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Histrionicus Histrionicus Histrionicus: Common Wild Ducks and Storytelling Animals

Kira Symington

Our lives are built with stories; they are the foundations of our perception, the pillars of our actions, and the blueprints of our aspirations. We must make sense of them to understand the world, each other, and ourselves. And, as Alasdair MacIntyre proved in his book, *After Virtue*, they must be used to make sense of even just one sentence, such as “The name of the common wild duck is *Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus*,” which is only comprehensible in the context of a narrative (210).

Scene 1

A bus stop outside the local university's library; two students stand waiting. YOU are wearing a fashionable leather jacket with horribly unfashionable plaid pants. YOUNG MAN stands to the left of YOU, wearing a white dress shirt and slacks.

Silence for a minute.

YOUNG MAN looks at YOU with recognition, focusing on your strikingly horrible pants.

YOUNG MAN

(politely)

The name of the common wild duck is *Histrionicus histri-*

onicus histrionicus.

Silence.

YOU hum in response.

NARRATOR

The YOUNG MAN has mistaken YOU for a student that approached him yesterday in the library, asking, “Do you by any chance know the Latin name of the common wild duck?” It was an understandable mistake. He had thought the chances of two students that frequented the library sharing the exact same horrible taste in pants was low. It should have been (MacIntyre 210).

Now, if the young man had consistently said similar statements at random and without context, it would be simple nonsense and a case for madness (MacIntyre 210). However, knowing the young man’s place in a narrative, his actions are intelligible. Within the scene, you (the character) cannot make sense of the young man’s statement without the context that the young man assumes about you. Taking a step back, we as readers are privileged in the fact that we know more about the story through the narrator. Yet, even so, we could come to an even fuller understanding if we knew the story behind why the student in the library was asking what the name of the common wild duck was in the first place. Given the “facts” of the interaction as they are without context and history, we cannot understand what happened. The conversations we have, the goals we pursue, and the fundamental ways we interact with the world are only sensible when placed within a story.

Growing up in rural North Dakota, stories were my primary way of engaging with the world. They were of vital importance to me because, as a child and in such an insular environment, I had limited control over my own life story. I remember hiding, with a flashlight to secretly read at

night, under my old pink-and-blue quilt that Grandma had made for me. When my parents caught on (despite the realistic snoring noises I made whenever they opened the door), I had to face several new obstacles, such as confiscated books and flashlights and many a stern-talking-to. But I loved them too much to give them up. It is simply unreasonable to expect one to live without stories. We cannot operate without them. My parents orient their entire lives around the Christian story of the Bible as Muslims do with the Quran. But even take away religion, and still, as MacIntyre states, “man is in his actions and practice, as well as his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal” (216).

How so? Think about how we live. We all, as Barbra Hardy says, “dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative” (MacIntyre 211). In not only conversation, but also through games, financial transactions, lectures, exercise routines, trips, and amid a whole host of human experiences in general, we find a narrative structure. With its beginnings leading to middles, and its middles leading to endings, these basic human experiences “embody reversals and recognitions; they move towards and away from climaxes” as well as having “digressions and subplots, indeed digressions within digressions and subplots within subplots” (MacIntyre 211). Games can be structured in the narrative of “war,” with climaxes in strategy or battles and only ending in one player’s loss and the other’s victory (or in the rarer case, a “draw”). Financial transactions operate on the shared story that a certain piece of linen holds a certain value. Even falling in love is, in some cultures, structured through a story of a journey as illustrated so brilliantly in George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By* (44). They state, “We have found [...] that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (Lakoff and Johnson 3). Scientists theorize that “Storytelling is arguably the defining characteristic of humans that sets us apart from the animal kingdom and our hominin ancestors” (Joubert et al. 1). Metaphors, stories, narratives, contexts,

and histories are the hardware of our human experience of perception and consciousness.

