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Bearing Down on the Lone Wolf

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Out of all of literature's enduring themes, the dichotomy between the individual and

society proves continually relevant no matter what the era. It makes sense-- it is only natural that

as humans confined to seeing the world through our own differing person-by-person lenses, we

constantly find ourselves attempting to understand how our neighbor's perception contrasts with

our own. The collective sum of these variations is the whole of society, shifting its form based

on the fluctuations of its countless individual elements. Nineteenth century American literature

saw a proliferation of writers addressing this issue more overtly than ever before, thus bringing

individualism to the thematic forefront of a generation of writer's works. As contemporaries,

Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville engaged previously celebrated notions of

individualism in varyingly nuanced ways, both ultimately leaning towards the belief that

incongruence with society will unavoidably lead to the degradation of the individual.

The catalyst of American literary discourse regarding individualism has its roots in the

transcendentalist movement. The earliest and most influential works of this movement were

authored by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who set the framework for transcendentalism to be an

exploration of the importance of self and the inherent goodness of mankind. A progressive

society, as defined by Emerson, "validates individuals who are confident in the integrity of their

uniqueness" (Lyttle 91). One of Emerson's primary texts on the matter, "Self-Reliance,"

champions breaking away from societal customs that conflict directly with one's personal

philosophy, which he does acknowledge as being an enormously taxing endeavor. Emerson

equates greatness with nonconformity, and emphasizes that inner peace can't be reached without

utmost faithfulness to one's own principles—a resulting friction between the collective and the

individual doesn't just exist on the outskirts of possibility, it's a requirement. In his eyes, "to be

great is to be misunderstood" (Emerson 39). This philosophy proclaims the importance of

individualism while acknowledging the difficulty of asserting the self, but it doesn't quite

measure the drawbacks of attempting to endure said difficulty. Emerson posits that whatever

oppression the individual is met with, when viewed in binary terms of right and wrong, the

individual is always right.

In contrast to Emersonian praise of the unique, Hawthorne depicts a society embedded

with hostility toward the different and nonconformist. The protagonist of Hawthorne's "The

Minister's Black Veil" finds himself instantly alienated by his community after his choice to don

a black veil, concealing his face entirely. The veil instantly becomes a topic of gossip among the

community, but minister Hooper never explains the purpose or deeper meaning of the veil's

presence. His choice to keep the veil's significance a mystery leads to a rift between him and the

townspeople, even leading to a distance from his closest loved ones. It is essential to note the

Puritan setting of the story; the veil acts "as the visible symbol of secret sin" (Fogle 33), thus

announcing the presence (or past existence) of something unholy in what is supposed to be a

pious community, brought about by a pious figurehead. Puritanism's image is partially hinged

upon the condemnation of unrepentant sinners, which is a primary topic of Hawthorne's *The

Scarlet Letter*. While the protagonist of this novel's mark of sin is put upon her by her

community in the form of the stitched letter A (leaving no doubt as to the nature of her spiritual

wrongdoing), the minster publicizes his own mark while simultaneously shrouding it in mystery,

building an ambiguity around his straying from God's path. Hooper's self-imposed distinction inevitably "meant an isolation […] that could only end in defeat" (Parkes 398). The veil stays on his face all the way up to his deathbed, where he explicitly addresses the community's unfavorable reaction to the veil, referring to "the symbol beneath which I have lived, and die! I look around me, and lo! On every visage a black veil" (Hawthorne 418). The minister's pursuit of what he felt best served him on an individual level culminates not in a righteous victory, but a wistful lament.

It's in Hooper's dying words that Hawthorne confronts Emerson's concept of the universality of the individual. Hawthorne focuses specifically on spiritual disparity to illustrate a commonality among humankind, which does overlap with Emerson's belief that "persons, as separate entities, can also be in reality each other" (Lyttle 90). However, Hawthorne's take on this universality introduces the hostile backlash brought about by a public acknowledgement of a less-than-favorable attribute shared among people, while also showing how said backlash can alienate the individual over time. Due in part to the Puritan setting of the story, Hawthorne's illustration of how society and individual relate to one another juggles questions of good vs. evil and the spiritual vs. the secular. With his dying breath the minister extends the acknowledgement of his sin to an all-encompassing claim about his community and possibly humankind.

This theme can also be seen in Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," in which the story's title character comes across a secretive nighttime meeting among virtually his entire neighborhood. Not even Brown's wife is absent from the event, which appears to be (and by the end of the story, undoubtedly is) a cultish congregation gathered for the worship of satanic deities. In the whirl of the night's events Brown loses consciousness, waking to find that

everyone he viewed participating at the congregation goes on with their routines the next day as if nothing had happened, leaving Brown to subsequently be suspicious of everyone involved (including himself). As Brown's suspicions grow that night, he has a moment when he grapples with the possibility that he could be equally as evil as the rest of his community. Instead of finding joy in the prospect of common ground between himself and his neighbor, Brown meets this discovery with "a gnawing fear that this might be true" (Fogle 16). Just as "The Minister's Black Veil" colored the collective surrounding the individual as unwilling to be honest about their own spiritual disparity, "Young Goodman Brown" pairs society with a tendency to conceal its own true condition. The awareness of universal sin is flipped: while Hooper's community is entirely unwilling to admit the presence of sin in each person, Brown's community is so aware of this that they're acting (albeit, in a somewhat concealed manner) on this acknowledgement. In both cases the protagonists find themselves isolated by their societies due to their insistence on following their own religious agendas. Viewed through Hawthorne's religious perspective, Emerson's belief that "all men have my blood, and I have all men's" (Emerson 48) means that all humans have an inherent capacity for malevolence. Hawthorne's stories show that even in the case of acting in the name of God's righteousness, pushing back against universal sameness is ultimately futile.

