THE MEANING OF AMERICA

A Companion to the Book
What So Proudly We Hail

Amy A. Kass    Leon R. Kass
For additional materials and opportunities for comment, readers are invited to visit our website:

www.whatsoproudlywehail.org
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Readings marked with an asterisk (*) are Common Core State Standards Exemplar Texts.

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Introduction

The Meaning of America is a new curriculum for civic education. It is based on our anthology What So Proudly We Hail: The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song (coedited with Diana Schaub), which takes a literary approach to making citizens—one centering on stories and supplemented by great public speeches and patriotic songs.

Our ultimate goal, stated without apology, is to produce better patriots and better citizens: men and women knowingly and thoughtfully attached to our country, devoted to its ideals, and eager to live an active civic life. Although we are committed to the goal of producing thoughtful patriots and engaged citizens, we have no partisan political agenda or ideological intentions. The patriotism we seek to encourage is deep, not superficial; reflective, not reflexive; and, above all, thoughtful. Our curriculum addresses liberals and conservatives; Democrats, Republicans, and independents; rich and poor; young and old; and Americans of every race, religion, and ethnicity, for all Americans have a stake in the well-being of our nation.

A Literary Approach to Civic Education

Our approach to civic education differs from the more common approaches now practiced. Many people, concerned about the state of civic literacy and American identity, have been developing programs of instruction that emphasize American history, political thought, and civic institutions. Another approach, emphasizing learning by doing, sends students into the community to perform services for others, in the hope that the students will thereby develop the habit of serving. But these worthy efforts by themselves will not produce (with the first approach) a love of country or (with the second approach) the capacity to think deeply about the character and purposes of the country in which we live and serve.

Developing robust and committed American citizens is a matter of both the heart and the head. We need to furnish our imaginations with true stories of American heroes, stories that inspire emulation and the pride of kinship with those who have nobly gone before—the stories of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, of Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King Jr. But we also can benefit greatly from fictional stories that not only inspire but also instruct. By giving us characters to identify with, stories provide concrete mirrors for self-discovery and self-examination. At their best, they reveal the complexities of our situation and educate the sentiments in a richer and more sophisticated way.

The Meaning of America aims to demonstrate concretely how short stories can illuminate the meaning of American identity, character, and citizenship, and to do so by displaying and promoting learning not through lecturing but through genuine inquiry and searching conversation.

Specific learning outcomes will include the following:
• **Reading.** Students will become engaged readers who appreciate ambiguity and complexity and who can articulate their own interpretations with an awareness of and curiosity about other perspectives.

• **Critical Thinking.** Through close reading and discussion of primary sources and other texts, students will engage with the authors’ ideas and begin to explore and develop their own. They will practice the skills needed to participate in conversations that build knowledge collaboratively: listening carefully and respectfully to others’ viewpoints, articulating their own ideas and questions clearly, and situating their own ideas in relation to other voices and ideas.

• **American Culture and History.** Students will analyze, compare, and evaluate classic American short stories and key historical texts. They will develop an ability to read texts in relation to their historical and cultural contexts to gain a richer understanding of both the text and context and become more aware of themselves as American citizens.

• **Valuing Literature and the Imagination.** Students will learn about and experience literature’s ability to elicit feeling, cultivate the imagination, and call us to account as citizens and human beings. They will appreciate the expressive use of language as a fundamental and sustaining human activity, preparing for a life of learning as readers and writers.

• **Civic Knowledge and Engagement.** Students will reflect upon who they are as American citizens and examine our most fundamental values and principles as they read these texts. Through discussion of characters’ motivations, aspirations, and choices, students will gain a deeper understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of individuals who are informed by the American creed.

**The Plan of the Book**

We group our selections thematically, in a four-part structure with the following logic. Lesson One opens with a discussion of American national identity and why it matters. Lessons Two through Five are devoted to the American character and what kind of citizens are likely to emerge in a nation founded on individual rights, equality, enterprise and commerce, and freedom of religion. Against these portraits of the American character, Lessons Six through Nine explore various virtues needed for robust civic life, from self-command and self-respect to public-spiritedness and reverence, including law-abidingness and justice; courage and self-sacrifice; and civility, tolerance, and compassion. The final lesson returns to the subject of American identity and its preeminent symbol, the flag, this time with a view to making one out of many.

Short stories—most of them fictional, some autobiographical, and all written by American authors, living and dead—form the majority of the selections. Supplementing the stories are important historical texts and speeches that shed light on our commitment to freedom and equality or give voice to our enduring aspirations for national and civic
improvement. These texts not only illuminate some past circumstance; they enable us today to feel more fully our lives as American citizens and to recognize which dispositions and practices enhance (and which undermine) republican self-government and ordered liberty. Carefully considered, the feelings and reactions aroused by both the texts and the stories can be thoughtfully attached to principled opinions. And the cumulative experience of such reflective reading and discussion can foster a deeper sense of American identity and contribute to forming the character needed for robust American citizenship and public life.

The authors of this curriculum have been engaged in teaching high school and college students for over forty years. In our teaching, we have relied mainly on the great writings by the best authors, whether living or dead, for we have found them to be the best companions for thought and the richest materials for enlarging the horizons, stimulating the imaginations, and challenging the intellectual complacencies of our students. Thus, we rely most heavily on stories by America’s finest writers, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Willa Cather, and Jack London, among others.

We recognize that there are important authors that we have overlooked and stories that might be better than those we have included—in fact, we welcome your suggestions. In the end, we have gone with readings that we know and have taught or that were recommended to us, that we think valuable for addressing questions about American identity and citizenship, and—of course—that we admire and enjoy.

Each lesson includes the following elements:

- **Text with headnotes.** Texts for all the readings are included. Teachers can download more copies for their pupils at our website (www.whatsoproudlywehail.org). Each text is preceded by a brief headnote, which provides the necessary historical context for understanding the story as well as guiding questions intended to deepen the reading experience and prepare students for class discussion.

- **Overview.** This section provides concise information about the author and a plot summary. The brief author biography provides useful context for understanding the text in relation to the author’s life and career, while the plot summary identifies key events and passages for discussion of the story.

- **Thinking about the Text.** This section provides a series of thematically arranged questions to better enable close reading of the text. These questions explore “literary” aspects of the work, such as characterization, diction, plot structure, tone, and theme, while preparing students to reflect on the larger American themes suggested by the selection.

- **Thinking with the Text.** These questions help students probe the meaning of the text for enduring insights about important American and human matters. They
relate the text’s themes to bigger questions about our national identity, the American creed, the American character, and the virtues and aspirations of active citizenship. This section also enables students to find connections between literary texts and historical texts (such as the Declaration of Independence).

- **In Conversation.** Interspersed throughout these guides are boxed features highlighting excerpts from a discussion with the editors and a guest. These discussions are drawn from video conversations (available for viewing on our website), which aim to capture the experience of high-level discourse as participants interact and elicit meaning from a classic American text. These excerpts, like the videos themselves, are meant to augment and not replace discussion or thought by teachers and students alike.

- **Web Portal.** Our web portal is a great place to access resources, curricula, and information on professional development opportunities. Please visit us at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org for more information.

**Teaching across Disciplines**

*The Meaning of America* is designed to allow teachers to integrate lessons into their current classroom curriculum in any way they see fit. The lessons can be used across disciplines—not only for civics classrooms, but also for social studies, language arts, humanities, and other subject areas.

An additional bonus is the connection this curriculum has with the new Common Core State Standards. These standards not only mandate certain critical types of content, such as seminal works in American literature, for all students, but they also advocate “close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding.” Literature and social studies teachers looking for models for teaching close reading and analyzing complex texts should find most welcome the headnotes; conversation excerpts; and, above all, the guiding questions that accompany each of the texts in our curriculum and the associated skills of critical thinking that they encourage and promote.

In brief, *The Meaning of America* reflects our own long experience in teaching and the principles derived from that practice: be serious; speak up, not down, to students; ask them genuine questions; and encourage them in thoughtful reflection and honest conversation. Students treated in this fashion more often than not will rise to the occasion and vindicate your trust in their capacity to learn and grow—in mind, in heart, and in soul.

—Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass
About the Editors

Amy A. Kass is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, senior lecturer emerita in the humanities at the University of Chicago, and coeditor of *What So Proudly We Hail: The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song* (Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2011). Trained in the history of ideas and the history of education, she was for over forty years an award-winning teacher of classic texts, first at St. John’s College, and from 1976 to 2010, in the College of the University of Chicago. Along with her husband, Leon R. Kass, Mrs. Kass helped found a still-popular core humanities course on Human Being and Citizen, which she chaired for twenty years. She was the founding director of the nationwide Tocqueville Seminars on Civic Leadership and, more recently, the nationwide Dialogues on Civic Philanthropy. She has served on the National Council on the Humanities for the National Endowment for the Humanities and as a consultant to the Corporation of Public Broadcasting and the Corporation for National and Community Service. Mrs. Kass is an adviser to Civic Enterprises and the National Conference on Citizenship and a member of the board of the Ethics and Public Policy Center. She is the author of numerous articles and editor of four other anthologies: *American Lives: Cultural Differences, Individual Distinction* (Golden Owl, 1995); *Wing to Wing, Oar to Oar: Readings on Courting and Marrying* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2000, with Leon R. Kass); *The Perfect Gift: The Philanthropic Imagination in Poetry and Prose* (Indiana University Press, 2002); and *Giving Well, Doing Good: Readings for Thoughtful Philanthropists* (Indiana University Press, 2007).

Leon R. Kass, MD, is the Madden-Jewett Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), Harding Professor Emeritus in the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, and coeditor of *What So Proudly We Hail: The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song* (Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2011). Originally trained in medicine and biochemistry, he shifted directions from doing science to thinking about its human meaning, and he has been engaged for forty years with ethical and philosophical issues raised by biomedical advancements and, more recently, with broader moral and cultural issues. Dr. Kass taught at St. John’s College (Annapolis) and Georgetown University before returning in 1976 to the University of Chicago, where he was until 2010 an award-winning teacher deeply involved in undergraduate education and committed to the study of classic texts. He helped found, and for many years chaired, an interdisciplinary degree-granting major, Fundamentals: Issues and Texts, emphasizing big questions and great books. His books include *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature* (University of Chicago Press, 1999); *Wing to Wing, Oar to Oar: Readings on Courting and Marrying* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2000, with Amy A. Kass); *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics* (Encounter Books, 2002); and *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (Free Press, 2003). Dr. Kass served on the National Council on the Humanities of the National Endowment for the Humanities and delivered its Jefferson Lecture in 2009. From 2001 to 2005, he was chairman of the President’s Council on Bioethics. In 2012, he was the recipient of AEI’s Irving Kristol Award.
STANDARDS

What content standards will this curriculum address?

Common Core State Standards, History/Social Studies

Common Core State Standards, English Language Arts
RL.9-10.1, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.3, RL.9-10.4, RL.9-10.9, RL.11-12.1, RL.11-12.3, RL.11-12.4, RL.11-12.5

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

What skills and discrete procedures should students master?

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
- Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.
- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
- Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to one another and the whole.
- Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning and the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.
- Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Essential Questions

- Who are we as Americans? How do we identify ourselves, as individuals and as a people?
- What is the American “creed”?
- What are the goals and purposes of the American republic?
- What ideals and principles are basic to American constitutional democracy?
Standards and Learning Objectives

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of individuals formed by the American creed?
- What is a “good” citizen?
- What are the rights and responsibilities of a citizen in a free society?
- What civic dispositions or traits of private and public character are important to the preservation and improvement of American civic life?
- How can America produce citizens who are knowledgeably attached to their country and their communities and who possess the character—the attitudes, sensibilities, and virtues—necessary for robust civic engagement?

Summary of Key Learning Events and Instruction

**Lesson 1—National Identity and Why It Matters:** Students will read Edward Everett Hale’s “The Man without a Country” and explore the meaning and significance of national identity in general and American identity in particular.

The next four lessons lay out the major ideas and ideals of the American creed: freedom and individual rights; equality; enterprise and commerce; freedom of and for religious worship and religious toleration. Taken together, the four selections will help students reflect on the character of citizens likely to be produced under such a polity.

**Lesson 2—Freedom and Individuality:** Students will explore the strengths and weaknesses of American individualism and independence by considering Jack London’s “To Build a Fire” in relation to the principles enunciated in the Declaration of Independence.

**Lesson 3—Equality:** Students will examine the difference between equality of outcome and equality of opportunity through reading Kurt Vonnegut Jr.’s “Harrison Bergeron” in relation to the idea of equality presented in Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address.

**Lesson 4—Enterprise and Commerce:** Students will discuss the status of virtue in a democratic society devoted to gain and self-interest through reading Mark Twain’s “The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg” in relation to the ideas expressed in Federalist 10.

**Lesson 5—Freedom and Religion:** Students will contrast and compare two guiding ideas of the American republic: the pursuit of happiness (see the Declaration of Independence) and the spirit of reverence (see the Mayflower Compact) as personified in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The May-Pole of Merry Mount.” Issues of religious tolerance raised by the story can also be discussed in connection with George Washington’s letter To the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island.

After discussing the American character, students will be ready to consider what we need to protect us from our potential vices and which virtues are requisite for robust American citizenship—the subject of the next four lessons.

