

Relative truth in the case against satan



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The novel *The Case Against Satan* was written by Ray Russell in 1962 and follows what is believed to be the possession of Susan Garth, a sixteen year old girl. Whether she is possessed or is suffering from a psychiatric illness is disputed throughout the novel, as Father Gregory and Bishop Crimmings cannot come to an agreement on what they believe to be true. Russell uses many elements of the novel to demonstrate the fact that truth can never be objectively determined. He does this through the conflict between Sargent and Crimmings regarding if the devil is real, the inconclusivity of certain aspects in the novel, and Father Gregory's change of belief.

Both men attempting to cure Susan, Bishop Crimmings and Father Sargent, have different diagnoses for what is wrong with her. Crimmings believes that she is possessed by Diabolus, while Sargent rationalizes her actions with mental illness, such as schizophrenia. This illustrates the subjectivity of truth, and how the same circumstances can create very different realities for different people. Both of them are men of God, as Sargent is a priest and Crimmings is a Bishop, but even they who should have the same ideas of truth, as told by their religion, do not. This subjectivity ultimately stems to one cause, that is that Bishop Crimmings believes in the existence of Satan, while Sargent is unsure. This is seen when Crimmings first suggests that Susan is possessed by the Devil, which causes Sargent to question his beliefs: " No, it is not it is not difficult to believe in God, but for an intelligent man of the twentieth century [...] to take the Devil as seriously as he takes God; that is difficult." (Russell, 44). Despite being a priest, Gregory never came to terms with God's adversary, and it causes him to question his own beliefs, and if he was a heretic. Despite both of them receiving the same

Catholic education, both of them reading the same literature, their perceived realities of the Devil are very different. For Bishop Crimmings, the Devil is a character he can use to justify Susan's actions, a tool to explain the world. Contrarily, even the idea of Satan being real caused Gregory to question himself, and even doubt his own loyalty to God. This disparity is not due to them living in different realities, they both live in the same however they interpret it very differently, believing different things to be true, showing it's subjectivity. This aspect is also seen in the ending of the novel. The novel ends in a very peculiar way. It is never revealed if Susan was indeed possessed. After the exorcism she suddenly became better, but it is unsure whether the two are related. The fact that she was also cured after her father mysteriously died after lightning stroke next to him leaves much of what actually happened up to the discretion of the reader. It is their choice whether they want to believe Susan was actually exorcised from a demon, or if the death of her father played a role in her healing due to his sexual abuse to Susan and that he intentionally murdered her mother, though other possibilities could also be explored. Russell chooses to use the ambiguity of the ending of the novel as a final demonstration of how relative truth is, and how much our own beliefs affect what we believe it to be. He does this multiple times earlier in the novel, one such example was Father Gregory writing in his journal about the nature of Garth's possible violation of Susan. He writes: " I say " attempt", although I have no way of knowing it was not in fact consummated. I prefer to believe it was no more than an attempt, and it seems unlikely we will ever know the full truth" (Russell, 131). By writing this, he acknowledges that what happened on the day that Susan doesn't remember will remain unknown, and it will be left up to the interpretation.

This demonstrates how truth will sometimes never be known, and it will only be up to how an individual interprets it. This relativity is also seen in different characters change of what they believe to be true.

Throughout the novel, what appears to be the truth shifts as characters change their opinions. Russell uses a metaphor for this with Bruce Glencannon telling Frank Berardi about what he believes:

“ If somebody tried to tell me the moon is made of green cheese, I’d laugh. If somebody else came along and said the same thing, I’d still laugh. Then if some scientist, say, came up to me and said he had color photographs taken from a rocket that prove the moon is bright green, I’d begin to wonder; and if another scientist from somewhere else said he didn’t know about that but he’d analyzed the moon through one of these spectrosopes and found it had a high protein content... well, then I’d start to think maybe those first two nuts weren’t so nutty after all,” (Russell 94).

Throughout his pursuit of the truth in this monologue, what he perceives to be true changes, however the actual truth does not change. Whether he believes the composition of the moon to be green cheese, rock, or anything else, it does not change the actual composition of the moon, his subjective truth is independent of the actual truth. This symbolizes what happens later on in the novel, when Father Gregory and Bishop Crimmings are discussing the events that passed. Father Gregory recounts all the events that took place with Susan, and gave a psychiatric justification for each one. At the end of this however, he states: “[...] although the literal mind can explain every one of these things in natural terms, I told my brother-in-law she was

possessed. That must mean I believe!” (Russell 137). Bruce Glencannon’s monologue is a symbol for this realization of Father Gregory, and there are many similarities between the two. Similar to Bruce’s example of the moon’s composition, Father Gregory initially believed in one truth, but then due to other’s opinions, he eventually convinced himself otherwise. His change of opinion is very superficial, as it does not address any of his doubts on if it made him heretic or an undevout Catholic, he simply told himself that he believes. His difference in beliefs have no relation to whether Susan was actually possessed or not. This only further demonstrates how an individual’s relative truth has no effect on the genuine truth, and his superficial change of opinion only shows how malleable what he believes to be truth is.

Through the conflict of belief of whether the Diabolus is real, the unresolved aspects, and the change of belief of Father Gregory, Russell was able to demonstrate the relativity of truth. He demonstrates that what an individual believes to be true, and what the absolute truth really is. An individual’s relative truth is based on what they have learnt and been told, and how they choose to interpret their reality.