Throughout Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener," the title character meets a fate that overlaps with those of the characters of the previously mentioned Hawthorne works. Melville's story tracks the relationship between the narrator, a Wall Street lawyer, and the title character, who refuses to engage in almost any interaction with another person. As the story progresses, the scrivener does less and less work for the narrator, taking his "I'd prefer not to" (Melville 1490) to the extreme. The ending of the story finds Bartleby jailed for the reason that society

just doesn't know what to do with him, and by this point he's declining to even eat, which soon leads to his death. As opposed to Hawthorne's focus on Puritan New-England, Melville sets Bartleby's story in contemporary Wall Street, where the governance of societal norms is derived from the imperatives of capitalism instead of the doctrines of the church. The fact that the story is set in Wall Street means that the most radical way to set oneself apart from society would mean refusing to turn a profit "right in the heart of robber-baron capitalism" (Pynchon). Bartleby's insistence on not engaging has the most direct impact on the story's narrator, who becomes increasingly distressed at Bartleby's otherness among his surrounding work-obsessed scriveners.

The namelessness of the narrator serves to qualify him as a sort of (albeit, perhaps especially generous) Everyman in this society, giving the reader the ability to gauge Bartleby's effect on society through the interaction between the two of them. The narrator describes himself as "an eminently safe man" (Melville 1484) in a claim to present himself as an agreeable and inconspicuous unit of his society. The very rhetoric present with which the narrator tells the story suggests that he's telling the story as an appeal to a jury—the use of phrases along the lines of "here it must be said" (Melville 1493) and "arguing the possibilities *pro* and *con*" (Melville 1498) while addressing the reader serve not only to indicate the narrator's occupation as a lawyer, but also to present himself as being not guilty of deviating from behavior that his audience would disapprove of. If the narrator possesses any qualities that could separate him from the normalcy of just another component of the collective, he evidently wishes to conceal said qualities, which would result in eliminating distinguishably individual traits (making him virtually identical to his neighbor).

When this is considered when looking at the great conflict between the narrator and Bartleby, the agitating effect of Bartleby on the narrator functions as a microcosm for the way that society reacts to a nonconforming individual. While Hawthorne places his rebel against society in the shoes of his narrator in the cases of both Hooper and Brown, Melville chooses to have the rebel intrude on the life and work of the narrator. This reversal places the reader's sympathies with the willingly conformist Everyman instead of the Other, which is heightened even further by Melville's depiction of the societal tangent as an emotionally inaccessible stranger.

Despite Bartleby's increasingly absurd determination to abstain from participating in anything, the narrator ultimately ends up deeply feeling for the man in whom he had originally unable to identify "any thing ordinarily human about him" (Melville 1490). The concluding lines of the story, "Ah Bartleby! Ah Humanity!" (Melville 1509), echo the sentiments articulated by Hooper on his deathbed, identifying universal traits in the individual. Melville's story differs in that unlike Hooper's proclamation of common ground he has with everyone, the recognition of Bartleby as a stand-in for the common man comes from a source outside of himself.

Hawthorne and Melville also differ in that Melville doesn't share Hawthorne's preoccupation with the question of how morality figures into the inherent nature of the masses. Although Melville doesn't overtly condemn his narrator for seeming to subscribe to the commonplace work ethic of his Wall Street environment, the narrator does illustrate an instance of what it looks like for a complacent member of his or her environment to engage with one whose every action, or in this case, non-action, stands completely outside of the ideology of society. There's not necessarily a stated evil attached to this ideology, but this same society is

the one whose strict focus on falling in line with one's neighbor comes at the cost of one's most deep seated preferences. While pointing out the difficulty of sticking to one's own personal philosophy, Emerson claims that the perseverance "demands something godlike" (Emerson 45). Bartleby and Hooper present cases where men who fall humanely short of this godlike strength find themselves emotionally and spiritually alienated all the way to their deathbeds, having done as much as humanly possible to stay true to themselves.

In the midst of these characters' moves toward a condition of dejected loneliness, their alienating behaviors actually enable them to excel in their respective communities. Hooper, by creating an air of mystery around himself with the veil, becomes an all the more effective minister due to his quality of otherness. In a similar move of physically blocking off his face from the surrounding world, Bartleby's screen placed between him and the narrator closes himself off into his own separate world, allowing Bartleby to accomplish his preferred tasks at a rate exceeding the productivity of the other scriveners of the office. The heightened output of Bartleby notably declines with the progression of the story, but his initial work ethic and Hooper's potency as a preacher both portray examples of the power of an individual to have an impact on their environments. While this specific aspect of their otherness is in agreement with Emerson's testament to the capability of one willing to step outside of the bounds of normality, both Hawthorne and Melville's stories shed light on the harrowing displacement that's experienced by the nonconformist nonetheless, calling into question the benefits of their almost supernatural ability to contribute to society against the resulting futility of human connection in their separated state. Hawthorne's and Melville's rebels suffer fates that indicate a pessimistic outlook on a life lived in defiance of societal expectations, but their stories present Emersonian elements of the strength of the individual nonetheless.

The discussed works by Melville and Hawthorne don't directly oppose ideas of individualism or Emerson's writing, but they depict the world as being harshly resistant to Emerson's claim that one must completely reject worldly customs in order to follow their gut. These stories, particularly with Bartleby and Hooper, end with the melancholy deaths of these characters to illustrate the less than fortunate long lasting effects on anyone resistant to what disagrees with their preferences. The stories vary in their understandings of which behaviors dominate society and how that morally reflects on the collective, but they share the idea that when something ideologically foreign makes itself seen through one's choices, the force with which society bears down on the nonconformist renders his or her capacity for standing apart from the crowd to be unsustainable and draining.

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