**Lesson 6—Self-Command:** In discussing Benjamin Franklin’s “Project for Moral Perfection,” students will consider the virtues of self-command and self-respect and what it means to be self-made.
Lesson 7—Law-Abidingness: Students will debate the elementary civic virtue of law-abidingness and the appropriateness of civil disobedience through reading and comparing Susan Glaspell’s “A Jury of Her Peers” and Abraham Lincoln’s “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions.”

Lesson 8—Courage and Self-Sacrifice: Students will explore the virtue of courage and how it can be cultivated, especially among self-interested citizens oriented toward the pursuit of their own happiness. Students will compare and contrast two very different speeches (one fictional, one historic): Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain’s speech to the troops before the battle of Gettysburg (excerpted from Michael Shaara’s The Killer Angels) and George S. Patton Jr.’s speech to the Third Army.

Lesson 9—Compassion: Students will reflect on the need for the virtue of compassion and their own personal and civic attitudes towards their neighbors through reading Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener.”

Lesson 10—Making One out of Many: In our last lesson, students return to the subject of American identity, reflecting on all that they have learned, through the reading and discussion of Willa Cather’s “The Namesake,” with special attention to the meaning of the national flag as a symbol of the nation.
National Identity & Why It Matters
The Man without a Country

Edward Everett Hale (1822–1909), Unitarian minister, antislavery activist, and for a time chaplain in the United States Senate, was also a prolific author of essays and stories, of which this one—written in 1863, the year of the Emancipation Proclamation—is the best known. The plot of the story is straightforward: Seduced by Aaron Burr, young, ambitious Philip Nolan, an artillery officer in the “Legion of the West,” becomes a Burr accomplice and is later convicted of treason. Asked after his conviction whether he wishes to declare his loyalty to the United States, he cries out, “Damn the United States! I wish I may never hear of the United States again!” His judges, half of them Revolutionary War veterans, give him precisely what he asks for. From that moment, September 23, 1807, until his dying day, May 11, 1863, Nolan “never but once again” hears the name of the United States, spending the rest of his life literally and figuratively at sea.

Why is Philip Nolan so quickly seduced and enlisted, “body and soul,” into the service of Aaron Burr? What causes him to change his attitude and feelings toward his country? Is Nolan’s eventual appreciation of his country simply the love of his own—his family, his country, his flag, his mother—or is it tied instead to something peculiarly American, such as our principles of freedom and equality? What does Nolan—what do we—learn from the emancipated slaves’ desire to return to their native lands?

Hale hoped that his story would contribute “towards the formation of a just and true national sentiment, or sentiment of love to the nation.” Does it do so for you?

I suppose that very few casual readers of the “New York Herald” of August 13th, 1863, observed, in an obscure corner, among the “Deaths,” the announcement,

“NOLAN. Died, on board U. S. Corvette Levant, Lat. 2° 11′ S., Long. 131° W., on the 11th of May, PHILIP NOLAN.”

I happened to observe it, because I was stranded at the old Mission-House in Mackinac, waiting for a Lake-Superior steamer which did not choose to come, and I was devouring, to the very stubble, all the current literature I could get hold of, even down to the deaths and marriages in the “Herald.” My memory for names and people is good, and the reader will see, as he goes on, that I had reason enough to remember Philip Nolan.

† The story is purely fictional, though it has echoes of historical events: After Aaron Burr left the vice presidency in 1805, he did make two trips down the Mississippi; he and his accomplices were tried for treason; and he was accused, among other things, of a conspiracy to steal Louisiana Purchase lands away from the United States and to crown himself king or emperor. Hale, years later, reported that the story, at least in part, was “testimony” against the election of 1863, in which Clement Vallandigham (1820–71), an ardent antiwar, pro-Confederate, anti—“King Lincoln” Ohio Democrat, was running for office from exile in Canada, and who, at his own earlier treason trial, like the fictional Nolan, asserted that he did not want to belong to the United States.
There are hundreds of readers who would have paused at that announcement, if the officer of the Levant who reported it had chosen to make it thus:—"Died, May 11th, THE MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY." For it was as "The Man without a Country" that poor Philip Nolan had generally been known by the officers who had him in charge during some fifty years, as, indeed, by all the men who sailed under them. I dare say there is many a man who has taken wine with him once a fortnight, in a three years’ cruise, who never knew that his name was "Nolan," or whether the poor wretch had any name at all.

There can now be no possible harm in telling this poor creature’s story. Reason enough there has been till now, ever since Madison’s Administration went out in 1817, for very strict secrecy, the secrecy of honor itself, among the gentlemen of the navy who have had Nolan in successive charge. And certainly it speaks well for the esprit de corps of the profession and the personal honor of its members, that to the press this man’s story has been wholly unknown,—and, I think, to the country at large also. I have reason to think, from some investigations I made in the Naval Archives when I was attached to the Bureau of Construction, that every official report relating to him was burned when Ross burned the public buildings at Washington. One of the Tuckers, or possibly one of the Watsons, had Nolan in charge at the end of the war; and when, on returning from his cruise, he reported at Washington to one of the Crowninshields,—who was in the Navy Department when he came home,—he found that the Department ignored the whole business. Whether they really knew nothing about it, or whether it was a "Non mi ricordo," determined on as a piece of policy, I do not know. But this I do know, that since 1817, and possibly before, no naval officer has mentioned Nolan in his report of a cruise.

But, as I say, there is no need for secrecy any longer. And now the poor creature is dead, it seems to me worth while to tell a little of his story, by way of showing young Americans of to-day what it is to be A MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY.

Philip Nolan was as fine a young officer as there was in the “Legion of the West,” as the Western division of our army was then called. When Aaron Burr made his first dashing expedition down to New Orleans in 1805, at Fort Massac, or somewhere above on the river, he met, as the Devil would have it, this gay, dashing, bright young fellow, at some dinner-party, I think. Burr marked him, talked to him, walked with him, took him a day or two’s voyage in his flatboat, and, in short, fascinated him. For the next year, barrack-life was very tame to poor Nolan. He occasionally availed himself of the permission the great man had given him to write to him. Long, high-worded, stilted letters the poor boy wrote and rewrote and copied. But never a line did he have in reply from the gay deceiver. The other boys in the garrison sneered at him, because he sacrificed in this unrequited affection for a politician the time which they devoted to Monongahela, sledge, and high-low-jack. Bourbon, euchre, and poker were still unknown. But one day Nolan had his revenge. This time Burr came down the river, not as an attorney seeking a place for his office, but as a disguised conqueror. He had defeated I know not how many district-attorneys; he had dined at I know not how many public dinners; he had been heralded in I know not how many Weekly Arguses; and it was rumored that he had an army behind him and an empire before him. It was a great day—his arrival—to poor Nolan. Burr had not been at the fort an hour before he sent for him.
That evening he asked Nolan to take him out in his skiff, to show him a canebrake or a cottonwood tree, as he said,—really to seduce him; and by the time the sail was over, Nolan was enlisted body and soul. From that time, though he did not yet know it, he lived as A MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY.

What Burr meant to do I know no more than you, dear reader. It is none of our business just now. Only, when the grand catastrophe came, and Jefferson and the House of Virginia of that day undertook to break on the wheel all the possible Clarences of the then House of York, by the great treason-trial at Richmond, some of the lesser fry in that distant Mississippi Valley, which was farther from us than Puget’s Sound is to-day, introduced the like novelty on their provincial stage, and, to while away the monotony of the summer at Fort Adams, got up, for spectacles, a string of court-martials on the officers there. One and another of the colonels and majors were tried, and, to fill out the list, little Nolan, against whom, Heaven knows, there was evidence enough,—that he was sick of the service, had been willing to be false to it, and would have obeyed any order to march any-whither with any one who would follow him, had the order been signed, “By command of His Exc. A. Burr.” The courts dragged on. The big flies escaped,—rightly for all I know. Nolan was proved guilty enough, as I say; yet you and I would never have heard of him, reader, but that, when the president of the court asked him at the close, whether he wished to say anything to show that he had always been faithful to the United States, he cried out, in a fit of frenzy,—

“D—n the United States! I wish I may never hear of the United States again!”

I suppose he did not know how the words shocked old Colonel Morgan, who was holding the court. Half the officers who sat in it had served through the Revolution, and their lives, not to say their necks, had been risked for the very idea which he so cavalierly cursed in his madness. He, on his part, had grown up in the West of those days, in the midst of “Spanish plot,” “Orleans plot,” and all the rest. He had been educated on a plantation, where the finest company was a Spanish officer or a French merchant from Orleans. His education, such as it was, had been perfected in commercial expeditions to Vera Cruz, and I think he told me his father once hired an Englishman to be a private tutor for a winter on the plantation. He had spent half his youth with an older brother, hunting horses in Texas; and, in a word, to him “United States” was scarcely a reality. Yet he had been fed by “United States” for all the years since he had been in the army. He had sworn on his faith as a Christian to be true to “United States.” It was “United States” which gave him the uniform he wore, and the sword by his side. Nay, my poor Nolan, it was only because “United States” had picked you out first as one of her own confidential men of honor, that “A. Burr” cared for you a straw more than for the flatboat men who sailed his ark for him. I do not excuse Nolan; I only explain to the reader why he damned his country, and wished he might never hear her name again.

He never did hear her name but once again. From that moment, September 23, 1807, till the day he died, May 11, 1863, he never heard her name again. For that half century and more he was a man without a country.
Old Morgan, as I said, was terribly shocked. If Nolan had compared George Washington to Benedict Arnold, or had cried, “God save King George,” Morgan would not have felt worse. He called the court into his private room, and returned in fifteen minutes, with a face like a sheet, to say,—

“Prisoner, hear the sentence of the Court. The Court decides, subject to the approval of the President, that you never hear the name of the United States again.”

Nolan laughed. But nobody else laughed. Old Morgan was too solemn, and the whole room was hushed dead as night for a minute. Even Nolan lost his swagger in a moment. Then Morgan added,—

“Mr. Marshal, take the prisoner to Orleans in an armed boat, and deliver him to the naval commander there.”

The marshal gave his orders and the prisoner was taken out of court.

“Mr. Marshal,” continued old Morgan, “see that no one mentions the United States to the prisoner. Mr. Marshal, make my respects to Lieutenant Mitchell at Orleans, and request him to order that no one shall mention the United States to the prisoner while he is on board ship. You will receive your written orders from the officer on duty here this evening. The court is adjourned without delay.”

I have always supposed that Colonel Morgan himself took the proceedings of the court to Washington City, and explained them to Mr. Jefferson. Certain it is that the President approved them,—certain, that is, if I may believe the men who say they have seen his signature. Before the Nautilus got round from New Orleans to the Northern Atlantic coast with the prisoner on board, the sentence had been approved, and he was a man without a country.

The plan then adopted was substantially the same which was necessarily followed ever after. Perhaps it was suggested by the necessity of sending him by water from Fort Adams and Orleans. The Secretary of the Navy—it must have been the first Crowninshield, though he is a man I do not remember—was requested to put Nolan on board a Government vessel bound on a long cruise, and to direct that he should be only so far confined there as to make it certain that he never saw or heard of the country. We had few long cruises then, and the navy was very much out of favor; and as almost all of this story is traditional, as I have explained, I do not know certainly what his first cruise was.

But the commander to whom he was intrusted—perhaps it was Tingey or Shaw, though I think it was one of the younger men,—we are all old enough now—regulated the etiquette and the precautions of the affair, and according to his scheme they were carried out, I suppose, till Nolan died.
When I was second officer of the Intrepid, some thirty years after, I saw the original paper of instructions. I have been sorry ever since that I did not copy the whole of it. It ran, however, much in this way:—

“Washington” (with a date, which must have been late in 1807.)

“SIR,—You will receive from Lt. Neale the person of Philip Nolan, late a Lieutenant in the United States Army.

‘This person on his trial by court-martial expressed with an oath the wish that he might ‘never hear of the United States again.’

“The Court sentenced him to have his wish fulfilled.

“For the present, the execution of the order is intrusted by the President to this Department.

“You will take the prisoner on board your ship, and keep him there with such precautions as shall prevent his escape.

“You will provide him with such quarters, rations, and clothing as would be proper for an officer of his late rank, if he were a passenger on your vessel on the business of his Government.

“The gentlemen on board will make any arrangements agreeable to themselves regarding his society. He is to be exposed to no indignity of any kind, nor is he ever unnecessarily to be reminded that he is a prisoner.

“But under no circumstances is he ever to hear of his country or to see any information regarding it; and you will especially caution all the officers under your command to take care, that, in the various indulgences which may be granted, this rule, in which his punishment is involved, shall not be broken.

“It is the intention of the Government that he shall never again see the country which he has disowned. Before the end of your cruise you will receive orders which will give effect to this intention.

“Resp’y yours,

“W. Southard, for the Sec’y of the Navy.”

If I had only preserved the whole of this paper, there would be no break in the beginning of my sketch of this story. For Captain Shaw, if it was he, handed it to his successor in the charge, and he to his, and I suppose the commander of the Levant has it to-day as his authority for keeping this man in this mild custody.

The rule adopted on board the ships on which I have met “the man without a country” was, I think, transmitted from the beginning. No mess liked to have him permanently, because his presence cut off all talk of home or of the prospect of return, of politics or letters, of peace or of war,—cut off more than half the talk the men liked to have at sea. But it was always thought too hard that he should never meet the rest of us, except to touch hats, and we finally sank into one system. He was not permitted to talk with the men, unless an officer was by. With officers he had unrestrained intercourse, as far as they and he chose. But he grew shy, though he had favorites: I was one.

