Before Reading

Like the Sun
Short Story by R. K. Narayan

How important is telling the TRUTH?

We all know that honesty is the best policy. But sometimes the truth hurts people’s feelings. In “Like the Sun,” a schoolteacher is determined to be honest, even if it puts a strain on his relationships.

QUICKWRITE In a brief letter to an advice columnist, describe a situation in which telling the truth would have painful consequences. Then exchange letters with a partner and write a response to your partner’s letter.

COMMON CORE

RL 1 Cite evidence to support inferences drawn from the text. RL 3 Analyze how complex characters develop and interact with others. RL 4 Determine the connotative meaning of words and phrases. RL 6 Analyze a particular point of view reflected in a work of world literature.
**TEXT ANALYSIS: MORAL DILEMMA**

The conflict in many short stories and longer works of fiction revolves around a character’s **moral dilemma**. A character facing a moral dilemma must choose between two or more morally questionable options; for example, someone might have to choose between betraying a friend’s trust or breaking a school rule. A character may also struggle to determine the right course of action or disagree with his or her society over what moral behavior is.

As you read a work of fiction that focuses on a moral dilemma, think about

- the moral choice the character faces
- what choice others expect the character to make
- the moral expectations of the character’s culture or country

In “Like the Sun,” the main character is concerned about the morality of telling the absolute truth. As you read, consider how this dilemma creates conflict for him, and think about the choices you would make if you were in his place.

**READING STRATEGY: PREDICT**

While reading a story, have you ever **predicted** that it would have a happy ending or that a character would get into trouble? When you make predictions, you guess what will happen in a story by using text clues and your own knowledge and experience. Even if your guesses turn out to be wrong, the process of making predictions can help you pay attention to important details.

As you read “Like the Sun,” make predictions about the consequences of the main character’s decision to tell the full truth. Use a chart like the one shown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Prediction</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sekhar’s wife serves him breakfast.</td>
<td>He will criticize her cooking and hurt her feelings.</td>
<td>She winces after he says the food isn’t good.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.
Truth, Sekhar reflected, is like the sun. I suppose no human being can ever look it straight in the face without blinking or being dazed. He realized that, morning till night, the essence of human relationships consisted in tempering truth so that it might not shock. This day he set apart as a unique day—at least one day in the year we must give and take absolute Truth whatever may happen. Otherwise life is not worth living. The day ahead seemed to him full of possibilities. He told no one of his experiment. It was a quiet resolve, a secret pact between him and eternity.

The very first test came while his wife served him his morning meal. He showed hesitation over a titbit, which she had thought was her culinary masterpiece. She asked, “Why, isn’t it good?” At other times he would have said, considering her feelings in the matter, “I feel full up, that’s all.” But today he said, “It isn’t good. I’m unable to swallow it.” He saw her wince and said to himself, Can’t be helped. Truth is like the sun. 

His next trial was in the common room when one of his colleagues came up and said, “Did you hear of the death of so-and-so? Don’t you think it a pity?”

“No,” Sekhar answered. “He was such a fine man—” the other began. But Sekhar cut him short with: “Far from it. He always struck me as a mean and selfish brute.”

During the last period when he was teaching geography for Third Form A, Sekhar received a note from the headmaster: “Please see me before you go home.” Sekhar said to himself: It must be about these horrible test papers. A hundred papers in the boys’ scrawls; he had shirked this work for weeks, feeling all the time as if a sword were hanging over his head.

The bell rang, and the boys burst out of the class.

Sekhar paused for a moment outside the headmaster’s room to button up his coat; that was another subject the headmaster always sermonized about.

He stepped in with a very polite “Good evening, sir.”

---

1. culinary (kəˈlɪnərē): having to do with cooking or the kitchen.
The headmaster looked up at him in a very friendly manner and asked, “Are you free this evening?” Sekhar replied, “Just some outing which I have promised the children at home—” “Well, you can take them out another day. Come home with me now.” “Oh . . . yes, sir, certainly . . .” And then he added timidly, “Anything special, sir?” “Yes,” replied the headmaster, smiling to himself . . . “You didn’t know my weakness for music?” “Oh, yes, sir . . .” “I’ve been learning and practicing secretly, and now I want you to hear me this evening. I’ve engaged a drummer and a violinist to accompany me—this is the first time I’m doing it full-dress, and I want your opinion. I know it will be valuable.” Sekhar’s taste in music was well-known. He was one of the most dreaded music critics in the town. But he never anticipated his musical inclinations would lead him to this trial. . . . “Rather a surprise for you, isn’t it?” asked the headmaster. “I’ve spent a fortune on it behind closed doors. . . .” They started for the headmaster’s house. “God hasn’t given me a child, but at least let him not deny me the consolation of music,” the headmaster said, pathetically, as they walked. He incessantly chattered about music: how he began one day out of sheer boredom; how his teacher at first laughed at him and then gave him hope; how his ambition in life was to forget himself in music. At home the headmaster proved very ingratiating. He sat Sekhar on a red silk carpet, set before him several dishes of delicacies, and fussed over him as if he were a son-in-law of the house. He even said, “Well, you must listen with a free mind. Don’t worry about these test papers.” He added half humorously, “I will give you a week’s time.” “Make it ten days, sir,” Sekhar pleaded. “All right, granted,” the headmaster said generously. Sekhar felt really relieved now—he would attack them at the rate of ten a day and get rid of the nuisance.

