

The Impossibility of Truth and the Hope of Interpretation

How can we believe anything we read? This is the pervasive question underlying the generation-spanning story of *Whale*, by Cheon Myeong-kwan. While exploring the complicated lives of three different women and the many people that touch those lives, the tale's narrator takes note of inconsistencies and discrepancies between the stories and truths of certain characters and moments. Bringing up questions on the existence of "objective truth" in relation to storytelling, the narrator sows doubt in the readers of Chunhui and Geumbok's stories, leading us to wonder just how much we can trust the narrator to relay a faithful retelling. Particularly after the gruesome murder of the man with the scar, the reader is left to evaluate the trustworthiness of any of the characters' or narrator's words, as well as find any "truth" that remains after Geumbok's grief-stricken crime of passion, the man with the scar's gasping last words, and later renegations and alterations to that night's story. The narrator, refusing the clarity of a singular truth or untruth to any story, precedes any further storytelling about the murder with the injunction, "Reader, you will believe what you want to believe. That's all there is to it" (99). This statement reverberates throughout the novel's exploration of Chunhui, a character with no words and therefore an infinite capacity of interpretation and extrapolation from her life's work, her drawings on bricks. With this, *Whale* ultimately comments on the inability to find an "objective truth," both in life as in fiction, as well as the very nature of storytelling as being antithetical to any such findings; instead, what is gained from fiction and stories is the very process of pondering upon and attempting to interpret these varying realities.

The lead up to one of the most climactic moments of the novel, as well as the major introduction of doubt, goes as follows. Geumbok remains devoted to her husband Geokjeong, who has changed from a hard-working, strong laborer into a lazy, abusive, obese parasite upon her life. In order to take care of him, she accepts many favors from the man with the scar, including moving into his house with Geokjeong in tow (98). Despite the man with the scar's reputation as a "renowned con artist, notorious smuggler, supreme butcher, rake, pimp of all the prostitutes on the wharf, and hot-tempered broker," he treats Geumbok with care, as he is in love with her and wants her to himself, enough to offer to kill

Geokjeong and “separate him from [Geumbok] permanently” (90). Geumbok, however, violently rebuffs him, asserting, “I will know you’re responsible if something happens to him” and threatening to kill herself if he so much as “touch[es] even a hair on [Geokjeong’s] body” (90). In this instance, the story emphasizes Geumbok’s intense belief in her instincts concerning Geokjeong and the man with the scar’s relationship, as she declares herself willing to kill herself based on her inner knowledge of whether or not the man with the scar hurt Geokjeong or not. In the following scene, however, this belief in her own instincts is questioned. Geumbok wakes up to find both the man with the scar and Geokjeong gone from their shared house and feels, through the “law of subconscious,” that something terrible is happening (97). Going outside, she finds the man with the scar standing at the edge of the wharf, in front of a huge wave created by the sea, and her head, “flooded with a vision of the man with the scar, tying a rock to Geokjeong’s waist and pushing him into the sea” (98). Without waiting for an explanation, Geumbok, taken over by her instinctive reading of the situation, stabs the man with the scar with a harpoon. Shocked, the man with the scar defends himself with his last words, straining to protest, “I... didn’t... kill... Geokjeong. He killed, himself...” (98). The scene ends here, leaving the readers with two different narratives to evaluate against each other; the inner visions of a woman with uncanny hunches, or the last words of a dying con artist.

Following the death of the man with the scar, the narrator refuses to go further without questioning the existence of “objective truth,” evaluating the credibility of “a story that floats through the world going from mouth to mouth,” and wondering if “a human [could] continue to be crafty even as he slides toward death in front of the person he loves” (99). The narrator then acknowledges that to all these questions, “we do not have answers,” and leaves us with the declaration: “Reader, you will believe what you want to believe. That’s all there is to it” (99). In doing so, *Whale* preemptively undermines its own future credibility as a novel of truth-telling and instead emphasizes the “very nature” of storytelling as an art form that “contains adjustments and embellishments depending on the perspective of the person telling it, depending on the listener’s convenience, depending on the storyteller’s skills” (99). This warning remains in our thoughts as the narrator launches into the story of Geokjeong, suddenly waking in the night