Then the captain always asked him to dinner on Monday. Every mess in succession took up the invitation in its turn. According to the size of the ship, you had him at your
mess more or less often at dinner. His breakfast he ate in his own state-room,—he always had a state-room,—which was where a sentinel, or somebody on the watch, could see the door. And whatever else he ate or drank he ate or drank alone. Sometimes, when the marines or sailors had any special jollification, they were permitted to invite “Plain-Buttons,” as they called him. Then Nolan was sent with some officer, and the men were forbidden to speak of home while he was there. I believe the theory was, that the sight of his punishment did them good. They called him “Plain-Buttons,” because, while he always chose to wear a regulation army-uniform, he was not permitted to wear the army-button, for the reason that it bore either the initials or the insignia of the country he had disowned.

I remember, soon after I joined the navy, I was on shore with some of the older officers from our ship and from the Brandywine, which we had met at Alexandria. We had leave to make a party and go up to Cairo and the Pyramids. As we jogged along, (you went on donkeys then,) some of the gentlemen (we boys called them “Dons,” but the phrase was long since changed) fell to talking about Nolan, and some one told the system which was adopted from the first about his books and other reading. As he was almost never permitted to go on shore, even though the vessel lay in port for months, his time, at the best, hung heavy; and everybody was permitted to lend him books, if they were not published in America and made no allusion to it. These were common enough in the old days, when people in the other hemisphere talked of the United States as little as we do of Paraguay. He had almost all the foreign papers that came into the ship, sooner or later; only somebody must go over them first, and cut out any advertisement or stray paragraph that alluded to America. This was a little cruel sometimes, when the back of what was cut out might be as innocent as Hesiod. Right in the midst of one of Napoleon’s battles, or one of Canning’s speeches, poor Nolan would find a great hole, because on the back of the page of that paper there had been an advertisement of a packet for New York, or a scrap from the President’s message. I say this was the first time I ever heard of this plan, which afterwards I had enough, and more than enough, to do with. I remember it, because poor Phillips, who was of the party, as soon as the allusion to reading was made, told a story of something which happened at the Cape of Good Hope on Nolan’s first voyage; and it is the only thing I ever knew of that voyage. They had touched at the Cape, and had done the civil thing with the English Admiral and the fleet, and then, leaving for a long cruise up the Indian Ocean, Phillips had borrowed a lot of English books from an officer, which, in those days, as indeed in these, was quite a windfall. Among them, as the Devil would order, was the “Lay of the Last Minstrel,” which they had all of them heard of, but which most of them had never seen. I think it could not have been published long. Well, nobody thought there could be any risk of anything national in that, though Phillips swore old Shaw had cut out the “Tempest” from Shakespeare before he let Nolan have it, because he said “the Bermudas ought to be ours, and, by Jove, should be one day.” So Nolan was permitted to join the circle one afternoon when a lot of them sat on deck smoking and reading aloud. People do not do such things so often now; but when I was young we got rid of a great deal of time so. Well, so it happened that in his turn Nolan took the book and read to the others; and he read very well, as I know. Nobody in the circle knew a line of the poem, only it was all magic and Border chivalry, and was ten
thousand years ago. Poor Nolan read steadily through the fifth canto, stopped a minute and drank something, and then began, without a thought of what was coming,—

“Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,  
Who never to himself hath said,”—

It seems impossible to us that anybody ever heard this for the first time; but all these fellows did then, and poor Nolan himself went on, still unconsciously or mechanically,—

“This is my own, my native land!”

Then they all saw something was to pay; but he expected to get through, I suppose, turned a little pale, but plunged on,—

“Whose heart hath ne’er within him burned,  
As home his footsteps he hath turned  
From wandering on a foreign strand?—  
If such there breathe, go, mark him well.”

By this time the men were all beside themselves, wishing there was any way to make him turn over two pages; but he had not quite presence of mind for that; he gagged a little, colored crimson, and staggered on,—

“For him no minstrel raptures swell;  
High though his titles, proud his name,  
Boundless his wealth as wish can claim,  
Despite these titles, power, and pelf,  
The wretch, concentred all in self,”—

and here the poor fellow choked, could not go on, but started up, swung the book into the sea, vanished into his state-room, “and by Jove,” said Phillips, “we did not see him for two months again. And I had to make up some beggarly story to that English surgeon why I did not return his Walter Scott to him.”

That story shows about the time when Nolan’s braggadocio must have broken down. At first, they said, he took a very high tone, considered his imprisonment a mere farce, affected to enjoy the voyage, and all that; but Phillips said that after he came out of his state-room he never was the same man again. He never read aloud again, unless it was the Bible or Shakespeare, or something else he was sure of. But it was not that merely. He never entered in with the other young men exactly as a companion again. He was always shy afterwards, when I knew him,—very seldom spoke, unless he was spoken to, except to a very few friends. He lighted up occasionally,—I remember late in his life hearing him fairly eloquent on something which had been suggested to him by one of Fléchier’s sermons,—but generally he had the nervous, tired look of a heart-wounded man.
When Captain Shaw was coming home,—if, as I say, it was Shaw,—rather to the surprise of everybody they made one of the Windward Islands, and lay off and on for nearly a week. The boys said the officers were sick of salt-junk, and meant to have turtle-soup before they came home. But after several days the Warren came to the same rendezvous; they exchanged signals; she sent to Phillips and these homeward-bound men letters and papers, and told them she was outward-bound, perhaps to the Mediterranean, and took poor Nolan and his traps on the boat back to try his second cruise. He looked very blank when he was told to get ready to join her. He had known enough of the signs of the sky to know that till that moment he was going “home.” But this was a distinct evidence of something he had not thought of, perhaps,—that there was no going home for him, even to a prison. And this was the first of some twenty such transfers, which brought him sooner or later into half our best vessels, but which kept him all his life at least some hundred miles from the country he had hoped he might never hear of again.

It may have been on that second cruise,—it was once when he was up the Mediterranean,—that Mrs. Graff, the celebrated Southern beauty of those days, danced with him. They had been lying a long time in the Bay of Naples, and the officers were very intimate in the English fleet, and there had been great festivities, and our men thought they must give a great ball on board the ship. How they ever did it on board the Warren I am sure I do not know. Perhaps it was not the Warren, or perhaps ladies did not take up so much room as they do now. They wanted to use Nolan’s state-room for something, and they hated to do it without asking him to the ball; so the captain said they might ask him, if they would be responsible that he did not talk with the wrong people, “who would give him intelligence.” So the dance went on, the finest party that had ever been known, I dare say; for I never heard of a man-of-war ball that was not. For ladies they had the family of the American consul, one or two travellers who had adventured so far, and a nice bevy of English girls and matrons, perhaps Lady Hamilton herself.

Well, different officers relieved each other in standing and talking with Nolan in a friendly way, so as to be sure that nobody else spoke to him. The dancing went on with spirit, and after a while even the fellows who took this honorary guard of Nolan ceased to fear any contra-temp. Only when some English lady—Lady Hamilton, as I said, perhaps—called for a set of “American dances,” an odd thing happened. Everybody then danced contra-dances. The black band, nothing loath, conferred as to what “American dances” were, and started off with “Virginia Reel,” which they followed with “Money-Musk,” which, in its turn in those days, should have been followed by “The Old Thirteen.” But just as Dick, the leader, tapped for his fiddles to begin, and bent forward, about to say, in true Negro state, “‘The Old Thirteen,’ gentlemen and ladies!” as he had said, “‘Virginny Reel,’ if you please!” and “‘Money-Musk,’ if you please!” the captain’s boy tapped him on the shoulder, whispered to him, and he did not announce the name of the dance; he merely bowed, began on the air, and they all fell to,—the officers teaching the English girls the figure, but not telling them why it had no name.

But that is not the story I started to tell.—As the dancing went on, Nolan and our fellows all got at ease, as I said,—so much so, that it seemed quite natural for him to bow to that splendid Mrs. Graff, and say,—
“I hope you have not forgotten me, Miss Rutledge. Shall I have the honor of dancing?”

He did it so quickly, that Shubrick, who was by him, could not hinder him. She laughed, and said,—

“I am not Miss Rutledge any longer, Mr. Nolan; but I will dance all the same,” just nodded to Shubrick, as if to say he must leave Mr. Nolan to her, and led him off to the place where the dance was forming.

Nolan thought he had got his chance. He had known her at Philadelphia, and at other places had met her, and this was a Godsend. You could not talk in contra-dances, as you do in cotillions, or even in the pauses of waltzing; but there were chances for tongues and sounds, as well as for eyes and blushes. He began with her travels, and Europe, and Vesuvius, and the French; and then, when they had worked down, and had that long talking-time at the bottom of the set, he said boldly,—a little pale, she said, as she told me the story, years after,—

“And what do you hear from home, Mrs. Graff?”

And that splendid creature looked through him. Jove! how she must have looked through him!

“Home!! Mr. Nolan!!! I thought you were the man who never wanted to hear of home again!”—and she walked directly up the deck to her husband, and left poor Nolan alone, as he always was.—He did not dance again.

I cannot give any history of him in order: nobody can now: and, indeed, I am not trying to. These are the traditions, which I sort out, as I believe them, from the myths which have been told about this man for forty years. The lies that have been told about him are legion. The fellows used to say he was the “Iron Mask”; and poor George Pons went to his grave in the belief that this was the author of “Junius,” who was being punished for his celebrated libel on Thomas Jefferson. Pons was not very strong in the historical line.

A happier story than either of these I have told is of the War. That came along soon after. I have heard this affair told in three or four ways,—and, indeed, it may have happened more than once. But which ship it was on I cannot tell. However, in one, at least, of the great frigate-duels with the English, in which the navy was really baptized, it happened that a round shot from the enemy entered one of our ports square, and took right down the officer of the gun himself, and almost every man of the gun’s crew. Now you may say what you choose about courage, but that is not a nice thing to see. But, as the men who were not killed picked themselves up, and as they and the surgeon’s people were carrying off the bodies, there appeared Nolan, in his shirt-sleeves, with the rammer in his hand, and, just as if he had been the officer, told them off with authority,—who should go to the cockpit with the wounded men, who should stay with him,—perfectly
cheery, and with that way which makes men feel sure all is right and is going to be right. And he finished loading the gun with his own hands, aimed it, and bade the men fire. And there he stayed, captain of that gun, keeping those fellows in spirits, till the enemy struck,—sitting on the carriage while the gun was cooling, though he was exposed all the time,—showing them easier ways to handle heavy shot,—making the raw hands laugh at their own blunders,—and when the gun cooled again, getting it loaded and fired twice as often as any other gun on the ship. The captain walked forward by way of encouraging the men, and Nolan touched his hat and said,—

“I am showing them how we do this in the artillery, Sir.”

And this is the part of the story where all the legends agree: the commodore said,—

“I see you do, and I thank you, Sir; and I shall never forget this day, Sir, and you never shall, Sir.”

And after the whole thing was over, and he had the Englishman’s sword, in the midst of the state and ceremony of the quarter-deck, he said,—

“Where is Mr. Nolan? Ask Mr. Nolan to come here.”

And when Nolan came, the captain said,—

“Mr. Nolan, we are all very grateful to you to-day; you are one of us to-day; you will be named in the despatches.”

And then the old man took off his own sword of ceremony, and gave it to Nolan, and made him put it on. The man told me this who saw it. Nolan cried like a baby, and well he might. He had not worn a sword since that infernal day at Fort Adams. But always afterwards, on occasions of ceremony, he wore that quaint old French sword of the Commodore’s.

The captain did mention him in the despatches. It was always said he asked that he might be pardoned. He wrote a special letter to the Secretary of War. But nothing ever came of it. As I said, that was about the time when they began to ignore the whole transaction at Washington, and when Nolan’s imprisonment began to carry itself on because there was nobody to stop it without any new orders from home.

I have heard it said that he was with Porter when he took possession of the Nukahiwa Islands. Not this Porter, you know, but old Porter, his father, Essex Porter,—that is, the old Essex Porter, not this Essex. As an artillery officer, who had seen service in the West, Nolan knew more about fortifications, embrasures, ravelins, stockades, and all that, than any of them did; and he worked with a right goodwill in fixing that battery all right. I have always thought it was a pity Porter did not leave him in command there with Gamble. That would have settled all the question about his punishment. We should have kept the islands, and at this moment we should have one station in the Pacific Ocean. Our
French friends, too, when they wanted this little watering-place, would have found it was preoccupied. But Madison and the Virginians, of course, flung all that away.

All that was near fifty years ago. If Nolan was thirty then, he must have been near eighty when he died. He looked sixty when he was forty. But he never seemed to me to change a hair afterwards. As I imagine his life, from what I have seen and heard of it, he must have been in every sea, and yet almost never on land. He must have known, in a formal way, more officers in our service than any man living knows. He told me once, with a grave smile, that no man in the world lived so methodical a life as he. “You know the boys say I am the Iron Mask, and you know how busy he was.” He said it did not do for any one to try to read all the time, more than to do anything else all the time; but that he read just five hours a day. “Then,” he said, “I keep up my note-books, writing in them at such and such hours from what I have been reading; and I include in these my scrap-books.” These were very curious indeed. He had six or eight, of different subjects. There was one of History, one of Natural Science, one which he called “Odds and Ends.” But they were not merely books of extracts from newspapers. They had bits of plants and ribbons, shells tied on, and carved scraps of bone and wood, which he had taught the men to cut for him, and they were beautifully illustrated. He drew admirably. He had some of the funniest drawings there, and some of the most pathetic, that I have ever seen in my life. I wonder who will have Nolan’s scrap-books.

