

Sleep walking through life: edgar huntly's unreality



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In Charles Brockden Brown's novel, *Edgar Huntly or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker* (1799), many characters have problems with interpreting their own ideas of reality and of what is actually real within the context of the novel. Edgar Huntly's often-inaccurate perception of reality causes many of the key events in the novel to occur. There are several instances of these fallacies throughout the novel, including the assumption that Clithero is Waldegrave's murderer, that the Native Americans killed Huntly's uncle and sisters, and that Clithero is innocent of any malicious intent towards Sarsefield and his wife. Brown situates his protagonist as well as other characters within this confused concept of reality in order to illustrate how humanity's perception of itself and one man's ideas about one another are often subjective and flawed, by no means universal truths.

Edgar's unreliability as a narrator is in no way accidental. Readers often begin a story with complete trust in the narrator until the narrator proves this trust unwarranted. Such is the case with Edgar: though he does not seem to have malicious intentions, he often perceives things to be true that are not. As the reader does get insight into his mind and thought process, it is easy to determine that Edgar's decisions are made solely based on what he determines to be true, and not for his own malicious reasons. However, what he deems as truth is often his own jumping to conclusions, which inspires him to some action, generally resulting in terrible consequences for both himself and others.

When Edgar finds his gun among the Native Americans, he assumes that his entire family must be dead, and that the Indians have stolen the gun from his manor before they destroyed it. He notes, " I needed no proof of my

calamity more incontestable than this. My uncle and my sisters had been murdered; the dwelling had been pillaged, and this had been a part of the plunder" (178). Yet in reality, only Edgar's uncle perished; the grounds, the house, and the sisters had not been harmed. Edgar assumes the worst, though, and this helps him justify his actions in killing all of the Native Americans that he encounters. Once he learns the truth, however, he does not give much thought to the fact that his assumptions deceived him in this case, nor wonders about other instances when he may have assumed something that ended up being false.

Not only does Edgar have flawed ideas about reality when he considers others, but he also often does not seem to know the truth about himself, both physically and mentally. There are several examples of this tendency throughout the novel. For instance, when Edgar cannot find the letters that he has kept from Waldegrave, instead of realizing that he is the only person who has access to where these letters are kept and thus must be the cause of their disappearance, he convinces himself that someone else has stolen these papers that are so important to him (128). Again, the reader is clued in to Edgar's misperceptions of himself when he wakes up in the cave: he has no idea who brought him here, leaving his body bruised and sore, and left him to starve (154). In reality, Edgar arrived at this place by his own bout of sleepwalking, though he does not realize that this is a condition that he suffers from until Sarsefield tells him so at the end of the novel. Throughout the story, Edgar continually tries to convince himself that he is a victim of someone else's folly, when he often is the one to blame for the difficult situations he finds himself in.

Though Edgar is often guilty of not knowing of his own actions and the actions of others, he does offer commentary on how problematic this state of mind can be. In his own thoughts, Edgar acknowledges how troublesome it can be when men do not realize each other's intentions and the truth that is around them. He thinks, " How little cognizance have men over the actions and motives of each other! How total is our blindness with our own performances" (268)! These ideas are the true flaws that Edgar as well as a few others have within the novel. Brown seems to argue that all of humanity struggles with these problems when people attempt to relate to one another. Edgar is not the only character who seems unable to grasp the truth when it comes to others. At different points within the novel, both Sarsefield and Clithero have tricked themselves into believing that a person who fainted had in fact fallen over dead. Both of these misperceptions greatly affect the plot, and the story would have been much different had the characters not interpreted these instances incorrectly. Brown writes these characters with such complicated notions of reality to provide evidence that men can easily allow themselves to be deceived about the conditions of their neighbors and fellow men. One of the most important quotes within the novel appears after Sarsefield explains his perception of reality, that Edgar had drowned in the river. After hearing his account, Edgar thinks to himself, " I gained a glimpse of the complicated errors by which we had been mutually deceived" (233-234). With the acknowledgment of how easy both men had been fooled, this moment seems to help Edgar realize that what one man believes to be real is not necessarily true for all men.

Considering the fact that Brown wrote this novel when America was just beginning to see itself as a country, the idea that a person cannot assume that what is true for themselves is true for near neighbors or for anyone else is important in the context of our nation's history. Edgar's misperceptions could be an allegory for America's misperceptions of the Native Americans or even the British. The lesson that Edgar Huntly teaches is that people often have different interpretations of the truth, and as Edgar Huntly proves, such interpretations sometimes lead to very destructive behavior.