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INTRODUCTION

Anna Quindlen is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who has turned her talents to fiction writing. *One True Thing* is partly autobiographical in the sense that Anna Quindlen took time off from college herself to nurse her mother who was dying of cancer. The narrative thus has the veracity of experience. While the story line centres on the changing relationships between Ellen Gulden and her parents, especially her mother, it also raises important wider issues.

Set in a small town in Middle America, Anna Quindlen explores the moral dimensions of duty and responsibility within a family. Just as Ellen Gulden, the twenty-four year old protagonist (main character) is beginning to establish herself as a successful journalist in New York, her father demands that she return home to nurse her mother through terminal cancer. Reluctantly she agrees but the relationship between her father and herself, once close, then damaged by her knowledge of his infidelities, now deteriorates further. Ellen is angry that her father refuses to take sabbatical to nurse his faithful wife, Kate.

Ellen's gentle mother, Kate (Katherine Gulden), is a middle class woman who keeps alive the tradition of homemaking, an occupation that Ellen has not appreciated, as she was 'vaguely contemptuous' of it 'at the time' (p.17). She had been preoccupied with pleasing her father, deferring to his superior intellect, whilst being uncomfortably aware of his failings. Through the closeness of the relationship that has been forced upon her Ellen painfully learns the value of belonging to a family and of the importance of a close mother-daughter relationship. Just as Ellen is not spared the agony of her mother's illness, neither is the reader.

When her mother dies, Ellen is accused of murder. She is gaoled and must endure the odium of the whole town while she waits to appear before the Grand Jury. She protests her own innocence while believing that her father is guilty of administering a fatal overdose to the woman who so obviously loves him. Ellen decides to protect her father although his motives are unclear to her.

Ellen must undertake a journey, one that will bring her to the knowledge of both her strengths and her weaknesses. In the process, Ellen's understanding of 'one true thing' changes significantly as she seeks the 'one true thing' that is important in her own life.

CONTEXT & BACKGROUND

Setting

American College System

George Gulden is chairman of the Langhorne College English department; his sons Jeff and Brian attend college in another town. The college system provides a general undergraduate education for students prior to taking higher level specialist study at university. Students leave home and live in dormitories on campus, returning home for the holidays. When Ellen is at university, one of her professors casts a slur on George who has remained in the college system, implying some inferiority. There are also references to his English courses that suggest his work is not of the highest academic order.

The Family and its Structure

Both the Gulden family and many of the Langhorne residents provide a model of traditional family life and values, as exemplified in many 1950s American television shows, such as *Father Knows Best*, *My Three Sons* and *Leave It To Beaver*, where the father is clearly the breadwinner and decision maker, while the mother is the homemaker, economically and socially dependent. Children are dutiful and respectful. In the novel we see elements of this 'perfect family model', although criticisms are evident.

- Ellen describes George's relationship with his sons by referring to popular shows such as those above (p.32), although he reads rather than playing ball.
- Kate and George's relationship conforms to this traditional, nuclear family model. She abandons intellectual pursuits, making sacrifices and protecting the family unit at the expense of other needs, especially her intellectual development.
- This type of family has origins in the Protestant ethic of white America, shown by the family retaining some link with Christian traditions, illustrated by the Thanksgiving dinner and the town's Episcopal Book Club.
- Townsfolk values are evident when Ellen's euthanasia essay wins a competition: 'the conservative Catholic governor, who usually awarded the prize, wanted nothing to do with me' (p.30). Later, Brian knows he cannot reveal his homosexuality.

Social Issues

Gender Roles

Gender roles are the expectations that cultures have of what constitutes masculine and feminine behaviours, lifestyles, activities, preferences, and so on. Much of what we call masculine and feminine is actually learned from our experiences in the family, from the media, with our peer groups, at school, in the workplace — in other words, through all our social interactions.

Gender roles are often stereotyped in naturalistic terms. Most people just assume that men and boys for instance are more likely to want to play rough games and have an interest in cars and football whilst girls and women are 'naturally' better at raising children, caring for others and maintaining family and home. The women's movement in the 1960s challenged these kinds of stereotypes claiming that they limited both men and women from pursuing their respective potentials, perpetuating inequalities between the sexes. However, women today are still expected to take on the major roles in childcare, care for the sick or elderly in their families and the bulk of domestic responsibilities.

This issue is considered further in *Themes & Issues* (p.56).