Well, he said his reading and his notes were his profession, and that they took five hours and two hours respectively of each day. “Then,” said he, “every man should have a diversion as well as a profession. My Natural History is my diversion.” That took two hours a day more. The men used to bring him birds and fish, but on a long cruise he had to satisfy himself with centipedes and cockroaches and such small game. He was the only naturalist I ever met who knew anything about the habits of the house-fly and the mosquito. All those people can tell you whether they are Lepidoptera or Steptopotera; but as for telling how you can get rid of them, or how they get away from you when you strike them,—why Linnæus knew as little of that as John Foy the idiot did. These nine hours made Nolan’s regular daily “occupation.” The rest of the time he talked or walked. Till he grew very old he went aloft a great deal. He always kept up his exercise; and I never heard that he was ill. If any other man was ill, he was the kindest nurse in the world; and he knew more than half the surgeons do. Then if anybody was sick or died, or if the captain wanted him to on any other occasion, he was always ready to read prayers. I have remarked that he read beautifully.

My own acquaintance with Philip Nolan began six or eight years after the War, on my first voyage after I was appointed a midshipman. It was in the first days after our Slave-Trade treaty, while the Reining House, which was still the House of Virginia, had still a sort of sentimentalism about the suppression of the horrors of the Middle Passage, and something was sometimes done that way. We were in the South Atlantic on that business. From the time I joined, I believe I thought Nolan was a sort of lay chaplain,—a chaplain with a blue coat. I never asked about him. Everything in the ship was strange to me. I knew it was green to ask questions, and I suppose I thought there was a “Plain-Buttons” on every ship. We had him to dine in our mess once a week, and the caution was given
that on that day nothing was to be said about home. But if they had told us not to say anything about the planet Mars or the Book of Deuteronomy, I should not have asked why; there were a great many things which seemed to me to have as little reason. I first came to understand anything about “the man without a country” one day when we overhauled a dirty little schooner which had slaves on board. An officer was sent to take charge of her, and, after a few minutes, he sent back his boat to ask that some one might be sent him who could speak Portuguese. We were all looking over the rail when the message came, and we all wished we could interpret, when the captain asked who spoke Portuguese. But none of the officers did; and just as the captain was sending forward to ask if any of the people could, Nolan stepped out and said he should be glad to interpret, if the captain wished, as he understood the language. The captain thanked him, fitted out another boat with him, and in this boat it was my luck to go.

When we got there, it was such a scene as you seldom see, and never want to. Nastiness beyond account, and chaos run loose in the midst of the nastiness. There were not a great many of the negroes; but by way of making what there were understand that they were free, Vaughan had had their hand-cuffs and ankle-cuffs knocked off, and, for convenience’ sake, was putting them upon the rascals of the schooner’s crew. The negroes were, most of them, out of the hold, and swarming all round the dirty deck, with a central throng surrounding Vaughan and addressing him in every dialect and patois of a dialect, from the Zulu click up to the Parisian of Beledeljereed.

As we came on deck, Vaughan looked down from a hogshead, on which he had mounted in desperation, and said,—

“For God’s love, is there anybody who can make these wretches understand something? The men gave them rum, and that did not quiet them. I knocked that big fellow down twice, and that did not soothe him. And then I talked Choctaw to all of them together; and I’ll be hanged if they understood that as well as they understood the English.”

Nolan said he could speak Portuguese, and one or two fine-looking Kroomen were dragged out, who, as it had been found already, had worked for the Portuguese on the coast at Fernando Po.

“Tell them they are free,” said Vaughan; “and tell them that these rascals are to be hanged as soon as we can get rope enough.”

Nolan “put that into Spanish,”—that is, he explained it in such Portuguese as the Kroomen could understand, and they in turn to such of the negroes as could understand them. Then there was such a yell of delight, clinching of fists, leaping and dancing,

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1 The phrase is General Taylor’s. When Santa Aña brought up his immense army at Buena Vista, he sent a flag of truce to invite Taylor to surrender. “Tell him to go to hell,” said old Rough-and-Ready. “Bliss, put that into Spanish.” “Perfect Bliss,” as this accomplished officer, too early lost, was called, interpreted liberally, replying to the flag, in exquisite Castilian, “Say to General Santa Aña, that, if he wants us, he must come and take us.” And this is the answer which has gone into history.
kissing of Nolan’s feet, and a general rush made to the hogshead by way of spontaneous
worship of Vaughan, as the _deus ex machina_ of the occasion.

“Tell them,” said Vaughan, well pleased, “that I will take them all to Cape Palmas.”

This did not answer so well. Cape Palmas was practically as far from the homes of
most of them as New Orleans or Rio Janeiro was; that is, they would be eternally
separated from home there. And their interpreters, as we could understand, instantly said,
“Ah, _non Palmas,_” and began to propose infinite other expedients in most voluble
language. Vaughan was rather disappointed at this result of his liberality, and asked
Nolan eagerly what they said. The drops stood on poor Nolan’s white forehead, as he
hushed the men down, and said,—

“He says, ‘Not Palmas.’ He says, ‘Take us home, take us to our own country, take us
to our own house, take us to our own pickaninnies and our own women.’ He says he has
an old father and mother, who will die, if they do not see him. And this one says he left
his people all sick, and paddled down to Fernando to beg the white doctor to come and
help them, and that these devils caught him in the bay just in sight of home, and that he
has never seen anybody from home since then. And this one says,” choked out
Nolan, “that he has not heard a word from his home in six months, while he has been locked up
in an infernal barracoon.”

Vaughan always said he grew gray himself while Nolan struggled through this
interpretation. I, who did not understand anything of the passion involved in it, saw that
the very elements were melting with fervent heat, and that something was to pay
somewhere. Even the Negroes themselves stopped howling, as they saw Nolan’s agony,
and Vaughan’s almost equal agony of sympathy. As quick as he could get words, he
said,—

“Tell them yes, yes, yes; tell them they shall go to the Mountains of the Moon, if they
will. If I sail the schooner through the Great White Desert, they shall go home!”

And after some fashion Nolan said so. And then they all fell to kissing him again, and
wanted to rub his nose with theirs.

But he could not stand it long; and getting Vaughan to say he might go back, he
beckoned me down into our boat. As we lay back in the stern-sheets and the men gave
way, he said to me,—“Youngster, let that show you what it is to be without a family,
without a home, and without a country. And if you are ever tempted to say a word or to
do a thing that shall put a bar between you and your family, your home, and your country,
pray God in His mercy to take you that instant home to His own heaven. Stick by your
family, boy; forget you have a self, while you do everything for them. Think of your
home, boy; write and send, and talk about it. Let it be nearer and nearer to your thought,
the farther you have to travel from it; and rush back to it, when you are free, as that poor
black slave is doing now. And for your country, boy,” and the words rattled in his throat,
“And for that flag,” and he pointed to the ship, “never dream a dream but of serving her as
she bids you, though the service carry you through a thousand hells. No matter what happens to you, no more matter who flatters you or who abuses you, never look at another flag, never let a night pass but you pray God to bless that flag. Remember, boy, that behind all these men you have to do with, behind officers, and government, and people even, there is the Country Herself, your Country, and that you belong to Her as you belong to your own mother. Stand by Her, boy, as you would stand by your mother, if those devils there had got hold of her to-day!"

I was frightened to death by his calm, hard passion; but I blundered out that I would, by all that was holy, and that I had never thought of doing anything else. He hardly seemed to hear me; but he did, almost in a whisper, say,—“O, if anybody had said so to me when I was of your age!”

I think it was this half-confidence of his, which I never abused, for I never told this story till now, which afterward made us great friends. He was very kind to me. Often he sat up, or even got up, at night to walk the deck with me, when it was my watch. He explained to me a great deal of my mathematics, and I owe to him my taste for mathematics. He lent me books, and helped me about my reading. He never alluded so directly to his story again; but from one and another officer I have learned, in thirty years, what I am telling. When we parted from him in St. Thomas harbor, at the end of our cruise, I was more sorry than I can tell. I was very glad to meet him again in 1830; and later in life, when I thought I had some influence in Washington, I moved heaven and earth to have him discharged. But it was like getting a ghost out of prison. They pretended there was no such man; and never was such a man. They will say so at the Department now! Perhaps they do not know. It will not be the first thing in the service of which the Department appears to know nothing!

There is a story that Nolan met Burr once on one of our vessels, when a party of Americans came on board in the Mediterranean. But this I believe to be a lie; or rather, it is a myth, *ben trovato*, involving a tremendous blowing-up with which he sunk Burr,—asking him how he liked to be “without a country.” But it is clear, from Burr’s life, that nothing of the sort could have happened; and I mention this only as an illustration of the stories which get a-going where there is the least mystery at bottom.

So poor Philip Nolan had his wish fulfilled. I know but one fate more dreadful; it is the fate reserved for those men who shall have one day to exile themselves from their country because they have attempted her ruin, and shall have at the same time to see the prosperity and honor to which she rises when she has rid herself of them and their iniquities. The wish of poor Nolan, as we all learned to call him, not because his punishment was too great, but because his repentance was so clear, was precisely the wish of every Bragg and Beauregard who broke a soldier’s oath two years ago, and of every Maury and Barron who broke a sailor’s. I do not know how often they have repented. I do know that they have done all that in them lay that they might have no country,—that all the honors, associations, memories, and hopes which belong to “country” might be broken up into little shreds and distributed to the winds. I know, too, that their punishment, as they vegetate through what is left of life to them in wretched
Boulognes and Leicester Squares, where they are destined to upbraid each other till they die, will have all the agony of Nolan’s, with the added pang that every one who sees them will see them to despise and to execrate them. They will have their wish, like him.

For him, poor fellow, he repented of his folly, and then, like a man, submitted to the fate he had asked for. He never intentionally added to the difficulty or delicacy of the charge of those who had him in hold. Accidents would happen; but they never happened from his fault. Lieutenant Truxton told me, that, when Texas was annexed, there was a careful discussion among the officers, whether they should get hold of Nolan’s handsome set of maps, and cut Texas out of it,—from the map of the world and the map of Mexico. The United States had been cut out when the atlas was bought for him. But it was voted, rightly enough, that to do this would be virtually to reveal to him what had happened, or, as Harry Cole said, to make him think Old Burr had succeeded. So it was from no fault of Nolan’s that a great botch happened at my own table, when, for a short time, I was in command of the George Washington corvette, on the South American station. We were lying in the La Plata, and some of the officers, who had been on shore, and had just joined again, were entertaining us with accounts of their misadventures in riding the half-wild horses of Buenos Ayres. Nolan was at table, and was in an unusually bright and talkative mood. Some story of a tumble reminded him of an adventure of his own, when he was catching wild horses in Texas with his brother Stephen, at a time when he must have been quite a boy. He told the story with a good deal of spirit,—so much so, that the silence which often follows a good story hung over the table for an instant, to be broken by Nolan himself. For he asked, perfectly unconsciously,—

“Pray, what has become of Texas? After the Mexicans got their independence, I thought that province of Texas would come forward very fast. It is really one of the finest regions on earth; it is the Italy of this continent. But I have not seen or heard a word of Texas for near twenty years.”

There were two Texan officers at the table. The reason he had never heard of Texas was that Texas and her affairs had been painfully cut out of his newspapers since Austin began his settlements; so that, while he read of Honduras and Tamaulipas, and, till quite lately, of California, this virgin province, in which his brother had travelled so far, and, I believe, had died, had ceased to be to him. Waters and Williams, the two Texas men, looked grimly at each other, and tried not to laugh. Edward Morris had his attention attracted by the third link in the chain of the captain’s chandelier. Watrous was seized with a convulsion of sneezing. Nolan himself saw that something was to pay, he did not know what. And I, as master of the feast, had to say,—

“Texas is out of the map, Mr. Nolan. Have you seen Captain Back’s curious account of Sir Thomas Roe’s Welcome?”

After that cruise I never saw Nolan again. I wrote to him at least twice a year, for in that voyage we became even confidentially intimate; but he never wrote to me. The other men tell me that in those fifteen years he aged very fast, as well he might indeed, but that he was still the same gentle, uncomplaining, silent sufferer that he ever was, bearing as
best he could his self-appointed punishment,—rather less social, perhaps, with new men whom he did not know, but more anxious, apparently, than ever to serve and befriend and teach the boys, some of whom fairly seemed to worship him. And now it seems the dear old fellow is dead. He has found a home at last, and a country.

Since writing this, and while considering whether or no I would print it, as a warning to the young Nolans and Vallandighams and Tatnalls of to-day of what it is to throw away a country, I have received from Danforth, who is on board the Levant, a letter which gives an account of Nolan’s last hours. It removes all my doubts about telling this story.

To understand the first words of the letter, the non-professional reader should remember that after 1817 the position of every officer who had Nolan in charge was one of the greatest delicacy. The Government had failed to renew the order of 1807 regarding him. What was a man to do? Should he let him go? What, then, if he were called to account by the Department for violating the order of 1807? Should he keep him? What, then, if Nolan should be liberated some day, and should bring an action for false imprisonment or kidnapping against every man who had had him in charge?

I urged and pressed this upon Southard, and I have reason to think that other officers did the same thing. But the Secretary always said, as they so often do at Washington, that there were no special orders to give, and that we must act on our own judgment. That means, “If you succeed, you will be sustained; if you fail, you will be disavowed.” Well, as Danforth says, all that is over now, though I do not know but I expose myself to a criminal prosecution on the evidence of the very revelation I am making.