Thus, we have “life stories” and to know someone is to know their history with its pains, successes, actions, and deeds. If someone were to ask me to tell them about my mother, I would not describe her as a mere collection of atoms or go into detail about the various biological processes and systems that comprise her existence. Why? Because, in that case, the way we think about others, the world, and ourselves are through the context of more personal stories. We are the “subject of a narrative that runs from one’s birth to one’s death” (MacIntyre 217). Not only that, but our lives are part of a larger story of human civilization within the subplot of American history and so on and so forth. From the most macro lenses of history, sociology, and economics to the most micro lenses of psychology, conversation, and games, we think through narratives.

Even if I were to describe my mother in terms of atoms or her circulatory system, I still would be appealing to a narrative structure. I would take a fragmented “fact” of life and abstract it through language to say something along the lines of my mother is a complex arrangement of atoms that make up chemical compounds that interact in a certain way and so on. I take my physical reality and in order to understand it, I draw pictures of it in textbooks, name it in Latin, and tell a story about electrons, neutrons, and protons. Or take one of my personal favorite examples: Mondays, something we collectively fear and dread, do not exist. To understand the sun disappearing and appearing again, humanity made up a story of patterns called “days.” It is a tale about a physical reality. It is obvious that to make sense of the world, us, and others, we do so through stories.

Scene 1

A bus stop amid a big city; traffic drowns out most noise. A crowd of people stand waiting, YOUNG MAN is to the right of YOU. YOU are wearing a stained artist's smock over plain clothes; YOUNG MAN is wearing a black turtleneck with skinny jeans.

Silence for a minute.

YOUNG MAN looks nervous, blushing with embarrassment. He scans the crowd, and his eyes settle on YOU.

YOUNG MAN

(whispering quickly)

The name of the common wild duck is Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus.

Silence.

YOU have earbuds in and don't hear him.

YOU continue staring at your phone.

NARRATOR

This YOUNG MAN's psychotherapist has urged him to work on his social anxiety by approaching random strangers and talking to them. When asked what he should say, the therapist replied, "Oh, anything at all." Luckily for him, the traffic and your headphones save him from much embarrassment (MacIntyre 210).

To pursue goals, like the young man in his plot of overcoming his social anxiety, we imagine life as having quests to complete in either failure or success. To approach life in general, like his psychotherapist who takes their limited knowledge of his situation and applies to it the story of cognitive behavioral therapy, we use narrative theories. To understand his statement, we must understand his story with its climaxes and subplots. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, I will say it again, we are, fundamentally, “story-telling animals” (MacIntyre 216).

And as a result of our being “story-telling animals,” it is of immense importance to understand and utilize them (MacIntyre 216). The media, whether it be through official news channels, TikTok, or my mother’s Facebook feed, is founded on this very idea. However, the rigorous study of stories and their interpretations, as is found in the various disciplines within the humanities such as English, theatre, philosophy, history, and so on are becoming increasingly marginalized. It is very strange to see how poorly the humanities are being received by universities, students, and the general public in these times.

I too felt these same strange pressures against my interest in the humanities. When a coworker of mine once asked me what I was majoring in, I was strangely abashed in my answer, “I’m actually double majoring in English and Philosophy right now.” In response, my manager smiled and said, “No offense, but I’ve heard that if there is one thing a humanities major can’t get”—we both finished, “it’s a job.” At the time, I had thought nothing of that conversation or of the countless similar ones before that. But they kept building up until my interest in literature was overshadowed by the haunting feeling that it was not enough, it was not practical, and it most certainly could not provide for me.

Now, as I write this, it seems very odd to me that something so integral to being human would ever be pushed to the sidelines, much less the sidelines of my own life. I am, as we all are, a creature of narratives, consuming them daily, even hourly, whether it be through conversation, television, goal setting, radio or even our own thought processes. It seems absurd to say that literature is “not practical” or “not enough,” as all we do operates on the basis of narrative. It is an inescapable fact of

life. Thus, the diligent study of it is crucial.

I interviewed Dr. Lori Robison of the University of North Dakota's English Department in the fall of 2022. John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* hung on the side wall of her office; *Ophelia* suspended in summer, while the clouds outside the nearby window whispered of winter. We chatted for a while, and she told me about her days as a college student. When I began my next line of questioning, "What surprised you the most about your career?" she became concerned. She had thought being a professor would mean talking and writing about the things she loved (which it was, to some degree), but most of her job now consists of her arguing for the importance of such things, so her department is functional with enough funding and staff.