Euthanasia

In 1995, public opinion statistics showed that 57% of Americans, as compared with 81% of Australians and 92% of the Dutch, supported euthanasia. In 1997 the US Supreme Court unanimously decided that ordinary American citizens have no constitutional right to physician-assisted suicide, making euthanasia illegal. Individual states can attempt to pass laws permitting euthanasia but they have to fight a very strong Pro-Life lobby opposed to it on religious grounds.

Many fear doctor-assisted suicide would establish a 'slippery slope' of abuse but statistics show that there have always been physicians who will help patients die, despite the laws. Dr. Jack Kavorkian, a Michigan physician who in 1998 actively helped a patient die, was charged with first degree murder and was found guilty of second degree murder in March 1999. Recent surveys of terminal patients in America showed that 74% wished to die because of discomfort other than pain, 53% because of loss of dignity, 52% because of fear of loss of control over their lives. In November 2000 the Netherlands became the first country to legalise Euthanasia.

Terminal Illness, Death and Dying

The novel raises important issues about the dignity and rights of the terminally ill and the dying person. Teresa gives Ellen 'the Dying Person's Bill of Rights.' One of its main tenets is 'I have the right to be treated as a living human being until I die' (p.121). Dr Cohn's treatment of Kate through the novel illustrates the need for honesty and respect in dealing with the terminally ill. Several aspects of death and dying are dealt with through Kate's illness and death.

- Euthanasia and Suicide — brave or cowardly?
- Stoicism as a response to pain
- The importance of dignity
- The stages of denial, anger, grief, guilt, blame, reconciliation.

Possible Readings: Traditional or Feminist?

There is more than one way to read a novel. In analysing the text and arriving at your interpretation make sure that you can sustain your position and support it with references from the text. Do not lock yourself into the alternatives offered above but consider them as a starting point. By carefully interrogating the text with questions such as the following, develop your own viewpoint.

- Q** Is *One True Thing* of relevance and interest only to female readers?
- Q** Does the novel simply reinforce the place of women in society as having a moral duty to be the primary carers of children and mothers, fathers, brothers?
- Q** In going back to the city and assuming her life, Ellen takes on a caring role but in quite a different way from her mother. How do you interpret this?
- Q** What issues are raised through the references to Brian's homosexuality?
- Q** Do you see this book as a critique of the male dominated society with some quite explicit criticisms of men? How are readers asked to question men's assumptions about their roles in the situation?
- Q** Ellen's ultimate choice of partner is a more balanced man who can be masculine and caring, a man who says he never has all the answers. How does this affect your understanding of the book?

GENRE, STYLE & STRUCTURE

Genre

One True Thing is a novel written retrospectively by an adult narrator, Ellen Gulden, who recounts her experiences of nursing her mother through a terminal illness. It is the story of a young woman who must reassess the values she has adhered to in the light of a maturity gained while learning to know and value her mother in a new way.

First-Person Narrator — Features and Effects

The strategy, sometimes referred to as a self-reflexive narrative technique, allows the author to establish a character who speaks in the first person. This creates the impression that Ellen Gulden is a 'reliable narrator' who:

- speaks truthfully to the reader as the witness of her own life;
- has authority over the events related;
- tells the story in hindsight, reflecting on her difficulties in creating relationships with partners and on her own behaviour, thoughts and attitudes;
- filters the views of her family and friends through her own experiences — others never speak directly to the reader; there are no letters or diary entries to help judge their point of view;
- provides an in-depth understanding of her suffering and transformation when she is forced to put aside her feelings and needs;
- shows her growing ethical appreciation of another's needs — those of her mother, a good woman — a 'Jane' as in *Pride and Prejudice* — who deserves love and care from those closest;
- positions readers to share *her* viewpoint of her mother's suffering and stoicism.

Style

References to Other Texts

One True Thing refers to works from American Popular Culture (films, TV shows, newspapers and popular books) and classical literature. The Popular Culture references depict idealised versions of relationships and families with happy-ending narratives. They suggest that its unreal worlds

can become a frame of reference for real life and indicate the pervasive underlying influence of popular media on Americans' attitudes and expectations of real life. These references also contribute to our understanding of characters, relationships and theme developments.

Popular Culture References

In the novel there are many references to Hollywood films and American TV shows. Some examples are listed here with brief details that indicate their significance. Note others you find important.