Here is the letter:

“Levant, 2° 2′ S. @ 131° W.

“DEAR FRED,—I try to find heart and life to tell you that it is all over with dear old Nolan. I have been with him on this voyage more than I ever was, and I can understand wholly now the way in which you used to speak of the dear old fellow. I could see that he was not strong, but I had no idea the end was so near. The doctor had been watching him very carefully, and yesterday morning came to me and told me that Nolan was not so well, and had not left his state-room,—a thing I never remember before. He had let the doctor come and see him as he lay there,—the first time the doctor had been in the state-room,—and he said he should like to see me. Oh, dear! do you remember the mysteries we boys used to invent about his room in the old Intrepid days? Well, I went in, and there, to be sure, the poor fellow lay in his berth, smiling pleasantly as he gave me his hand, but looking very frail. I could not help a glance round, which showed me what a little shrine he had made of the box he was lying in. The stars and stripes were triced up above and around a picture of Washington, and he had painted a majestic eagle, with lightnings blazing from his beak and his foot just clasping the whole globe, which his wings overshadowed. The dear old boy saw my glance, and said, with a sad smile, ‘Here, you see, I have a country!’ And then he pointed to the foot of his
bed, where I had not seen before a great map of the United States, as he had drawn it from memory, and which he had there to look upon as he lay. Quaint, queer old names were on it, in large letters: ‘Indiana Territory,’ ‘Mississippi Territory,’ and ‘Louisiana Territory,’ as I suppose our fathers learned such things: but the old fellow had patched in Texas, too; he had carried his western boundary all the way to the Pacific, but on that shore he had defined nothing.

“Oh Danforth,” he said, ‘I know I am dying. I cannot get home. Surely you will tell me something now?—Stop! stop! Do not speak till I say what I am sure you know, that there is not in this ship, that there is not in America,—God bless her!—a more loyal man than I. There cannot be a man who loves the old flag as I do, or prays for it as I do, or hopes for it as I do. There are thirty-four stars in it now, Danforth. I thank God for that, though I do not know what their names are. There has never been one taken away: I thank God for that. I know by that, that there has never been any successful Burr. Oh, Danforth, Danforth,” he sighed out, ‘how like a wretched night’s dream a boy’s idea of personal fame or of separate sovereignty seems, when one looks back on it after such a life as mine! But tell me,—tell me something,—tell me everything, Danforth, before I die!’

“Ingham, I swear to you that I felt like a monster that I had not told him everything before. Danger or no danger, delicacy or no delicacy, who was I, that I should have been acting the tyrant all this time over this dear, sainted old man, who had years ago expiated, in his whole manhood’s life, the madness of a boy’s treason? ‘Mr. Nolan,’ said I, ‘I will tell you everything you ask about. Only, where shall I begin?’

“Oh, the blessed smile that crept over his white face! and he pressed my hand and said, ‘God bless you!’ ‘Tell me their names,’ he said, and he pointed to the stars on the flag. ‘The last I know is Ohio. My father lived in Kentucky. But I have guessed Michigan and Indiana and Mississippi,—that was where Fort Adams is,—they make twenty. But where are your other fourteen? You have not cut up any of the old ones, I hope?

“Well, that was not a bad text, and I told him the names, in as good order as I could, and he bade me take down his beautiful map and draw them in as I best could with my pencil. He was wild with delight about Texas, told me how his cousin died there; he had marked a gold cross where he supposed his grave was; and he had guessed at Texas. Then he was delighted as he saw California and Oregon;—that, he said, he had suspected partly, because he had never been permitted to land on that shore, though the ships were there so much. ‘And the men,’ said he, laughing, ‘brought off a good deal besides furs.’ Then he went back—heavens, how far!—to ask about the Chesapeake, and what was done to Barron for surrendering her to the Leopard, and whether Burr ever tried again,—and he ground his teeth with the only passion he showed. But in a moment that was over, and he said, ‘God forgive me, for I am sure I forgive him.’ Then he
asked about the old war,—told me the true story of his serving the gun the day we took the Java,—asked about dear old David Porter, as he called him. Then he settled down more quietly, and very happily, to hear me tell in an hour the history of fifty years.

“How I wished it had been somebody who knew something! But I did as well as I could. I told him of the English war. I told him about Fulton and the steamboat beginning. I told him about old Scott, and Jackson; told him all I could think of about the Mississippi, and New Orleans, and Texas, and his own old Kentucky. And do you think he asked who was in command of the ‘Legion of the West’? I told him it was a very gallant officer, named Grant, and that, by our last news, he was about to establish his head-quarters at Vicksburg. Then, ‘Where was Vicksburg?’ I worked that out on the map; it was about a hundred miles, more or less, above his old Fort Adams; and I thought Fort Adams must be a ruin now. ‘It must be at old Vick’s plantation,’ said he: ‘well, that is a change!’

“I tell you, Ingham, it was a hard thing to condense the history of half a century into that talk with a sick man. And I do not now know what I told him,—of emigration, and the means of it,—of steamboats and railroads and telegraphs,—of inventions and books and literature,—of the colleges and West Point and the Naval School,—but with the queerest interruptions that ever you heard. You see it was Robinson Crusoe asking all the accumulated questions of fifty-six years!

“I remember he asked, all of a sudden, who was President now; and when I told him, he asked if Old Abe was General Benjamin Lincoln’s son. He said he met old General Lincoln, when he was quite a boy himself, at some Indian treaty. I said no, that Old Abe was a Kentuckian like himself, but I could not tell him of what family; he had worked up from the ranks. ‘Good for him!’ cried Nolan; ‘I am glad of that. As I have brooded and wondered, I have thought our danger was in keeping up those regular successions in the first families.’ Then I got talking about my visit to Washington. I told him of meeting the Oregon Congressman, Harding; I told him about the Smithsonian and the Exploring Expedition; I told him about the Capitol,—and the statues for the pediment,—and Crawford’s Liberty,—and Greenough’s Washington: Ingham, I told him everything I could think of that would show the grandeur of his country and its prosperity; but I could not make up my mouth to tell him a word about this infernal Rebellion!

“And he drank it in and enjoyed it as I cannot tell you. He grew more and more silent, yet I never thought he was tired or faint. I gave him a glass of water, but he just wet his lips, and told me not to go away. Then he asked me to bring the Presbyterian ‘Book of Public Prayer,’ which lay there, and said, with a smile, that it would open at the right place,—and so it did. There was his double red mark down the page; and I knelt down and read, and he repeated with me, ‘For ourselves and our country, O gracious God, we thank Thee, that, notwithstanding our manifold transgressions of Thy holy laws, Thou hast continued to us Thy
marvelous kindness.’—and so to the end of that thanksgiving. Then he turned to
the end of the same book, and I read the words more familiar to me,—‘Most
heartily we beseech Thee with Thy favor to behold and bless Thy servant, the
President of the United States, and all others in authority,’—and the rest of the
Episcopal collect. ‘Danforth,’ said he, ‘I have repeated those prayers night and
morning, it is now fifty-five years.’ And then he said he would go to sleep. He
bent me down over him and kissed me; and he said, ‘Look in my Bible, Danforth,
when I am gone.’ And I went away.

“But I had no thought it was the end. I thought he was tired and would
sleep. I knew he was happy, and I wanted him to be alone.

“But in an hour, when the doctor went in gently, he found Nolan had
breathed his life away with a smile. He had something pressed close to his lips. It
was his father’s badge of the Order of Cincinnati.

“We looked in his Bible, and there was a slip of paper, at the place where
he had marked the text,—

“They desire a country, even a heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed
to be called their God: for He hath prepared for them a city.’

“On this slip of paper he had written,—

“Bury me in the sea; it has been my home, and I love it. But will not
some one set up a stone for my memory at Fort Adams or at Orleans, that my
disgrace may not be more than I ought to bear? Say on it,—

“In Memory of
“PHILIP NOLAN
“Lieutenant in the Army of the United States.
“He loved his country as no other man has loved her; but no man
deserved less at her hands.’”
First Inaugural Address

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

The First Inaugural Address was delivered ten days after Abraham Lincoln’s arrival in Washington, DC. Several southern states had already seceded from the Union, and Jefferson Davis had been inaugurated as the president of the Confederacy just two weeks before. Ignoring advice to the contrary, the former Illinois congressman (1809–65) rode with outgoing President James Buchanan in an open carriage to the Capitol, where he took the oath of office from the East Portico steps on March 4, 1861.

Lincoln begins by affirming his Constitutional duty to preserve the Union while reassuring the South as to “the good will, conciliatory purposes, and Constitutional scruples of the new administration.” In his famous last appeal, Lincoln expresses the hope—forlorn as it turned out—that the “mystic chords of memory” would draw the Union back together. This memorable expression invites us to think about how and why speech about the things we share is important for forming and cementing our loyalties, our affections, our commitments, and our common memories. What are the “mystic chords of memory”? Why are they important? What role do they play in uniting our country? Do they have limitations?

Fellow-citizens of the United States:

In compliance with a custom as old as the government itself, I appear before you to address you briefly, and to take in your presence the oath prescribed by the Constitution of the United States to be taken by the President “before he enters on the execution of his office.”

I do not consider it necessary at present for me to discuss those matters of administration about which there is no special anxiety or excitement.

Apprehension seems to exist among the people of the Southern States that by the accession of a Republican Administration their property and their peace and personal security are to be endangered. There has never been any reasonable cause for such apprehension. Indeed, the most ample evidence to the contrary has all the while existed and been open to their inspection. It is found in nearly all the published speeches of him who now addresses you. I do but quote from one of those speeches when I declare that—

I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so.

Those who nominated and elected me did so with full knowledge that I had made this and many similar declarations, and had never recanted them; and, more than this, they placed in the platform for my acceptance, and as a law to themselves and to me, the clear and emphatic resolution which I now read:
Resolved, That the maintenance inviolate of the rights of the States, and especially the right of each State to order and control its own domestic institutions according to its own judgment exclusively, is essential to that balance of power on which the perfection and endurance of our political fabric depend; and we denounce the lawless invasion by armed force of the soil of any State or Territory, no matter under what pretext, as among the gravest of crimes.

I now reiterate these sentiments; and, in doing so, I only press upon the public attention the most conclusive evidence of which the case is susceptible, that the property, peace, and security of no section are to be in any wise endangered by the now incoming Administration. I add, too, that all the protection which, consistently with the Constitution and the laws, can be given will be cheerfully given to all the States when lawfully demanded, for whatever cause—as cheerfully to one section as to another.

There is much controversy about the delivering up of fugitives from service or labor. The clause I now read is as plainly written in the Constitution as any other of its provisions:

No person held to service or labor in one State, under the laws thereof, escaping into another, shall in consequence of any law or regulation therein be discharged from such service or labor, but shall be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service or labor may be due.

It is scarcely questioned that this provision was intended by those who made it for the reclaiming of what we call fugitive slaves; and the intention of the lawgiver is the law. All members of Congress swear their support to the whole Constitution—to this provision as much as to any other. To the proposition, then, that slaves whose cases come within the terms of this clause “shall be delivered up,” their oaths are unanimous. Now, if they would make the effort in good temper, could they not with nearly equal unanimity frame and pass a law by means of which to keep good that unanimous oath?

There is some difference of opinion whether this clause should be enforced by national or by State authority, but surely that difference is not a very material one. If the slave is to be surrendered, it can be of but little consequence to him or to others by which authority it is done. And should anyone in any case be content that his oath shall go unkept on a merely unsubstantial controversy as to how it shall be kept?

Again, in any law upon this subject ought not all the safeguards of liberty known in civilized and humane jurisprudence to be introduced, so that a free man be not in any case surrendered as a slave? And might it not be well at the same time to provide by law for the enforcement of that clause in the Constitution which guarantees that “the citizens of each State shall be entitled to all privileges and immunities of citizens in the several States”?

I take the official oath to-day with no mental reservations and with no purpose to construe the Constitution or laws by any hypercritical rules; and while I do not choose
now to specify particular acts of Congress as proper to be enforced, I do suggest that it
will be much safer for all, both in official and private stations, to conform to and abide by
all those acts which stand unrepealed than to violate any of them trusting to find impunity
in having them held to be unconstitutional.

It is seventy-two years since the first inauguration of a President under our National
Constitution. During that period fifteen different and greatly distinguished citizens have
in succession administered the executive branch of the Government. They have
conducted it through many perils, and generally with great success. Yet, with all this
scope of precedent, I now enter upon the same task for the brief constitutional term of
four years under great and peculiar difficulty. A disruption of the Federal Union,
heretofore only menaced, is now formidably attempted.

I hold that in contemplation of universal law and of the Constitution the Union of
these States is perpetual. Perpetuity is implied, if not expressed, in the fundamental law
of all national governments. It is safe to assert that no government proper ever had a
provision in its organic law for its own termination. Continue to execute all the express
provisions of our National Constitution, and the Union will endure forever, it being
impossible to destroy it except by some action not provided for in the instrument itself.

Again: if the United States be not a government proper, but an association of States in
the nature of contract merely, can it, as a contract, be peaceably unmade by less than all
the parties who made it? One party to a contract may violate it—break it, so to speak—
but does it not require all to lawfully rescind it?