and suddenly becoming aware of his monstrous existence, unrecognizable to himself and unaware of the world around him. Coming to this realization, Geokjeong drags himself to the sea in order to commit suicide. The man with the scar, waking soon after Geokjeong, follows behind and only watches as he throws himself in to the sea, unsure and unable to do anything before Geokjeong's suicide and his own subsequent murder. This version of the story, of course, makes the man with the scar's death senseless, meaningless, and undeserved. Afterwards, when Geumbok, having changed genders from female to male and nearing the end of his life, once again meets the man she killed in the form of a ghost, the man with the scar reiterates, "I didn't kill Geokjeong. He killed himself" (264). This time, however, Geumbok says she now knows this to be the truth and apologizes to the man with the scar, once again validating the man with scar's side of the story. Despite *Whale* seemingly corroborating the man with the scar's story, doubt continues to be sowed in the reader's mind as to the real truth of what happened that night. After all, we will never have the answers.

Although the death of the man with the scar is the most contentious reckoning of the truth within this novel, doubts as to the accuracy of storytelling are brought up time and time again in *Whale*, creating a continuous current of unrest beneath the narration. For example, on page 94, children create wild and strange rumors about a monstrous beast living in the man with the scar's house. This beast, wildly obese, is rumored to eat a truckload of food everyday and pound on the floor, demanding children to eat, but the man with the scar keeps him due to a personal fascination. The narrator ends this retelling of local rumors by dismissing them as the nonsensical prattle of children; but of course, we know that this creature is Geokjeong, who, at the time, was morbidly obese and eating enormous quantities of food everyday. By creating this contrast between what we as readers know to be true and what the narrator dismisses as irrelevant chatter, the "truth" becomes incongruous. Another time this uncertainty is brought out is during the story of Geumbok's arrival in Pyeongdae Station. The story that people tell involves an old man playing an instrument under the tree at the time of her arrival; however, others disagree and point out that there was no such tree at Pyeongdae Station (130). This seemingly small discrepancy within the story people tell amongst themselves throws the entire tale into question, and the narrator ultimately concludes

that it must have been “made up,” a yarn spun into existence by those with nothing else to do but talk. Through several of these discrepancies in stories and rumors profligated by different storytellers, the narrator of *Whale* creates an environment of questioning into the possibility of an entirely true story, with entirely reliable narrators.

In this novel full of people talking and exchanging stories about the salacious tales that come out of the lives of others, one character is distinctly different from the rest. Chunhui, born mute and unable to tell or understand stories, has only ever had experience communicating with her childhood companion, the elephant named Jumbo. The fact that Chunhui is unable to speak and put words to her own thoughts and actions requires everything she does to be interpreted. Through a strange twist of fate, the bricks that Chunhui made consistently until her death were used to build a grand and important theater in her country, leading to a great amount of scholarly interest in Chunhui and her life. Soon after, Chunhui is termed the “Red Brick Queen,” and “soon, all kinds of stories about the bricks proliferated in the media,” with there being “so many reports it was difficult to determine what was true and what was made up. A new story was added almost every day and a correction was issued almost everyday.” (350). Again, the existence of multiple stories makes it difficult to distinguish fact from the media’s falsifications. Since Chunhui was nonverbal, could not write, and had likely not interacted with a singular person during the latter half of her life, the only thing scholars had to go on were the bricks that Chunhui drew on. One may believe that *Whale* expresses its view on scholars through the debate behind the foreboding couplet that comes out of the shaman’s mouth, which prophesizes the great fire that kills a crowd of people and ruins Pyeongdae forever. Because the scholars in that case were nonsensical and violent in their argument, we may interpret *Whale*’s position on the scholarship about Chunhui’s life to be that it was similarly nonsensical. To be sure, the novel often pokes fun at the scholars doing archaeological digs and attempting to extrapolate a life from bricks; but at the same time, the narrator also aligns himself and us, the readers, with these scholars. Although we may know more than the scholars perusing Chunhui’s life and theorizing about her drawings, we still only know as much as the storyteller knows, and even then, we do not know if the storyteller is telling us the truth. In the end, the novel decides to leave us with a

stunningly moving poem by a scholar struck by inspiration from one of Chunhui's drawings, allowing us to recognize that ultimately, the worth of *Whale* and stories in general lies not in the search of a fundamental truth, but in the process itself of interpreting, questioning, and creating based on the discrepancies, doubts, and uncertainties resulting from the many variations of glorious stories.