As it is now, higher education is in trouble. Dr. Robison mentioned that state funding is decreasing, and colleges are being forced to turn to tuition to make up the difference. College is becoming more inaccessible, and the pandemic and increased economic hardships are only exasperating the problem. Money (or the lack of it) has returned to the forefront of everyone's minds with the fury of a winter storm. The growth of higher education became stunted with students fearing the looming cloud of seemingly eternal debt that hung over their heads. Colleges struck by these declining numbers of students turned to the industries that promised economic growth despite the harsh climate: STEM majors. But with current state funding, colleges struggled to supply the STEM majors they promised. To compensate, resources were diverted from the humanities. Dr. Robison grieved the gradual loss of about half of her department faculty over the course of around five to ten years. Averages of about 170 majors turned into averages of about a hundred. The humanities were wilting in this cold environment.

If this was not enough, the humanities were struck with another blight, one of a more political nature. I once visited a friend, and her husband recounted to me his poor experience with his one English class. He ended it on a scornful note, "It's called *liberal arts* for a reason...." Several genuinely concerned older women and family members told me to be careful taking philosophy courses because "they are very atheis-

tic.” (I will gloss over the fact that they all encouraged me to go to Bible college, a place with an *explicit* mission to indoctrinate its students.) Ben Shapiro, a popular conservative influencer, tweeted on March 13th of 2019, that “non-STEM education is a giant scam” (McManus). Another popular conservative influencer, Steven Crowder, urged high school students not to go to college at all, especially not for the humanities as they are “useless degrees” (McManus). There was a common sentiment they all shared: all the humanities could be boiled down to being simply a breeding ground for progressive propaganda.

There are two misconceptions about the humanities I wish to address. The first is that there is a binary opposition between the sciences and the humanities and only one promises a financially stable future. As I stated earlier, STEM pursuits are inherently structured in terms of narrative. It remains a fact that “stories [are] versatile tools to help people make sense of the world around them, including issues and developments rooted in science” (Joubertet al. 2). Not only is this binary at its core, fundamentally mistaken, but its conclusion, that the humanities offer less in terms of career and economic opportunities, is also incorrect. That is not to ignore the rising inflation, decreased funding, and political climate’s effects on the humanities, but rather to point out the fact that as “story-telling animals,” we simply cannot structure our society without it. There will always remain a place for narrative in some form.

How so? The American Academy of Arts & Sciences found in a survey that “a substantial share of Americans deployed humanities skills with some regularity in their current or most recent job.” Geoffrey Borshof stated that not only will the demand for humanities skills increase in the age of automation, but it will also “provide a reliable foundation” for that future of rapid change. The British Academy reported in 2020, that “Arts, humanities and social science graduates [are] resilient to economic downturns,” and Dr. Sarah Churchwell found that humanities degrees “make graduates just as employable as STEM.” The humanities are not in opposition to the STEM fields, but also provide much in the way of financially fulfilling careers and skills.

Now I will address the second misconception I listed, that the

humanities are simply a tool for indoctrination. We consume narratives daily, often unwittingly. Advertisements on billboards, websites, streaming and social media services tell us fantasies about how a product will transform your life or somehow make you the main character of everyone else's narratives. Their teeth-whitening toothpaste will get that barista you've been thinking about to finally notice you; their yoga mats and candles will provide you with spiritual peace and bodily relaxation after your long workdays. An even deeper examination of these adverts could lead you to see a more ideological narrative beneath them, that materialism will provide you with a meaningful life.