Descending from these general principles, we find the proposition that, in legal
contemplation the Union is perpetual confirmed by the history of the Union itself. The
Union is much older than the Constitution. It was formed, in fact, by the Articles of
Association in 1774. It was matured and continued by the Declaration of Independence in
1776. It was further matured, and the faith of all the then thirteen States expressly
plighted and engaged that it should be perpetual, by the Articles of Confederation in
1778. And, finally, in 1787 one of the declared objects for ordaining and establishing the
Constitution was “to form a more perfect Union.”

But if the destruction of the Union by one or by a part only of the States be lawfully
possible, the Union is less perfect than before the Constitution, having lost the vital
element of perpetuity.

It follows from these views that no State upon its own mere motion can lawfully get
out of the Union; that resolves and ordinances to that effect are legally void; and that acts
of violence, within any State or States, against the authority of the United States, are
insurrectionary or revolutionary, according to circumstances.

I therefore consider that in view of the Constitution and the laws the Union is
unbroken, and to the extent of my ability, I shall take care, as the Constitution itself
expressly enjoins upon me, that the laws of the Union be faithfully executed in all the
States. Doing this I deem to be only a simple duty on my part, and I shall perform it so far as practicable unless my rightful masters, the American people, shall withhold the requisite means or in some authoritative manner direct the contrary. I trust this will not be regarded as a menace, but only as the declared purpose of the Union that it will constitutionally defend and maintain itself.

In doing this there needs to be no bloodshed or violence, and there shall be none unless it be forced upon the national authority. The power confided to me will be used to hold, occupy, and possess the property and places belonging to the government, and to collect the duties and imposts; but beyond what may be necessary for these objects, there will be no invasion, no using of force against or among the people anywhere. Where hostility to the United States in any interior locality shall be so great and universal as to prevent competent resident citizens from holding the Federal offices, there will be no attempt to force obnoxious strangers among the people for that object. While the strict legal right may exist in the Government to enforce the exercise of these offices, the attempt to do so would be so irritating and so nearly impracticable withal that I deem it better to forego for the time the uses of such offices.

The mails, unless repelled, will continue to be furnished in all parts of the Union. So far as possible the people everywhere shall have that sense of perfect security which is most favorable to calm thought and reflection. The course here indicated will be followed unless current events and experience shall show a modification or change to be proper, and in every case and exigency my best discretion will be exercised, according to circumstances actually existing and with a view and a hope of a peaceful solution of the national troubles and the restoration of fraternal sympathies and affections.

That there are persons in one section or another who seek to destroy the Union at all events, and are glad of any pretext to do it, I will neither affirm nor deny; but if there be such, I need address no word to them. To those, however, who really love the Union may I not speak?

Before entering upon so grave a matter as the destruction of our national fabric, with all its benefits, its memories, and its hopes, would it not be wise to ascertain precisely why we do it? Will you hazard so desperate a step while there is any possibility that any portion of the ills you fly from have no real existence? Will you, while the certain ills you fly to are greater than all the real ones you fly from, will you risk the commission of so fearful a mistake?

All profess to be content in the Union if all constitutional rights can be maintained. Is it true, then, that any right plainly written in the Constitution has been denied? I think not. Happily the human mind is so constituted that no party can reach to the audacity of doing this. Think, if you can, of a single instance in which a plainly written provision of the Constitution has ever been denied. If by the mere force of numbers a majority should deprive a minority of any clearly written constitutional right, it might in a moral point of view justify revolution; certainly would if such a right were a vital one. But such is not our case. All the vital rights of minorities and of individuals are so plainly assured to
them by affirmations and negations, guarantees and prohibitions, in the Constitution that controversies never arise concerning them. But no organic law can ever be framed with a provision specifically applicable to every question which may occur in practical administration. No foresight can anticipate nor any document of reasonable length contain express provisions for all possible questions. Shall fugitives from labor be surrendered by national or by State authority? The Constitution does not expressly say. May Congress prohibit slavery in the Territories? The Constitution does not expressly say. Must Congress protect slavery in the Territories? The Constitution does not expressly say.

From questions of this class spring all our constitutional controversies, and we divide upon them into majorities and minorities. If the minority will not acquiesce, the majority must, or the Government must cease. There is no other alternative; for continuing the Government is acquiescence on one side or the other. If a minority in such case will secede rather than acquiesce, they make a precedent which in turn will divide and ruin them; for a minority of their own will secede from them whenever a majority refuses to be controlled by such minority. For instance, why may not any portion of a new confederacy a year or two hence arbitrarily secede again, precisely as portions of the present Union now claim to secede from it? All who cherish disunion sentiments are now being educated to the exact temper of doing this.

Is there such perfect identity of interests among the States to compose a new union as to produce harmony only and prevent renewed secession?

Plainly the central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy. A majority held in restraint by constitutional checks and limitations, and always changing easily with deliberate changes of popular opinions and sentiments, is the only true sovereign of a free people. Whoever rejects it does of necessity fly to anarchy or to despotism. Unanimity is impossible. The rule of a minority, as a permanent arrangement, is wholly inadmissible; so that, rejecting the majority principle, anarchy or despotism in some form is all that is left.

I do not forget the position assumed by some that constitutional questions are to be decided by the Supreme Court; nor do I deny that such decisions must be binding in any case upon the parties to a suit, as to the object of that suit, while they are also entitled to very high respect and consideration in all parallel cases by all other departments of the Government. And while it is obviously possible that such decision may be erroneous in any given case, still the evil effect following it, being limited to that particular case, with the chance that it may be overruled and never become a precedent for other cases, can better be borne than could the evils of a different practice. At the same time, the candid citizen must confess that if the policy of the Government upon vital questions affecting the whole people is to be irrevocably fixed by decisions of the Supreme Court, the instant they are made in ordinary litigation between parties in personal actions the people will have ceased to be their own rulers, having to that extent practically resigned their Government into the hands of that eminent tribunal. Nor is there in this view any assault upon the court or the judges. It is a duty from which they may not shrink to decide cases.
NATIONAL IDENTITY AND WHY IT MATTERS

properly brought before them, and it is no fault of theirs if others seek to turn their decisions to political purposes.

One section of our country believes slavery is right and ought to be extended, while the other believes it is wrong and ought not to be extended. This is the only substantial dispute. The fugitive-slave clause of the Constitution and the law for the suppression of the foreign slave trade are each as well enforced, perhaps, as any law can ever be in a community where the moral sense of the people imperfectly supports the law itself. The great body of the people abide by the dry legal obligation in both cases, and a few break over in each. This, I think, cannot be perfectly cured, and it would be worse in both cases after the separation of the sections than before. The foreign slave trade, now imperfectly suppressed, would be ultimately revived without restriction, in one section, while fugitive slaves, now only partially surrendered, would not be surrendered at all by the other.

Physically speaking, we cannot separate. We cannot remove our respective sections from each other nor build an impassable wall between them. A husband and wife may be divorced and go out of the presence and beyond the reach of each other, but the different parts of our country cannot do this. They can not but remain face to face, and intercourse, either amicable or hostile, must continue between them. Is it possible, then, to make that intercourse more advantageous or more satisfactory after separation than before? Can aliens make treaties easier than friends can make laws? Can treaties be more faithfully enforced between aliens than laws can among friends? Suppose you go to war, you can not fight always; and when, after much loss on both sides and no gain on either, you cease fighting, the identical old questions, as to terms of intercourse, are again upon you.

This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing Government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow it. I cannot be ignorant of the fact that many worthy and patriotic citizens are desirous of having the National Constitution amended. While I make no recommendation of amendments, I fully recognize the rightful authority of the people over the whole subject, to be exercised in either of the modes prescribed in the instrument itself; and I should, under existing circumstances, favor rather than oppose a fair opportunity being afforded the people to act upon it. I will venture to add that to me the convention mode seems preferable, in that it allows amendments to originate with the people themselves, instead of only permitting them to take or reject propositions originated by others, not especially chosen for the purpose, and which might not be precisely such as they would wish to either accept or refuse. I understand a proposed amendment to the Constitution—which amendment, however, I have not seen—has passed Congress, to the effect that the Federal Government shall never interfere with the domestic institutions of the States, including that of persons held to service. To avoid misconstruction of what I have said, I depart from my purpose not to speak of particular amendments so far as to say that, holding such a provision to now be implied constitutional law, I have no objection to its being made express and irrevocable.

The Chief Magistrate derives all his authority from the people, and they have
conferred none upon him to fix terms for the separation of the States. The people themselves can do this also if they choose; but the Executive as such has nothing to do with it. His duty is to administer the present Government, as it came to his hands and to transmit it unimpaired by him to his successor.

Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people? Is there any better or equal hope in the world? In our present differences, is either party without faith of being in the right? If the Almighty Ruler of Nations, with His eternal truth and justice, be on your side of the North, or on yours of the South, that truth and that justice will surely prevail by the judgment of this great tribunal of the American people.

By the frame of the Government under which we live this same people have wisely given their public servants but little power for mischief, and have with equal wisdom provided for the return of that little to their own hands at very short intervals. While the people retain their virtue and vigilance no administration by any extreme of wickedness or folly can very seriously injure the Government in the short space of four years.

My countrymen, one and all, think calmly and well upon this whole subject. Nothing valuable can be lost by taking time. If there be an object to hurry any of you in hot haste to a step which you would never take deliberately, that object will be frustrated by taking time; but no good object can be frustrated by it. Such of you as are now dissatisfied still have the old Constitution unimpaired, and, on the sensitive point, the laws of your own framing under it; while the new Administration will have no immediate power, if it would, to change either. If it were admitted that you who are dissatisfied hold the right side in the dispute, there still is no single good reason for precipitate action. Intelligence, patriotism, Christianity, and a firm reliance on Him who has never yet forsaken this favored land are still competent to adjust in the best way all our present difficulty.

In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The Government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in heaven to destroy the government, while I shall have the most solemn one to “preserve, protect, and defend it.”

I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.
Discussion Guide for
“The Man without a Country”

I. About the Author
II. Summary
III. Thinking about the Text
IV. Thinking with the Text

I. About the Author

It is probably no accident that Edward Everett Hale (1822–1909) was a lifelong American patriot. He was the nephew of Edward Everett, renowned orator and statesman. And his father, Nathan Hale, was the namesake and nephew of Nathan Hale, executed by the British for espionage during the Revolutionary War and famous for his last words: “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.”

As a Unitarian minister in Boston, as chaplain in the United States Senate, and as a prolific writer of essays and short fiction, Edward Everett Hale was a devoted activist, championing especially the causes of the abolition of slavery and the advancement of public education. “The Man without a Country,” his most famous story, was published anonymously in the Atlantic Monthly during the terrible days of Civil War, in 1863, the same year that President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

II. Summary

The plot of Hale’s story is straightforward: Seduced, “body and soul,” by the charm and grand vision of Aaron Burr, young Philip Nolan, an ambitious artillery officer in the “Legion of the West,” becomes a Burr accomplice (3–4). Tried for treason, “Nolan was proved guilty enough” (4). Still, no one would have heard of him “but that, when the president of the court asked him at the close, whether he wished to say anything to show that he had always been faithful to the United States, Nolan cried out, in a fit of frenzy,—

‘D—n the United States! I wish I may never hear of the United States again!’”

His judges, half of them veterans of the Revolutionary War, are stunned. They decide to give him precisely what he has asked for: From that moment, September 23, 1807, until his dying day, May 11, 1863—nearly fifty-six years later—Nolan is literally, and figuratively, put out to sea. He never again sets foot on American soil; only as he is dying does he again hear anything about the United States. Yet during—and perhaps because of—his enforced separation from his native land, Nolan’s attitude toward her changes dramatically. The rest of the story powerfully shows how his transformation comes about.
The story has a historical setting, but it is almost entirely fictional. Hale tells us his purpose both in the story proper and in the introduction he wrote for it twenty years after publication, to correct public misperceptions of the story’s historicity. In the text, the narrator, Fredric Ingham, says that his purpose is to show “young Americans . . . what it is to be A MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY” (3). In the later introduction, Hale reports that he had hoped the story would be published before the 1863 elections, as he intended it not only “as a contribution, however humble, towards the formation of a just and true national sentiment, or sentiment of love to the nation,” but also as “‘testimony’ regarding the principles involved in [the election].” He had especially in mind the notorious activities of Clement Vallandigham, an ardent antiwar, pro-Confederate Ohio Democrat, then running for governor of Ohio from his exile in Canada. Some people believe that Hale’s story was in fact inspired by Vallandigham’s widely publicized assertion that he did not want to belong to the United States.

Only a couple of historical facts inform this otherwise fabricated tale about a purely fictitious character. After Aaron Burr left the vice presidency in 1805, he did make two trips down the Mississippi. Also, he and his accomplices were tried for treason. Burr was accused of a conspiracy to steal the Louisiana Purchase lands away from the United States and to crown himself as king or emperor. Despite the fact that US President Thomas Jefferson threw his full weight against Burr, the evidence available did not hold up in court, and Burr was acquitted. Not so for Philip Nolan, the fictitious protagonist of Hale’s story. Appreciating Nolan’s story requires us to try to understand, from the text alone, the young Nolan, the fate he was made to suffer, and his responses to it, from beginning to end. We need also to reflect on Hale’s stated purpose for writing the story.

A. Philip Nolan’s Early Life, His Crime, and Punishment (2–6)

1. Describe young Philip Nolan. What is he like as a young officer in the Legion of the West?
2. Why do you think he is attracted so quickly and completely—“body and soul”—to Aaron Burr the man and, later, to his cause?

