

Humanities Struggle with Darkness through Literature

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Throughout this semester, we have read many works of art written by authors throughout multiple eras. Although each era held their own unique features within the literature, there was easily many overall themes found amongst these pieces. The theme that I found most evident amongst these would be how individuals struggle to adjust or adapt to the darkness's in life regardless of their culture. This was portrayed directly through some of the pieces, but also incorporated as an allegory in others, and was evident amongst each of the eras studied. To truly have an understanding of the portrayal of this theme, it is important to first have an understanding of the various tenets of each era.

The first era we dove into this semester was the Romantic era. This era spanned from the 18th century to the mid-19th century and was characterized by a focus of the psychology of the individual rather than the previous traditions of society. This would often lead to the authors portraying a sense of freedom and imagination. This era was also characterized by a sense of rebellion in the writing. While previous eras would flow from one part to the next, writing from the Romantic era would often jump from one part to the next, jumping between scenes with different characters and settings. During this era, it was not normal for individuals to seek help for mental health issues or to express their struggles to others.

One of the first pieces that we looked at was Melville's *Bartleby*. This piece provided quite a strong portrayal of working against the norms of society and provided a great example of how individuals might deal with their struggles in life. Throughout this piece the character Bartleby is defiant in completing the tasks set out for him by his employer by stating 'I'd prefer not to'. Although on the surface, this seems like just an insubordinate employee, when examining this deeper we can find that it is Melville's way of portraying his defiance against writing what the

readers want versus what he enjoys. This struggle was a darkness in Melville's life and using the tale of *Bartleby* was an excellent use of resources to portray that struggle in terms the reader might understand. When I began researching other interpretations of this piece, I came across an article from the Guardian written by Stuart Kelly. In his interpretation he states: "Melville, I think, offers a more dangerously hopeful idea: that revolutionary resistance comes from a man in a conventional suit mildly stating there are things he would rather not do" (Kelly, 2017, n.p.). While I agree, I feel as though it was not Melville's intentions for this piece to be interpreted in this way, but rather to be interpreted as a form of defiance against the literary world of that time.

Another piece from the Romantic era that follows this common theme would be Goethe's *Faust*. Although this piece might be interpreted in many ways, one thing remains constant: Goethe worked hard to portray humanities struggle with alienation in the modern world and how individuals struggled to find meaning. The story portrays Faust as an individual who sells his soul to a demon, Mephistopheles, in exchange for knowledge and pleasure. However, he is instead faced with darkness and hardship. While he experiences pleasure when he meets and falls in love with Gretchen, after she drowns their child and is sentenced for murder, he is faced with a continuous struggle against the darkness's of the world. I feel as though this piece could be interpreted as way to portray politicians throughout history: they promise everyone whatever they'd please, but then give them nothing in return. In fact, when reading an interpretation by Benjamin Ramm (2017) of *BBC: Culture*, I found that he held a similar interpretation of this piece as he found many correlations between past and present world leaders and the concepts laid out throughout this piece.

Next, we explored the Realism era of literature. This era took place from around the 1850's to 1914. Within this era, there were many unique elements found within literature. In comparison

to the Romantic era, the realism era placed a very large focus on attention to detail. This gave readers a sense of reading a novel versus reading poetry which was common up until this point. Another element of realism is transparency in the language. Rather than force the reader to interpret things in many ways, the authors were more direct in their portrayals allowing for a better understanding of the text. Finally, the Realism era portrayed a lot of social critique, challenging societal norms of the time. In relation to mental health and struggles, as with the Romantic era, individuals in this era still did not express their struggles to others. This places more value on the literature of the time because it was a way for people to escape their own struggles but also to feel as though they were not alone.

Although most of the pieces from the Realism era did not stand out to me, Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* brought a unique approach to a well-known topic. In the time that it was written, it was common to assume that a woman's role was to play homemaker, however, in this piece, there is a sense of defiance against that concept. In a way, I feel as though this piece brought to light many issues of feminism before it was an issue at the forefront of society. Through its depiction of feminism, it also laid out a very real issue: suicide. When Hedda Gabler became unable to cope with her expected role in society, she chose to take her own life rather than accept her fate. I feel as though this piece could easily be interpreted as an ode to feminism as well as portraying an awareness to the mental health of the individual. Again, this piece was written in a time where many individuals were struggling, but still hid their struggles from others rather than express themselves. While reviewing other interpretations of this piece, I came across one written by Charles Isherwood (2009) of the New York Times. I found his approach to this piece to be quite different from mine as he found Hedda Gabler to be a cold, merciless individual whereas I felt that she was just gravely misunderstood due to her own struggles with her place in society.

