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Freedom in American Literature

Ever since America became its own nation, and indeed even before, one of the country’s greatest national ideals has been freedom. Freedom is the most ubiquitous concept in American society and is a defining aspect of our national culture and identity. As such, freedom has also been a major influence on American literature throughout history. In the romantic period, authors such as James Fenimore Cooper viewed nature as the ultimate source of freedom and believed that society trapped and confined the human spirit. Though the romantic period faded away into realism, these ideas still remained. While realism authors viewed the world and nature more objectively than their romantic counterparts, nature is still a symbol of freedom in many realist works, including the transitional work of Herman Melville and the firmly realistic work of Eugene O’Neill. Even as American literature has evolved, nature continues to be seen as a place of freedom, while the society we have built around freedom is often depicted instead as our prison.

In James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Deerslayer*, the secluded and natural setting plays a crucial role in the freedom of the main characters. The broad setting of the story is 1700s New York, back when America was largely unsettled wilderness and the states were still British colonies. A description of the area says that “a bird's-eye view of the whole region east of the Mississippi must then have offered one vast expanse of woods” (Cooper 462). This remoteness is essential to the freedom enjoyed by the characters in the story. They live apart from society and, thus, are not forced to obey its rules. Though the setting has a great emphasis on freedom, there is a certain irony in it as well that actually ends up making a comparison between freedom in nature and in society. This story takes place in colonial America, before the colonies won their freedom from the British. Even so, the main characters are so far away from society that it makes little difference in their lives who is making the laws. No matter what kind of society is in charge, they are still freest away from it.

Within this larger setting, the events of the first chapter occur in a clearing in the woods, open to the sun and fresh air. The large clearing is representative of their freedom with its vast open space and sunlight for the characters to enjoy and use as they please. In the introduction of the clearing, Cooper even uses a direct reference to freedom. As one of the main characters, Hurry Harry, stumbles into the clearing, Cooper wrote, “‘Here is room to breathe in!’ exclaimed the liberated forester, as soon as he found himself under a clear sky” (Cooper 462). Harry and the title character, Deerslayer, have lived essentially in the wilderness apart from society all their lives, and this life has granted them a considerable measure of freedom. Out in nature, away from society, they are not bound by its rules and expectations. They eat whatever they can catch, go wherever they wish, and often do whatever they please, as is evident from Harry’s lawless attitude. The place in which they live allows them unique liberties, and Cooper uses the setting both to explain their freedom and symbolize it.

In contrast to Harry and Deerslayer, the title character of Herman Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener* lives his life confined by society, and Melville uses the setting to emphasize and represent Bartleby’s trapped isolation. Bartleby works in New York on Wall Street, and it is soon revealed that he lives there too. Bartleby takes up residence in his employer’s office, in a tiny, walled-off space much like the modern cubicle. His office space is confined by screens on three sides, and the fourth side bears a grimly ironic window. What would be Bartleby’s only glimpse into nature and the outside world is blocked by a brick wall constructed mere feet from the glass, emphasizing just how much he is cut off from the world. This particular choice in the setting demonstrates the influence of romanticism on Melville, as the greatest indication of Bartleby’s lack of freedom is that he is entirely separated from nature.

The physical setting of Bartleby’s cubicle says a great deal about his place in society. Bartleby is both literally and metaphorically confined. He almost never leaves his tiny office, and this represents that there’s nothing for him beyond it. Bartleby cares about nothing beyond the office walls, and no one beyond those walls cares about him. Bartleby’s true prison in the story is his inability to find a place in society or a meaning and purpose for his life. While isolation was freeing for the characters in *The Deerslayer*, it is the opposite for Bartleby. Harry and Deerslayer were isolated from society, away from others’ rules and expectations. In contrast, Bartleby is isolated within society. Whereas the characters in *The Deerslayer* felt no pressure to belong and fulfill a purpose in society, Bartleby does, and that is what makes his isolation far more sad, lonely, and trapping.

The influence of romantic views of nature becomes apparent once again near the end of the story. Once Bartleby is arrested as a vagabond, he is allowed to roam the prison yard, which has some grass and a few trees. The narrator tries to comfort Bartleby about his situation by telling him, “And see, it is not so sad a place as one might think. Look, there is the sky, and here is the grass” (Melville 688). This clearly shows the romantic attitude of the narrator, a caring and idealistic man. He tries to assure Bartleby that he is not as trapped as he seems to be, as at least he is contact with the liberating influence of nature. However, Bartleby rejects this, as he has rejected almost everything in life. He has grown so accustomed to his office prison that in death he turns his back to the trees and the grass, symbolic of the freedom he never had, and instead once again faces a brick wall as he submits to humanity’s final and inescapable prison.