- The 'down home' values implicit in *The Wizard of Oz* provide an insight into the Gulden family. Ironically, when arriving back in New York Ellen says 'There's no place like home' and Jules answers, 'We're not in Kansas any more'.
- The lowbrow Gothic romance novels show Brian's preference for popular culture over classical culture, borne out by his ignorance about Victorian novelist George Eliot, a pseudonym for English woman writer, Mary Ann Evans (1819-1880). Brian's ignorance implies some rejection of his father who specialises in English Literature.
- Jimmy Stewart in *It's a Wonderful Life* reminds us of the old style American movie hero. In this film George Bailey comes to appreciate the small town values of Bedford, such as the importance of a strong community spirit. Importantly, in that film positive values are associated with the past. Progress is something to be feared, a direct threat to religious beliefs and family values. Is the suggestion here that Langhorne is stuck in the past and is not necessarily an ideal place?
- Ellen tells Mrs Forburg 'You're playing the Shirley Booth role in this movie'. This refers to the process of understanding and interpreting real life through popular culture TV representations — mainly through soaps, TV dramas, chat shows and the like.

Classical Literature References

The references to classical literature provide a frame of reference mainly for the interpretation of George, Kate and Ellen. Kate Gulden proves herself to be an intelligent reader, studying the classics in the light of her lived experience. George, on the other hand, offers theoretical approaches that do not relate the books to real life. This is borne out by Ellen's confusion about her mother's discussion of *Pride and Prejudice* because they hadn't discussed the plot, characters and themes along academic lines. Kate used

the novel to cast light on Ellen's personal relationships and on her own experience as the unappreciated, quiet good wife who works for others in the background. Brief guidelines follow for selected references.

- Victorian literature depicts a period in English history when traditional patriarchal ideas were at their peak. Women tended to be self-sacrificing, the 'angel in the house' devoting themselves completely to their usually large family, while husbands were authoritarian, stern, distant figures who provided income for the family. Novels by Charles Dickens (*David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*) and George Eliot [Mary Ann Evans] (*Middlemarch*, *Silas Marner*) particularly contextualise and critique the kind of attitudes and behaviour exhibited by George Gulden. These works offer social criticism and, importantly, have clear moral messages that George himself fails to live up to.
- George called Ellen 'little Nell' from Charles Dickens' novel *The Old Curiosity Shop* (published 1841).
- Kate gave up reading *Pride and Prejudice* when she married George. Why?
- Classical titles such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Middlemarch*, *Silas Marner*, *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House* and *Anna Karenina* are all referred to at various points. They are works usually studied in formal university programs, and, directly or indirectly, contrast with Brian's selection of the popular culture references. George would consider himself an expert in classical literature.
- The character, Jane Bennet, from *Pride & Prejudice*, allows Kate to plead for the quiet, good souls to be recognised and valued. Kate voices clear criticism of George who teaches that Elizabeth Bennet is the important one. Is there an implied criticism that Elizabeth is more self-centred and less morally worthy?
- *Anna Karenina* is used to introduce various attitudes to a life of love, to a woman following her passion rather than being constrained by duty, and to introduce a character who suicides. Anna is another character who contrasts with Kate and the character is used to comment on the moral value of women's actions in novels. Ellen revised her reading of Anna leaving her son and husband for Vronsky in the light of experience. In what ways and why? Note that Kate has this as the final book for the Gulden Girls Literature Club but Ellen fails to see how it prefigures her own mother's suicide.

- Ellen's disappointment that she and her mother don't read *Anna Karenina* together marks a major change in their relationship. She appreciates and understands Kate's female viewpoint on goodness and the moral value of duty. This is opposed to George's stereotyped male view of Kate — that she is not an intellectual and that her interpretation of books is not academic.

Structure

The chapters are unnumbered and quite short, enabling the author to present the narrative episodically. The novel opens with a Prologue that precedes the events of Part Two, foreshadowing events and building suspense. Part One uses a flashback technique to recount the main story of Kate's terminal illness and the part that Ellen is required to play in her nursing. The novel ends with a formal Epilogue that ties together the loose ends of the story and relates another stage in Ellen's quest for self-knowledge. Set eight years after the main action, the Epilogue recounts Ellen's change of career, her brothers' fortunes and a final meeting with her father.

The Title

The title, *One True Thing*, is used to signal some of the key concerns of the novel as evident in these quotations:

- George's charm 'was a real true thing....the stream of pleasantries that my father could pour from the pitcher of that personality' (p.53).
- Ellen explains that she and her brothers made her mother 'simpler' after she was dead. They had always made her what they 'needed her to be. We'd made her ours, our one true thing' (p.276).
- The 'one true thing' that Ellen must learn, with her mother's prompting, is to be true to herself. Ellen reaches a point of maturity when she realises that relationships between two people *are* important.