To avoid the rigorous study of stories is to take away the tools to examine them; leaving us to mindlessly consume them. For example, I have two adopted siblings from Ethiopia. They were the only black people in my small rural town. The old couple next door had heard stories from their parents, neighbors, friends, newspapers, and television shows about black people which led them to believe that my brother and sister were somehow dangerous. Their mere acceptance of ideologically founded narratives led them to assume dehumanizing things about the two young children who walked by their house on their way to school. Although they later went on to develop a genuine relationship with my siblings, their inability to critically analyze the narratives they had been fed had brought them to the point of bigotry. It is clear that to deny the discipline of the humanities, we only aid in indoctrination and propaganda. The ability to distinguish false narratives from true narratives, to understand other life stories, and to create meaningful change in these structures is only possible with the humanities. In terms of career, human nature, and social and technological progress, the humanities are not useless but *essential*.

Scene 1

A bus stop in a shady part of the city; Three strangers waiting. YOU are wearing a baby blue sweater and glasses too big for your face. YOUNG MAN stands next to you, completely expressionless. STRANGER sits on the bench, briefcase in her gloved hands.

Silence for a minute.

YOUNG MAN stares straight ahead.

STRANGER glances at her watch.

YOU yawn.

YOUNG MAN

(sternly, staccato)

The name of the common wild duck is *Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus*.

Silence.

STRANGER gets up and leaves her briefcase by the bench.

YOU pretend to not notice.

YOUNG MAN sits on the bench, holding the briefcase.

YOU feel the pressure of a glare between your shoulder blades.

YOU shiver.

NARRATOR

The STRANGER had left something of great import to her fellow Soviet spy at the bus stop. Both were greatly disappointed to see the seedy bus stop was already

occupied by YOU. But they were good at taking care of loose ends... (MacIntyre 210).

There is another element besides nature and necessity that the story-telling tradition (as is found in the humanities) provides. Like the scene above, stories can offer excitement and intrigue. They bring mystery and meaning to life and can provide a way to connect deeply with others. I remember vividly each of the stories my father told me as he tucked me into bed. Sometimes he would tell me about the double life I supposedly led: I was a superhero called *Cool Cat* who saved innocent civilians in New York City and flew back to my small town before my father got me up for school. Other times, he would spin a tale about Crumbo (the elephant Dumbo's twin sister) and how we both fought poachers in Africa. When I was a child, stories gave me a way to bond with my parents, understand moral behavior and empathy, and ultimately have *fun* with life.

Stories can also take on genres such as thriller or romance, genres that bleed into our real lives. MacIntyre has a more pessimistic view on this as he writes, "the true genre of life is neither hagiography nor saga, but tragedy" (213). Not to disagree with MacIntyre's account of life's genre, but look again at the scene above. The line—"but they were good at taking care of loose ends"—promises a continuation of the narrative or the beginning of a new one. Our stories are not fixed but rather always in the process of becoming. We are the "co-authors of our own narratives" (MacIntyre 213). For example, in the situation above, you could decide to change the genre to romance by seducing one of the spies. Or make it a comedy by self-inserting some slapstick routines. Of course, there are constraints on how much of life we can author as we live in a world with other things outside ourselves such as other people, nature, and so on. But despite these constraints on our stories, "within those constraints there are indefinitely many ways [they] can continue" (MacIntyre 216). Understanding and *enjoying* the world through a fuller knowledge of narratives opens a whole horizon of possibilities for us.

Some universities are beginning to recognize again the necessity of the humanities. During my interview with Dr. Robison, I asked her what the possible solutions to the marginalization of the humanities were at her university. She explained an outreach-based approach: if the students did not come to the humanities, they would go to them. Aviation majors, a popular major at the University of North Dakota, were required to take higher-level English classes. Other humanities courses now offered a greater variety of essential studies credits. Now, with the change of the university's president and provost, these efforts are becoming supported and even encouraged. For the University of North Dakota, things may be beginning to brighten up.

It has been encouraging to see these changes in this university in favor of the humanities; however, when you are dealing with entire institutions, those changes are excruciatingly slow at times. We need a revitalization of the humanities throughout all universities. Stories provide us with the ability to take a plain statement like "The name of the common wild duck is *Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus*" and develop theories, set goals, give meaning, and appreciate life holistically. Creating, understanding, and enjoying narratives are a fundamental part of human nature. We are "story-telling animals," and it is time we recognize that on a cultural, institutional, and personal level (MacIntyre 216).

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