In Conversation

In this conversation, Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass discuss Hale’s story with Wilfred McClay, the SunTrust Bank Chair of Excellence in Humanities at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Amy Kass: Aaron Burr probably represents to Philip Nolan everything that Philip Nolan wants to be. Burr is ambitious. He is interested in glory and honor—and so is Philip Nolan. I think it is Nolan’s ambition that draws him to Burr, but it’s also the fact that Nolan is in the United States, but is not of the United States. He grew up in the Wild West without any real attachments, and though he currently owes
his entire life to the army of the United States—he’s a member of the Legion of the West—there’s no land that he can really identify with.

Leon Kass: He’s not attached to anything. And he might even have some imperial ambitions, which would make someone like Burr especially attractive. But how can they gain great glory founding the United States? It’s already been founded! Whereas if there is some other nation that they could found, their names would be sung forever, like those of Washington, Hamilton, Madison, and Jefferson.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

3. Does the punishment he receives fit his crime?
4. What is Nolan’s initial attitude toward the punishment he receives? Do you understand it?

B. Charting Nolan’s Changing Attitude toward Home and Country

About each of the following incidents, please consider these two general questions:
1. What has happened?
2. Why does it have such an impact on Nolan?

In addition, consider the following incident-specific questions:

1. Reading “The Lay of the Last Minstrel” (7–8).
   a. What does Sir Walter Scott’s poem mean? Why and how does it affect Nolan? See, specifically, Canto 6:

   *Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,*  
   *Who never to himself hath said,*  
   *This is my own, my native land!*  
   *Whose heart hath ne’er within him burn’d,*  
   *As home his footsteps he hath turned,*  
   *From wandering on a foreign strand?*  
   *If such there breathe, go, mark him well;*  
   *For him no minstrel raptures swell;*  
   *High though his titles, proud his name,*  
   *Boundless his wealth as wish can claim,*  
   *Despite these titles, power, and pelf;*  
   *The wretch, concentr’d all in self;*  
   *Living, shall forfeit fair renown,*  
   *And, doubly dying, shall go down*  
   *To the vile dust, from whence he sprung,*  
   *Unwept, unhonor’d, and unsung.*
IN CONVERSATION

Wilfred McClay: Why does it turn out to be the case that having the United States never being spoken of in his presence is such a searing punishment for him?

Amy Kass: If Nolan is the man we were characterizing—that noble, ambitious man who craves honor and glory—then this punishment drives home to him that he will be unwept and unsung.

Leon Kass: The punishment makes Nolan, perhaps for the first time, confront his extreme egotism. And by so doing, he realizes that his atomistic individualism is in fact going to make him wretched; the honor that he craves can only be had by people who have a country that will honor them.

Wilfred McClay: So to enjoy enduring honor, one has to have a country, and be of it, and live in it.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

2. Rebuke from his dancing partner, Mrs. Graff (9–10).
   a. Does Nolan’s acquaintance with a person like Mrs. Graff, back in Philadelphia before her marriage, shed any further light on Nolan’s former life? What kind of person do you think Nolan was back then? What kind of society did he belong to?

3. Nolan’s receipt of the “sword of ceremony” for his splendid and courageous action in the frigate duel with the English (10–11).
   a. What do the tears Nolan sheds here tell us about the state of his soul?
   b. Why might the receipt of the “sword of ceremony” be both especially meaningful and especially painful for Nolan?

4. Nolan’s confrontation with the newly freed African slaves (13–14).
   a. Nolan’s fitness to take on this job is due to his knowledge of Portuguese. Does his knowledge of the language surprise you? What can we infer about the type of upbringing and education Nolan had growing up? What kind of family do you think he came from?
   b. What role does Nolan play in their emancipation?
   c. Why is Nolan’s agony especially poignant here?

5. The speech to young Fred Ingham (14–15).
   a. What significance does Nolan here attach to “home and country”?
   b. What really has he come to long for?
   a. Why did Danforth, so forthcoming in many other ways, decide not to tell Nolan about the Civil War?
   b. Why did Nolan take such pleasure in discovering that the then-president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, was a man of the people, not a man of privileged birth?
   c. Nolan dies with his father’s badge of the Order of Cincinnati pressed to his lips. (The Order of Cincinnati is an eagle-shaped badge to be worn by veterans of the Revolutionary War.) What is the meaning of this gesture?
   d. Was Nolan a man without a country? Why or why not?

C. Hale’s Purposes

1. Despite Hale’s insistence that the story is fictional, as noted earlier, we do know when it is written—during the height of the Civil War, in the year of the Emancipation Proclamation. Is its Civil War background important for understanding the story’s meaning?
2. If you regard the background as key, is the story anything more than a piece of wartime propaganda? Why do you answer as you do?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: In the story, the naval vessel that Nolan is on encounters another ship that is ferrying African slaves. Since this is after the United States signed the treaty against the further importation and trading of slaves, the American ship stops the slave ship, and in the process the sailors try to tell the slaves that they’re free—but nobody understands a word. The captain calls out, “Does anyone here know Portuguese?”—and it turns out that Nolan is the only person aboard who does. So he goes down to the slave ship and translates.

Somewhat anachronistically, in this story told in the year of the Emancipation Proclamation, Nolan is able to play Abraham Lincoln to these slaves. Here is Nolan, as far as the slaves are concerned, the universally speaking representative of the United States, giving the slaves their freedom. And he does this partly because he knows Portuguese, but partly because he’s aboard a ship bearing the flag of the United States. So Nolan has been put in the position of embodying the American principle of freedom and the American principle of equality.

Wilfred McClay: I’m persuaded there is something to this sort of “Lincolnian” moment. Even though in some ways he is a fraud in doing so—because he is the one person aboard his ship who cannot represent the United States.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.
Hale’s story, the first entry in *What So Proudly We Hail*, appears under the first and overarching theme of the anthology: “National Identity: Why Should It Matter?” Since the story’s first appearance, many people have been moved by it to patriotic feeling. But as many have rightly noted, throughout the story Hale uses the word “country,” not “nation.” Many have thus wondered whether, and in what way, the story is particularly about American national identity and how it works to promote it. These questions also arise when one notes that in the fourth and fifth incidents cited above—Nolan’s encounter with the newly freed African slaves and his subsequent impassioned speech to Fred Ingham—the emphasis is on home as the place of one’s own, not as the embodiment of political institutions devoted to the idea or fact of freedom. One’s country is spoken of as *alma mater* (Latin: “the nourishing mother”)—the source of one’s life, love, and rearing, in a particular place, in a particular time—but not as a people looking up to particular ideals. What, then, is it that makes for national identity? How should one speak about it? What does it mean if one cannot speak or hear about it? These are among the larger issues that the story raises for our consideration.

**A. Human Being and Citizen**

1. Is there anything especially American in the identity and attachment that Nolan comes to desire? Or, more specifically, is there anything in the story that would have you believe that Nolan’s newly acquired appreciation of his *country* embraces essential American principles (e.g., liberty, equality)? If so, where do you see it? Which principles?

2. Does Nolan’s longing for “home” differ in any way from the longing for home of the newly freed slaves?

3. What is the difference between belonging to a “country” and belonging to a “nation”?

4. Which is more important for making attached American citizens: the love of American principles or the love of our native land? Can love of principles suffice to make attached citizens?
   a. If love of one’s native land is crucial, what, then, about the national attachment of immigrants, who are Americans not by birth but by choice?
   b. If love of American principles is crucial, what happens to one’s attachment when the country’s deeds are at odds with its ideals?

**IN CONVERSATION**

**Leon Kass:** There is something American in Nolan’s longings. America, unlike other nations, is not simply built on shared nativity or common ancestry. We are a nation founded upon a creed: of liberty, equality, the rights expressed in the Declaration of Independence, religious freedom and toleration, minority rights, and the opportunity to make something of yourself without external constraint beyond
law-abidingness. And while they are wonderful things and we enjoy the life that is built on living in a polity founded on them, the principles themselves don’t produce the emotional attachment. So the question is, what do Americans need in addition to the philosophical principles that form the heart of our convictions? It seems to me that this story—told during the Civil War and set in the early part of the Republic—with its emotional power belongs to the poetry of the kinds of tales that we need.

Amy Kass: I think what a story allows you to do is to get inside of other characters, make the decisions that they are making, face the kinds of problems that they are facing—in a way that you cannot do simply by reading a treatise and analyzing it. Stories are also especially important in American civic education precisely because America is founded on principles—and stories help us to elaborate what those principles are. They enable you to see concrete examples of people who demonstrate what the abstract principles of liberty and equality actually are.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

5. Could a roughly identical story be written about a treasonous Frenchman or Briton who expressed a similar wish that he would “never hear” of his country again? Is this story not about American identity but, rather, about a primal human need to belong to some larger community or nationality?

B. Speaking, Hearing, and National Attachment (For these questions, consider the story in conjunction with Abraham Lincoln’s First Inaugural on page 21.)

1. Nolan’s punishment does not prohibit his speaking about the United States; it only prohibits others from ever speaking of it in his presence. Presumably, they must also ignore him when he speaks or asks about it. As we have noted, this punishment has a powerful effect on Nolan’s soul, demonstrated by his general transformation of heart, and, more visibly, by the shrine he erects in his stateroom. What is lost by the absence of shared speech about one’s country? What do we gain by talking with one another about the things we value? Would we still value them the same if we were unable to talk with others about them?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: So much of the way we understand who we are in the world in which we live comes through efforts to articulate it in language. And so much of who we are is also built up in terms of the memories of who we have been and who the people we love have been. But the “now” is fleeting. Who we are is built up over ages, decades—and in our case as a country, hundreds of years. Speech is the
vehicle of memory. All of that is lost to a person who cannot speak of home. The punishment, even if he is in the midst of everybody else, is to make him homeless.

Wilfred McClay: Right, we need stories, speeches, and songs. And this story speaks to that, because it’s about what happens to people when they are story-less, when they can’t tell their stories, when they can’t sing their songs, and when they can’t speak their speeches.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

2. In his First Inaugural, Lincoln expressed the hope—forlorn as it turned out—that the “mystic chords of memory” would draw the Union back together. This memorable expression invites us to think about how and why speech about the things we share is important for forming and cementing our loyalties, our affections, our commitments, and our common memories. What are the “mystic chords of memory”?

3. Reflecting on your experience of reading this story and—we hope—discussing it with others, did it make you more aware of why your nation and your American identity matters?
The American Character
Freedom and Individuality
To Build a Fire

JACK LONDON

American freedom and individuality have often been expressed in, and celebrated by, stories of exploration, adventure, enterprise, and the pursuit of gain: the conquest of the prairie, the settling of the West, the taming of the wilderness, the gold rush, and the mastery of nature through science, industry, and technology. Jack London’s story (1908) offers us a picture of one such fortune-hunting, rugged individual. London (1876–1916) took part in the Klondike gold rush, and though he failed as a miner, he struck gold with stories drawing on the places and people he encountered during those hope-filled and brutal times in the Northwest Territory.

In this story, an unnamed man, accompanied by a husky, undertakes a nine-hour walk along a faint and little traveled trail in brutally cold weather, in order to scope out the “possibilities of getting out logs in the spring from the islands in the Yukon.” How would you describe his character? Is his self-reliance an exercise of irresponsibility and folly? Or does he embody an admirable spirit of adventure and enterprise of the sort that tamed the wilderness, settled the West, and established businesses? What do you think of the old-timer’s advice and the reservations clearly expressed by the dog?

Day had broken cold and gray, exceedingly cold and gray, when the man turned aside from the main Yukon trail and climbed the high earth-bank, where a dim and little traveled trail led eastward through the fat spruce timber-land. It was a steep bank, and he paused for breath at the top, excusing the act to himself by looking at his watch. It was nine o’clock. There was no sun nor hint of sun, though there was not a cloud in the sky. It was a clear day, and yet there seemed an intangible pall over the face of things, a subtle gloom that made the day dark, and that was due to the absence of sun. This fact did not worry the man. He was used to the lack of sun. It had been days since he had seen the sun, and he knew that a few more days must pass before that cheerful orb, due south, would just peep above the sky-line and dip immediately from view.

The man flung a look back along the way he had come. The Yukon lay a mile wide and hidden under three feet of ice. On top of this ice were as many feet of snow. It was all pure white, rolling in gentle undulations where the ice jams of the freeze-up had formed. North and south, as far as his eye could see, it was unbroken white, save for a dark hairline that curved and twisted from around the spruce-covered island to the south, and that curved and twisted away into the north, where it disappeared behind another spruce-covered island. This dark hair-line was the trail—the main trail—that led south five hundred miles to the Chilcoot Pass, Dyea, and salt water; and that led north seventy miles to Dawson, and still on to the north a thousand miles to Nulato, and finally to St. Michael on Bering Sea, a thousand miles and half a thousand more.

But all this—the mysterious, far-reaching hair-line trail, the absence of sun from the sky, the tremendous cold, and the strangeness and weirdness of it all—made no impression on the man. It was not because he was long used to it. He was a newcomer in
the land, a chechaquo, and this was his first winter. The trouble with him was that he was without imagination. He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances. Fifty degrees below zero meant eighty-odd degrees of frost. Such fact impressed him as being cold and uncomfortable, and that was all. It did not lead him to meditate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature, and upon man’s frailty in general, able only to live within certain narrow limits of heat and cold; and from there on it did not lead him to the conjectural field of immortality and man’s place in the universe.