The headmaster lighted incense sticks. “Just to create the right atmosphere,” he explained. A drummer and a violinist, already seated on a Rangoon mat, were waiting for him. The headmaster sat down between them like a professional at a concert, cleared his throat, and began an alapana, and paused to ask, “Isn’t it good Kalyani?” Sekhar pretended not to have heard the question. The headmaster went on to sing a full song composed by Thyagaraja and followed it with two more. All the time the headmaster was singing, Sekhar went on commenting within himself, He croaks like a dozen frogs. He is bellowing like a buffalo. Now he sounds like loose window shutters in a storm.

2. full-dress: complete in every respect.
3. alapana: improvisational Indian music in the classical style.
The incense sticks burnt low. Sekhar’s head throbbed with the medley of sounds that had assailed his eardrums for a couple of hours now. He felt half stupefied. The headmaster had gone nearly hoarse, when he paused to ask, “Shall I go on?” Sekhar replied, “Please don’t, sir; I think this will do . . .” The headmaster looked stunned. His face was beaded with perspiration. Sekhar felt the greatest pity for him. But he felt he could not help it. No judge delivering a sentence felt more pained and helpless. Sekhar noticed that the headmaster’s wife peeped in from the kitchen, with eager curiosity. The drummer and the violinist put away their burdens with an air of relief. The headmaster removed his spectacles, mopped his brow, and asked, “Now, come out with your opinion.”

“Can’t I give it tomorrow, sir?” Sekhar asked tentatively.
“No. I want it immediately—your frank opinion. Was it good?”
“No, sir . . .” Sekhar replied.
“Oh! . . . Is there any use continuing my lessons?”
“Absolutely none, sir . . .” Sekhar said with his voice trembling. He felt very unhappy that he could not speak more soothingly. Truth, he reflected, required as much strength to give as to receive.

All the way home he felt worried. He felt that his official life was not going to be smooth sailing hereafter. There were questions of increment and confirmation and so on, all depending upon the headmaster’s goodwill. All kinds of worries seemed to be in store for him. . . . Did not Harischandra lose his throne, wife, child, because he would speak nothing less than the absolute Truth whatever happened?

At home his wife served him with a sullen face. He knew she was still angry with him for his remark of the morning. Two casualties for today, Sekhar said to himself. If I practice it for a week, I don’t think I shall have a single friend left.

He received a call from the headmaster in his classroom next day. He went up apprehensively.

“Your suggestion was useful. I have paid off the music master. No one would tell me the truth about my music all these days. Why such antics at my age! Thank you. By the way, what about those test papers?”
“You gave me ten days, sir, for correcting them.”
“Oh, I’ve reconsidered it. I must positively have them here tomorrow. . . .” A hundred papers in a day! That meant all night’s sitting up! “Give me a couple of days, sir . . .”
“No. I must have them tomorrow morning. And remember, every paper must be thoroughly scrutinized.”
“Yes, sir,” Sekhar said, feeling that sitting up all night with a hundred test papers was a small price to pay for the luxury of practicing Truth.

---

6. increment and confirmation: salary increases and job security.
7. Harischandra: a legendary Hindu king and the subject of many Indian stories. His name has come to symbolize truth and integrity.
Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Emily Dickinson

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise
5 As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—
Comprehension

1. Recall What does Sekhar decide to do for one day?
2. Recall How is Sekhar tested during the day?
3. Summarize What negative consequences result from Sekhar’s decision?

Text Analysis

4. Analyze Character and Plot Which of Sekhar’s character traits most directly influence the story’s plot? Explain your answer.
5. Make Inferences Reread lines 98–108. Do you think the headmaster is sincere when he thanks Sekhar for his honesty? Why or why not?
6. Predict Look back at the predictions you recorded as you read. How close were the predictions to what actually happened? Cite specific evidence that influenced your predictions.
7. Moral Dilemma In “The Possibility of Evil” and “Like the Sun,” the main characters both hold a moral position that brings them into conflict with their communities. Compare and contrast the ways they respond to their moral dilemmas. Do you think they make the right decisions? Why or why not?
8. Evaluate How successful was Sekhar’s experiment in telling the absolute truth? Use evidence from the story to support your opinion.
9. Compare Literary Works “The Possibility of Evil,” “Like the Sun,” and “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—” all show different perspectives on telling the truth. What message about telling the truth does each work reveal? How are the messages similar? How are they different? Fill in a chart like this one to record your answer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message about truth</th>
<th>“The Possibility of Evil”</th>
<th>“Like the Sun”</th>
<th>“Tell all the Truth…”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Similarities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Text Criticism

10. Critical Interpretations When asked why the problems of characters are often left unresolved at the end of his stories, Narayan responded, “Life is like that. We cannot manipulate life to suit fictional needs.” Do you consider the ending of “Like the Sun” to be realistic? Cite evidence to support your opinion.

How important is telling the TRUTH?
Would you speak only the truth for an entire day? Why or why not?