Throughout the era of World War I, World War II, and the great depression, there was a lot of destruction around the world which led to the Modernism era of literature. This era existed from around 1914 through the 1960's and portrayed many themes related to fear, anxiety, and dread. This era often held many aspects of war, struggle, and symbols of revolution. Struggles within humanity were commonplace throughout this era, which led to readers wanting to escape through literature. Due to this, many of the pieces written throughout this era were allegories for things going on in real life. This allowed the reader to feel a sense of enjoyment from the text, but also to allow them to gain a deeper understanding of things going on around them. In dealing with all the struggles in life during this era, society began to open up to the concept of mental health, however there was a stigma attached to it which led people to still struggle in silence rather than reaching out for help. I feel as though the pieces we read from this era show this struggle, especially within *Metamorphosis*.

While most of the other pieces focused on internal struggles of the individual, Orwell's *Animal Farm* took a different approach and focused on the darkness in society as a whole. This was portrayed through an allegory of animals on a farm, which allowed readers to gain enjoyment and a sense of understanding from the piece. Although the piece gave hope early on of a utopian society after animals gained their freedom from the humans, they soon after learned that once given power over others, it is hard to control oneself. Rather than look after the farm as a whole, the pigs in charge quickly decided to look after their own interests instead. I feel like this closely relates to society because communities are constantly wishing for new leadership for some reason or another, but once faced with the new leadership, they then find a new aspect to make complaints about. This shows a dark side to society and culture as a whole because it is a constant struggle between what is wanted versus what is provided.

Another piece from the Modernist era, and one of my personal favorites this semester, Kafka's *Metamorphosis* truly embodied the concept of struggle with darkness. The narrator wakes up one day to find that he had transformed into a giant cockroach and must learn to live and cope with his new way of life. In fact, not only is he trying to come to terms with this new reality, but so is his immediate family. I feel as though this piece is an allegory to mental illness because when an individual is struggling with mental health issues, they often find themselves lost and alienate themselves from others. In addition, their loved ones often do not know what to do in the situation so they tend to just let them be as we saw in this piece. When reading Lucas' (2013) interpretation of this piece I found many similarities between his thoughts and mine. The overall piece was about how Gregor struggled to deal with his transformation, but more so for the sake of his family than for himself. While Lucas' interpretation does not make any direct mention of mental health issues being the root cause of Gregor's struggles, I feel like it can easily be inferred from reading his thoughts on the piece.

Finally, we jumped into the Contemporary era of literature. This era has taken place from around the 1960's through today. The literature from this era differs greatly from the previous because the authors have followed a trend of writing their pieces in a way in which an overall meaning cannot be determined. This is done by utilizing concepts that are constantly changing and by treating the act of reading like play rather than education. This era has been a time of rapid technological advancements; what once was thought to be impossible is now possible, if not normal in many cases. This leads to advancements within the health care system as well. It was during this era where the concept of mental health began to be more widely accepted among society, but still, individuals struggled with darkness in their every day lives which literature continued to portray.

One of the main pieces we read from the Contemporary era of literature was Kobo Abe's *The Box Man*. While this piece contained many of the characteristics of this era, it also contained a rather unique point of view, coming from a narrator who has essentially cut himself off from the rest of society. I feel as though this was done in a way for the narrator to combat his own personal struggles with darkness in peace without dragging others down with him. I find this piece to be a statement of mental health by giving the reader a direct view into a life of instability. In a similar way, Charyn (1974) of the *New York Times* wrote "Schizophrenia is the particular province of the box man. He is a 'specialized voyeur' who spies at replicas of himself through the vinyl curtain" (n.p.). Reading the full interpretation that Charyn wrote gave me further confidence in my own analysis of this very complex piece as we shared many similar view points of its meaning.

As it can be seen, the concept of human struggle transcends the eras of world literature; Not only is this theme repeated throughout time, but it is also present across cultures. It is important to note the differences in how each era chose to portray this struggle based on societies standards at the time. Although speaking out about mental health and internal struggles is becoming more widely acceptable, there is still a stigma attached which is why many authors might choose to portray this struggle in writing through stories rather than speaking out publicly about it. Seeing how this portrayal has transformed from one era to the next does give me hope that some day we will be able to openly share our struggles with others without being negatively judged for it.

Resources

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