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The Tradition of Questioning Tradition in American Literature

American poet E. E. Cummings concisely encapsulates the American psyche: “America makes prodigious mistakes, America has colossal faults, but one thing cannot be denied: America is always on the move. She may be going to Hell, of course, but at least she isn't standing still.” He observes that even though American society has great flaws, it is committed to finding solutions to those flaws, and this culture permeates American literature. American texts have often held the objective of improving society, from the Constitution radically applying Enlightenment values to statecraft, to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* decrying slavery, to The Book of Mormon seeking to reform Christianity. To question the relationship between individuals and societies, American authors Nathaniel Hawthorne, Robert Frost, and Toni Morrison personify the ideas they question into antagonists to critique and ultimately improve American society.

Nathaniel Hawthorne questions the entire nature of the judicial system through his novel *The Scarlet Letter*, which portrays Hester as the victim of Puritan law. He first questions the best arbiter of justice by juxtaposing the spectators and the established authority with Hester at the market-place. He portrays the spectators as having “a moral diet not a whit more refined” and with “broad shoulders and well-developed busts” (Hawthorne 37). Hawthorne challenges the role of commoners in the judicial process by not only discrediting their morality, but caricaturing them as physically crude and masculine. Hawthorne ironically depicts Dimmesdale, who holds

the authority over Hester's punishment, as with "the earnest of high eminence in his profession" and "dewy purity of thought" (46). Hawthorne portrays Dimmesdale, who the public reveres as responsible and chaste, as a secret adulterer, undermining the status of authority. In contrast, Hawthorne describes Hester as "tall, with a figure of perfect elegance" and "lady-like" (39). By portraying Hester as physically pure and feminine compared to the masculine crowd and impure Dimmesdale, Hawthorne argues for the individual as the arbiter of justice. Dimmesdale fails to "recall one instant of peace or hope" over the past seven years, until Hester pardons him: "Thou wilt go" (121). Hawthorne affirms the authority of individual justice by ending Dimmesdale's punishment with Hester's pardon. Hester, not the crowd or the magistrates, who adore Dimmesdale, have the power to pardon him. Hawthorne also argues against vigilantism by portraying Roger negatively. Hawthorne describes Roger as a leech (75) with a "writhing horror" (43) across his features. He also compares Roger to the devil: "Had a man seen old Roger Chillingworth, at that moment of his ecstacy, he would have had no need to ask how Satan comports himself" (87). After Dimmesdale confesses, Roger "knelt down beside him, with a blank, dull countenance, out of which the life seemed to have departed" (151). Roger represents extralegal vigilante revenge, and Hawthorne decries it by portraying Robert so negatively. After years of Hester accepting her punishment, the scarlet letter provokes "awe" and "reverence," and "people brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and besought her counsel" (154). Hester becomes a pillar of Puritan society and ultimately grows from her penitence. By positively depicting Hester and negatively depicting the onlookers, Dimmesdale, and Roger, Hawthorne argues that, despite a flawed judicial system, only the individual holds the authority to seek justice.

In “Mending Wall,” Robert Frost juxtaposes the narrator with a negative caricature of the neighbor to critique the blind adherence to tradition. “The gaps I mean, / No one has seen them made or heard them made, / But at spring mending-time we find them there” (Frost, 9-11). Frost begins by describing mending the wall as a repetitive and futile endeavor. Frost then juxtaposes the questioning narrator with the neighbor, whom characterizes as ignorant:

> In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
>
> He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
>
> Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
>
> He will not go behind his father’s saying,
>
> And he likes having thought of it so well
>
> He says again, “Good fences make good neighbors.” (40-5)

The neighbor appears like a savage from early civilization, indicating the archaic nature of the wall. Frost uses the darkness the neighbor moves through as a metaphor for ignorance, implying that the neighbor cannot see beyond traditional ideas of boundaries. Frost extends the description through irony, with the neighbor satisfied that he had rationalized the act in his mind even though he obeys the ritual without thought. The neighbor does not justify the wall with logic or necessity, but only with the meaningless adage. Robert Frost’s portrayal of an uncivilized, obtuse, and arbitrarily conservative neighbor questions a blind adherence to archaic ideas and demands a more open-minded society.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison questions conformity by personifying the most extremely negative aspects and consequences of the idea into Geraldine. “They learn [. . .] how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short,

how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" (83). Morrison introduces Geraldine not as an individual, but as the stereotype that she embodies. Morrison equates the adoption of refined manners and customs with the extermination of her uniqueness. She loses her passion, nature, and emotion and becomes a caricature for the negative consequences. "He was always brushed, bathed, oiled, and shod. Geraldine did not talk to him, coo to him, or indulge him in kissing bouts, but she saw that every other desire was fulfilled" (86). Her conformity influences her parenting, leading her to satisfy Junior's physical needs but neglect his emotional needs, causing him to resent Geraldine and abuse the cat. Morrison caricatures Geraldine to argue in favor of emotion and passion in an individual and a parent.

Toni Morrison also questions blind adherence to tradition by personifying it in the abhorrent Soaphead Church. Soaphead's lewd and arrogant outlook comes from his ancestors: "That they were corrupt in public and private practice, both lecherous and lascivious, was considered their noble right" (168). As most of his recent ancestors have done, Soaphead chooses to cling onto his insignificant English heritage and use it as a mandate to act superior and nefarious to other people. Morrison uses him to argue against conforming to the practices of your ancestors by portraying him as so evil and hateable. He displays amity once, but only as a wish to rid Pecola of her natural eyes and give her blue ones. He describes her as "a little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes" (174). Adhering to his family's notion of racial superiority, he indulges in Pecola's self-hatred under the guise of helping her. Instead of gaining confidence, Pecola loses her mind: "beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach—could not even see—but

which filled the valleys of the mind" (204). The faint possibility of having blue eyes consumes and destroys Pecola. Morrison challenges the attachment to tradition by personifying it with Soaphead Church, with the result of superiority, racial self-hatred, and the death of Pecola's personality.

To question the relationship between individuals and societies, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Robert Frost, and Toni Morrison caricature the traits they question into physically and morally abhorrent antagonists to critique and ultimately improve American society. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne questions the entire judicial system by portraying the public, Dimmesdale, and Roger negatively and Hester positively. In "Mending Wall," Frost challenges tradition by depicting the neighbor as ignorant and uncivilized. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison incarnates extreme conformity and colorism into Geraldine and Soaphead Church to question those ideas. *The Scarlet Letter*, "Mending Wall," and *The Bluest Eye* are only three of countless American cultural, political, and religious texts written to question, critique, and ultimately improve American society.

Works Cited

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