Even as literature moved firmly into realism, remnants of romantic views of nature still lingered in stories such as Eugene O’Neill’s play *The Hairy Ape*. The story focuses on a large, wild man named Yank, who is an incredibly similar character to Cooper’s Hurry Harry. Yank, much like Bartleby, lives and works in a confined space that visually resembles a prison. The underbelly of the ship where Yank lives is described as, “a cramped space in the bowels of a ship, imprisoned by white steel. The lines of bunks, the uprights supporting them, cross each other like the steel framework of a cage” (O’Neill 1680). On the ship, Yank encounters Paddy, a romantic character in a realist world, much like the narrator in *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. Paddy mourns the days when he worked on a sailing ship with “a warm sun on the clean decks. Sun warming the blood of you, and wind over the miles of shiny green ocean like strong drink to your lungs” (O’Neill 1684). Paddy longs to be closer to nature, closer to freedom, rather than trapped below deck away from the world. Yank is physically confined to the bottom of a steamship, representing how he is trapped at the bottom of society. Yank is an unskilled laborer with almost no chance of becoming someone important. However, Yank is largely unaware of his insignificance until he encounters a rich steel-mogul’s daughter, Mildred.

In the play, Mildred spends the majority of her time onstage on the ship’s top deck. O’Neill describes it thus: “The impression to be conveyed by this scene is one of the beautiful, vivid life of the sea all about—sunshine on the deck in a great flood, the fresh sea wind blowing across it” (O’Neill 1686). While every setting Yank inhabits is dark and confined, Mildred is found in settings that are bright and open, signifying the freedom she is awarded by her status. This is similar to the way Cooper used the sunlit open clearing to symbolize the freedom enjoyed by his main characters. Beyond just Mildred’s surroundings, a bright, open setting is used later in the play to emphasize the freedom of the entire upper class. Later in the play, Yank visits Fifth Avenue to try and get his revenge on Mildred for insulting him. The street is described as having “a general atmosphere of clean, well-tidied, wide street; a flood of mellow, tempered sunshine; gentle, genteel breezes” (O’Neill 1695). Even though the setting is within a city, a center of human civilization, O’Neill emphasizes the natural elements of the setting to evoke the feeling of freedom, which shows the ongoing influence of romantic authors like Cooper on realist writers.

While Mildred and the upper class enjoy the freedoms granted by high status, Yank becomes increasingly trapped, and he soon finds himself in a real cage, rather than the metaphoric “cage” in the bottom of the steamship. Yank is arrested after his visit to Fifth Avenue and ends up in prison. O’Neill uses the setting of a physical cage to emphasize the invisible societal cage that Yank is trapped in, in a similar manner to how Melville used Bartleby’s literal confined office to symbolize his place in life and society. At the end of the play, Yank finds himself in a place that represents the ultimate paradox of freedom ­— the zoo. Free animals from nature have been placed in cages by society, creating a sharp contrast for the audience between nature and man, freedom and captivity. The zoo also makes a statement about freedom in society. Just as people have built physical cages for the animals, they have built invisible cages for themselves. In a natural state, away from society, Yank would be a free man, just like his counterpart Hurry Harry in *The Deerslayer*. However, Yank lives in a society that has caged him with its expectations and judgements. Yank is trapped in the dregs of society because others deem him worthless. His awareness of his inability to meet society’s expectations eventually becomes his prison and his doom.

Though the romantic period of literature ended long ago, its ideas of nature as a place of freedom remain in literature to this day. Romantic and realist writers, including Cooper, Melville, and O’Neill, have used open, natural settings to symbolize freedom in their works. In contrast, society is often depicted as the cage we have built for ourselves. Within a society, everyone feels the pressure to belong, make connections, be useful, meet expectations, achieve admirable goals. In truth, we are less free to do what we want and be who we are within society than we would be in our natural state. Even as American ideals change, nature and freedom continue to be linked in our beliefs and our literature, and are likely to continue to be so long into the future.

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