential questions ignored by other unbelievers. "[B]ut at least I am not crazy" (Percy 1980:173).

Will feels that there aren't any clear answers to the existential question: "My father seemed to know what was what and ended up distributing brain cells over the attic - after trying to take me with him. Perhaps he was right. I aim to find out. I have found out how to find out" (Percy 1980:171). At this point, Will hits upon the idea that his life or death could be the answer to what he considered the ultimate question: Does God exist? Will explains his scheme:

My experiment is simply this: I shall go to a desert place and wait for God to give a sign. If no sign is forthcoming I shall die. But people will know why I died: because there is no sign. The cause of my death will be either his nonexistence or his refusal to manifest himself, which comes to the same thing as far as we are concerned (Percy 1980:176).

Will went down into a cave to wait for God's sign, or lack thereof. Seeing no clear sign from God, Will remains down in the cave for a week or more. Will waits for the answer, one way or the other, until he develops a toothache so painful "that every heartbeat feels like a hot ice pick shoved straight up into the brain" (Percy 1980:194). Will finds that he can no longer concentrate his thoughts on his outrageous experiment, because the pain is so intense that it makes him nauseated. "There is one cure for cosmic explorations, grandiose ideas about God, man, death, suicide and such - and that is nausea. I defy a man afflicted with nausea to give a single thought to these vast subjects" (Percy 1980:194). In the end, Will is unsure of the source of the toothache, whether "act of God" or biological. The question of God's existence remains unanswered. (Source: Glenn W. Muschert.)

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