

# How far do you think 'Whose life is it anyway' is a play about the individual versus authority and bureaucracy?

Whose life is it Anyway? is about Ken Harrison, a paralysed patient in hospital, and his battle to end his own life. The problem here is that he is incapable of committing suicide and has to turn to euthanasia. The hospital is against this. They cannot deliberately let a conscious person die. In this essay I will tackle the question above, of whether this play is purely about the ethical and moral issues involved, or whether it is also about the man versus the system.

For these purposes, Ken Harrison, the patient, is the individual and the hospital the bureaucracy and authority.

The title of the play, 'Whose life is it anyway?' announces the issue. It is evidently Ken's life, but the amount of choice and free will he now has in it is minimal. Nowadays, human rights are accepted as being inalienable, so the absence of freedom and choice makes you wonder just how much of a life he is now in possession of. Of course, as well, despite the fact it is his life he isn't running it. Hence the title. This starts the play with a question and all further events are in answer to it. This shows it is meant to be, partly, a battle of wills between two sides over his life.

Ken is very much alone in that his disability makes him different and distances him from the people he encounters. For example, he says to Dr. Scott, 'It's surprising how relaxed a woman can be when she is not in the presence of man.' He is saying very plainly he doesn't feel he is a man any longer. Dr. Scott feels sorry for him, and he likes her, maybe even loves her - but he feels her pity as an insult. It also disturbs him. He feels himself changing, doing things he wouldn't normally do, and not being in control is unsettling for him. This isolates him and shows him as standing on his own as a result of an accident, not by choice as is usual in cases of rebellion against bureaucracy

No close friends come and see him - he sent them away. He is alone by choice, as well as because of his accident. In response to a question from the psychiatrist about any relationships, he says 'A fiancée actually. I asked her not to visit me any more. About a fortnight ago.' He sent her away because he feels she didn't really want to stay with him, she was just doing it out of a sense of duty. It was meant to 'release her from the guilt she would feel if she did what she really wanted to.' He claims he sent people away because he didn't like to be the way in which they punished themselves. He doesn't want to be a duty, unpleasant but which makes you feel better when you've done it. He has separated himself from others as a result of choice, which counteracts the previous point.

The people who he does have contact with, the medical staff, he feels hold back from him. He refers to them as gods; '[Dr. Emerson] will sweep in here like Zeus from Olympus, with his attendant nymphs and swains'. Nymphs and swains imply the others are subservient to Dr. Emerson. It's a fair comparison. The medical staff are omniscient, all-powerful and hold the power of life and death over him. Although they only mean it to be good for him and they just want to help, he cannot do anything without them or anything that they do not want him to do. They have physical power over him because he is incapacitated and cannot survive without help, and they have mental power over him because the law is on their side. They are also aggressively cheerful which he feels is infringing his right to be miserable. Because of this he calls the 'the monstrous regiment' and reminds them that they can't say anything personal or in anyway negative because they work 'in the optimism industry' and must be professional, i.e. distant at all times. All these collective terms solidify them and class them as the opposition or the enemy. They are firmly marked as THEM not us. This segregation defines the sides and shows it as Ken vs. everyone else. I think this raises the topic of individualism vs. groups.

The hospital can also administer drugs to him against his will, if they think it is good for him. (after being injected) 'Doctor, I didn't give you permission to stick that needle in me.' He can't defend himself and they have every right, apparently, to do whatever they feel necessary with no thought for his wishes. The word stick implies that is it a rough action, although it probably wasn't because he is a trained doctor and Ken is not putting up any opposition. I think it was the invasion of privacy and direct contradiction of his wishes that he objected to. This is just a small confrontation, but it is definitely a case of the authority versus Ken. Ken is losing.

At one point during the play Ken's lawyer, Mr. Kershaw, says to Dr. Emerson 'You wouldn't like to find yourself powerless in the hands of, say, a lawyer or a bureaucrat. I wouldn't like to find myself powerless in the hands of a doctor.' This is the most direct answer to the question that is found in the text. And it's not very direct. Dr. Emerson is asked to accept the fact that he has unreasonable power over

Ken and that if he was in a similar situation he would not be content. This shows that the medical staff are to Ken as lawyers or bureaucrats would be to a 'normal' person. The two occupations mentioned are ones generally mistrusted. Maybe this is meant to point out that Ken mistrusts doctors irrationally, and the fact that he actually has reason to now is merely a coincidence. This reinforces the picture of a lone man struggling against the system.

The subject under discussion throughout the play is euthanasia. As this is illegal now, a play about it would have to represent the individual in question vs. authority. The purpose of the story might have been merely to present the ethical issues without dragging in a question of how far bureaucracy has the power (and by what authority) to run our lives.

While Ken does try to distance himself from the staff, and feels uncomfortable with the large part they play in his life, he has friendships with many of them. He flirts and toys with Sister and Nurse Sadler, he sees John as an equal because he is the most sympathetic to his position, and Dr. Scott is a good friend to him. Although all these people with the exception of John and possible exception of Dr. Scott want him to live, I feel that they could be swayed one way or the other and if he begged would allow him to die. His only real opponents to his plan are Dr. Emerson and anyone else Dr. Emerson brings in to help his case. Because the majority of the authority is on his side, I don't think it can be said that is it about the individual vs. authority.

The doctors are there to serve people. They have trained, and gained knowledge and skill, in order to help patients. 'Patients need knowledge to make good decisions'. This says that the patients choose what to do themselves and the doctors are there to carry it out or advise. If the patient is unquestionably sane this probably does happen, but when the patient's mental health can be called into question the doctor uses his/her own judgement. They are not distant authority figures, but real people who have lives just like everyone else. They are not perfect. The fact they work with and for their patients, or at least try to, says that they are not against Ken, just trying to help him in a different way. This may be the wrong way as far as he is concerned but they are trying. This is born out by the judge's statement at the end 'I am convinced all parties acted in good faith.' It basically sums up everything that the play was about.

The play is about Ken fighting against authority, nearly as much as it is about whether euthanasia or suicide is morally acceptable. The fact I could find few arguments to support the opposite arguments shows this. However, my main one, that he has many allies who work for the hospital, lessens the certainty of that view, as does the fact that doctors are there to help people and they are not allowed to go against a sane patient's wishes. There are no black and whites, only grey. All parties concerned were only doing what they thought was best for Ken. Where they differed is that the hospital team refused to accept that Ken deserved to have a say in his future, or lack of one. They also thought that living is always better than dying, and again I think that is something that has to be considered for each situation. Whatever the motive, and however well meaning this was, the play is about one man fighting for his right to end a 'shadow of a life', against an authority who cannot agree to let him die.