ENGLISH: *SPIES*

Reality is beyond the understanding of mere humans.

"Row, row, row your boat gently down a stream, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream." This simple, innocent nursery rhyme captures in a nutshell the extent to which we can be detached from the reality. Clearly, life is not a cheerful smooth-sailing journey as this lullaby suggests; it is instead, an arduous, difficult journey navigating the vagaries of life with some scattering of joy and laughter. The unpleasant aspect of reality is often ignored to the point where it becomes incomprehensible for humans, who are deeply human and flawed. Plagued by fears and insecurities, lying becomes a defence mechanism to deliberately avoid reality in order to garner some semblance of self-esteem. Nevertheless, although we fail to understand reality by failing to recognise it, it is important to seek the evasive reality in order to understand ourselves and others. Yet understanding is a more complex task than it appears to be, as there is a fine line between knowing something and understanding it.

The human mind, despite all its complexities, is flawed with an inability to connect with the reality of situations. This may be a past, present or future event which the mind distances itself from. The detachment of our mental state from the existence of people or situations may be a product of our malleable, changing perception. This is exemplified in Michael Frayn's "Spies" as the older Stephen finds that his memory is "overwritten by hindsight". His greater adult experience and insight into the way the world works interferes with his ability to reconnect with the past. Venturing into the recesses of his memory becomes a metaphysical journey down "memory lane" to the "far-off nearby land". In this paradox, Stephen articulates how distance the past reality is when one would expect it to be easy to recall his memories. This detachment from reality of another place and time can be experienced in our modern technological world. The advent of iPhones and smartphones allows conversations to occur anywhere in the world. This has given rise to the phenomenon of people having conversations with others when they are at a family dinner or a social function. Certainly these people are unable to connect to and comprehend the situations that their bodies are in as their mind is in a different reality. The human mind is just too easily distracted and influenced by technology and by adult experience to understand reality.

The limitations of humans also extend to a need to feel validated, even if this means lying and rejecting reality in the process. The human instinct to lie in order to cover up the truth stems from the vulnerabilities of human nature. Men are weak, constantly plagued by fears and insecurities and are often afraid of succumbing to the unpleasant reality of their lives. In "Spies", young Stephen conceals the terrifying and horrible bullying which he suffers at school by filtering and editing the information he gives to his father, claiming that the boys do not call him names and refusing to give the truth to his parents when Keith slits his throat. As a truly frightened and confused boy, Stephen is incapable of coming to terms with the bullying, and becomes dominated by others for the rest of his adulthood. Evidently, the phenomenon of lying, an intrinsic part of human nature, impedes humans from facing up and understanding their reality.

Nonetheless, a dose of reality is often required to strengthen and regain a sense of identity and find peace within ourselves. Seeking the truth, no matter the difficulty, is a road travelled by many in order to find closure over a disturbing event. This demonstrates that humans are sometimes willing to embrace and connect with reality but the depth of this connection may be questionable. Michael Frayn exemplifies the need to make sense of past reality in Stefan's burning desire to put to rest the restlessness and unease which plagues him every summer. This idea is similar to families of murder victims who seek retribution through the courts of law in order to find some closure amid the tumultuous grief of their loved one. Yet how much do these families understand about the murderer's motivations? Certainly that is the reality of the horrific event; it is the why behind the act of murder which goes to the heart of the truth. It is often the case though, that the murderer is vilified and demonized for their crime. While it is irrefutable that murder is shameful and atrocious, the reality of the murderer's mindset is unknowable to the victim's family although they know the identity

of the murderer – who the murderer is. This line between knowledge and understanding is equally captured in Stephen's understanding of the truth. He ruminates that "what's unthinkable can't in nature be exactly anything. Its inexactitude is what makes it so over-powering." Hence the power of reality lies in the fact that it is incomprehensible and that the understanding of reality will always elude mere humans.

Such is the difficulty of interacting with reality. Perhaps the frustration of seeking the truth is too much for humans to bear. This explains why it is easier to take comfort and solace in fantasies and lies which cushion humans from unpleasant realities. The weaknesses of the human mind may also contribute to the detachment of humans from reality and render humans blissfully optimistic and naïve, rowing their boat along a calm tranquil stream while there are the most horrible undercurrents and crocodiles below.