Fifty degrees below zero stood for a bite of frost that hurt and that must be guarded against by the use of mittens, ear-flaps, warm moccasins, and thick socks. Fifty degrees below zero was to him just precisely fifty degrees below zero. That there should be anything more to it than that was a thought that never entered his head.

As he turned to go on, he spat speculatively. There was a sharp, explosive crackle that startled him. He spat again. And again, in the air, before it could fall to the snow, the spittle crackled. He knew that at fifty below spittle crackled on the snow, but this spittle had crackled in the air. Undoubtedly it was colder than fifty below—how much colder he did not know. But the temperature did not matter. He was bound for the old claim on the left fork of Henderson Creek, where the boys were already. They had come over across the divide from the Indian Creek country, while he had come the roundabout way to take a look at the possibilities of getting out logs in the spring from the islands in the Yukon. He would be in to camp by six o’clock; a bit after dark, it was true, but the boys would be there, a fire would be going, and a hot supper would be ready. As for lunch, he pressed his hand against the protruding bundle under his jacket. It was also under his shirt, wrapped up in a handkerchief and lying against the naked skin. It was the only way to keep the biscuits from freezing. He smiled agreeably to himself as he thought of those biscuits, each cut open and sopped in bacon grease, and each enclosing a generous slice of fried bacon.

He plunged in among the big spruce trees. The trail was faint. A foot of snow had fallen since the last sled had passed over, and he was glad he was without a sled, traveling light. In fact, he carried nothing but the lunch wrapped in the handkerchief. He was surprised, however, at the cold. It certainly was cold, he concluded as he rubbed his numb nose and cheek-bones with his mittened hand. He was a warm-whiskered man, but the hair on his face did not protect the high cheek-bones and the eager nose that thrust itself aggressively into the frosty air.

At the man’s heels trotted a dog, a big native husky, the proper wolf-dog, gray-coated and without any visible or temperamental difference from its brother, the wild wolf. The animal was depressed by the tremendous cold. It knew that it was no time for traveling. Its instinct told it a truer tale than was told to the man by the man’s judgment. In reality, it was not merely colder than fifty below zero; it was colder than sixty below, than seventy below. It was seventy-five below zero. Since the freezing point is thirty-two above zero, it meant that one hundred and seven degrees of frost obtained. The dog did not know anything about thermometers. Possibly in its brain there was no sharp consciousness of a condition of very cold such as was in the man’s brain. But the brute had its instinct. It experienced a vague but menacing apprehension that subdued it and
made it slink along at the man’s heels, and that made it question eagerly every unwonted movement of the man as if expecting him to go into camp or to seek shelter somewhere and build a fire. The dog had learned fire, and it wanted fire, or else to burrow under the snow and cuddle its warmth away from the air.

The frozen moisture of its breathing had settled on its fur in a fine powder of frost, and especially were its jowls, muzzle, and eyelashes whitened by its crystalled breath. The man’s red beard and mustache were likewise frosted, but more solidly, the deposit taking the form of ice and increasing with every warm, moist breath he exhaled. Also, the man was chewing tobacco, and the muzzle of ice held his lips so rigidly that he was unable to clear his chin when he expelled the juice. The result was that a crystal beard of the color and solidity of amber was increasing its length on his chin. If he fell down it would shatter itself, like glass, into brittle fragments. But he did not mind the appendage. It was the penalty all tobacco-chewers paid in that country, and he had been out before in two cold snaps. They had not been so cold as this, he knew, but by the spirit thermometer at Sixty Mile he knew they had been registered at fifty below and at fifty-five.

He held on through the level stretch of woods for several miles, crossed a wide flat of niggerheads, and dropped down a bank to the frozen bed of a small stream. This was Henderson Creek, and he knew he was ten miles from the forks. He looked at his watch. It was ten o’clock. He was making four miles an hour, and he calculated that he would arrive at the forks at half-past twelve. He decided to celebrate that event by eating his lunch there.

The dog dropped in again at his heels, with a tail drooping discouragement, as the man swung along the creek-bed. The furrow of the old sled-trail was plainly visible, but a dozen inches of snow covered the marks of the last runners. In a month no man had come up or down that silent creek. The man held steadily on. He was not much given to thinking, and just then particularly he had nothing to think about save that he would eat lunch at the forks and that at six o’clock he would be in camp with the boys. There was nobody to talk to; and, had there been, speech would have been impossible because of the ice-muzzle on his mouth. So he continued monotonously to chew tobacco and to increase the length of his amber beard.

Once in a while the thought reiterated itself that it was very cold and that he had never experienced such cold. As he walked along he rubbed his cheek-bones and nose with the back of his mittened hand. He did this automatically, now and again changing hands. But rub as he would, the instant he stopped his cheek-bones went numb, and the following instant the end of his nose went numb. He was sure to frost his cheeks; he knew that, and experienced a pang of regret that he had not devised a nose-strap of the sort Bud wore in cold snaps. Such a strap passed across the cheeks, as well, and saved them. But it didn’t matter much, after all. What were frosted cheeks? A bit painful, that was all; they were never serious.

§ Racially charged name of a strong dark chewing tobacco of the period, applied here to large hummocks of earth under the snow that are created by centuries of alternate freezing and thawing.
Empty as the man’s mind was of thoughts, he was keenly observant, and he noticed the changes in the creek, the curves and bends and timber jams, and always he sharply noted where he placed his feet. Once coming around a bend, he shied abruptly, like a startled horse, curved away from the place where he had been walking, and retreated several paces back along the trail. The creek he knew was frozen clear to the bottom,—no creek could contain water in that arctic winter,—but he knew also that there were springs that bubbled out from the hillsides and ran along under the snow and on top the ice of the creek. He knew that the coldest snaps never froze these springs, and he knew likewise their danger. They were traps. They hid pools of water under the snow that might be three inches deep, or three feet. Sometimes a skin of ice half an inch thick covered them, and in turn was covered by the snow. Sometimes there were alternate layers of water and ice-skin, so that when one broke through he kept on breaking through for a while, sometimes wetting himself to the waist.

That was why he had shied in such panic. He had felt the give under his feet and heard the crackle of a snow-hidden ice-skin. And to get his feet wet in such a temperature meant trouble and danger. At the very least it meant delay, for he would be forced to stop and build a fire, and under its protection to bare his feet while he dried his socks and moccasins. He stood and studied the creek-bed and its banks, and decided that the flow of water came from the right. He reflected a while, rubbing his nose and cheeks, then skirted to the left, stepping gingerly and testing the footing for each step. Once clear of the danger, he took a fresh chew of tobacco and swung along at his four-mile gait.

In the course of the next two hours he came upon several similar traps. Usually the snow above the hidden pools had a sunken, candied appearance that advertised the danger. Once again, however, he had a close call; and once, suspecting danger, he compelled the dog to go on in front. The dog did not want to go. It hung back until the man shoved it forward, and then it went quickly across the white, unbroken surface. Suddenly it broke through, floundered to one side, and got away to firmer footing. It had wet its forefeet and legs, and almost immediately the water that clung to it turned to ice. It made quick efforts to lick the ice off its legs, then dropped down in the snow and began to bite out the ice that had formed between the toes. This was a matter of instinct. To permit the ice to remain would mean sore feet. It did not know this. It merely obeyed the mysterious prompting that arose from the deep crypts of its being. But the man knew, having achieved a judgment on the subject, and he removed the mitten from his right hand and helped tear out the ice-particles. He did not expose his fingers more than a minute, and was astonished at the swift numbness that smote them. It certainly was cold. He pulled on the mitten hastily, and beat the hand savagely across his chest.

At twelve o’clock the day was at its brightest. Yet the sun was too far south on its winter journey to clear the horizon. The bulge of the earth intervened between it and Henderson Creek, where the man walked under a clear sky at noon and cast no shadow. At half-past twelve, to the minute, he arrived at the forks of the creek. He was pleased at the speed he had made. If he kept it up, he would certainly be with the boys by six. He unbuttoned his jacket and shirt and drew forth his lunch. The action consumed no more than a quarter of a minute, yet in that brief moment the numbness laid hold of the
exposed fingers. He did not put the mitten on, but, instead struck the fingers a dozen sharp smashes against his leg. Then he sat down on a snow-covered log to eat. The sting that followed upon the striking of his fingers against his leg ceased so quickly that he was startled. He had had no chance to take a bite of biscuit. He struck the fingers repeatedly and returned them to the mitten, baring the other hand for the purpose of eating. He tried to take a mouthful, but the ice-muzzle prevented. He had forgotten to build a fire and thaw out. He chuckled at his foolishness, and as he chuckled he noted the numbness creeping into the exposed fingers. Also, he noted that the stinging which had first come to his toes when he sat down was already passing away. He wondered whether the toes were warm or numb. He moved them inside the moccasins and decided that they were numb.

He pulled the mitten on hurriedly and stood up. He was a bit frightened. He stamped up and down until the stinging returned to the feet. It certainly was cold, was his thought. That man from Sulphur Creek had spoken the truth when telling how cold it sometimes got in the country. And he had laughed at him at the time! That showed one must not be too sure of things. There was no mistake about it, it was cold. He strode up and down, stamping his feet and threshing his arms, until reassured by the returning warmth. Then he got out matches and proceeded to make a fire. From the undergrowth, where high water of the previous spring had lodged a supply of seasoned twigs, he got his firewood. Working carefully from a small beginning, he soon had a roaring fire, over which he thawed the ice from his face and in the protection of which he ate his biscuits. For the moment the cold space was outwitted. The dog took satisfaction in the fire, stretching out close enough for warmth and far enough away to escape being singed.

When the man had finished, he filled his pipe and took his comfortable time over a smoke. Then he pulled on his mittens, settled the ear-flaps of his cap firmly about his ears, and took the creek trail up the left fork. The dog was disappointed and yearned back toward the fire. The man was well aware of the cold, of real cold, of cold one hundred and seven degrees below freezing point. But the dog knew; all its ancestry knew, and it had inherited the knowledge. And it knew that it was not good to walk abroad in such fearful cold. It was the time to lie snug in a hole in the snow and wait for a curtain of cloud to be drawn across the face of outer space whence this cold came. On the other hand, there was no keen intimacy between the dog and the man. The one was the toil-slave of the other, and the only caresses it had ever received were the caresses of the whiplash and of harsh and menacing throat-sounds that threatened the whiplash. So, the dog made no effort to communicate its apprehension to the man. It was not concerned in the welfare of the man, it was for its own sake that it yearned back toward the fire. But the man whistled, and spoke to it with the sound of whiplashes and the dog swung in at the man’s heel and followed after.

The man took a chew of tobacco and proceeded to start a new amber beard. Also, his moist breath quickly powdered with white his mustache, eyebrows, and lashes. There did not seem to be so many springs on the left fork of the Henderson, and for half an hour the man saw no signs of any. And then it happened. At a place where there were no signs, where the soft, unbroken snow seemed to advertise solidity beneath, the man broke
through. It was not deep. He wet himself halfway to the knees before he floundered out to the firm crust.

He was angry, and cursed his luck aloud. He had hoped to get into camp with the boys at six o’clock, and this would delay him an hour, for he would have to build a fire and dry out his foot-gear. This was imperative at that low temperature—he knew that much; and he turned aside to the bank, which he climbed. On top, tangled in the underbrush about the trunks of several small spruce trees, was a high-water deposit of dry firewood—sticks and twigs, principally, but also larger portions of seasoned branches and fine, dry, last-year’s grasses. He threw down several large pieces on top of the snow. This served for a foundation and prevented the young flame from drowning itself in the snow it otherwise would melt. The flame he got by touching a match to a small shred of birch bark that he took from his pocket. This burned even more readily than paper. Placing it on the foundation, he fed the young flame with wisps of dry grass and with the tiniest dry twigs.

He worked slowly and carefully, keenly aware of his danger. Gradually, as the flame grew stronger, he increased the size of the twigs with which he fed it. He squatted in the snow, pulling the twigs out from their entanglement in the brush and feeding directly to the flame. He knew there must be no failure. When it is seventy-five below zero, a man must not fail in his first attempt to build a fire—that is, if his feet are wet. If his feet are dry, and he fails, he can run along the trail for half a mile and restore his circulation. But the circulation of wet and freezing feet cannot be restored by running when it is seventy-five below. No matter how fast he runs, the wet feet will freeze the harder.

All this the man knew. The old-timer on Sulphur Creek had told him about it the previous fall, and now he was appreciating the advice. Already all sensation had gone out of his feet. To build the fire he had been forced to remove his mittens, and the fingers had quickly gone numb. His pace of four miles an hour had kept his heart pumping blood to the surface of his body and to all the extremities. But the instant he stopped, the action of the pump eased down. The cold of space smote the unprotected tip of the planet, and he, being on that unprotected tip, received the full force of the blow. The blood of his body recoiled before it. The blood was alive, like the dog, and like the dog it wanted to hide away and cover itself up from the fearful cold. So long as he walked four miles an hour, he pumped that blood, willy-nilly, to the surface; but now it ebbed away and sank down into the recesses of his body. The extremities were the first to feel its absence. His wet feet froze the faster, and his exposed fingers numbed the faster, though they had not yet begun to freeze. Nose and cheeks were already freezing, while the skin of all his body chilled as it lost its blood.

But he was safe. Toes and nose and cheeks would be only touched by the frost, for the fire was beginning to burn with strength. He was feeding it with twigs the size of his finger. In another minute he would be able to feed it with branches the size of his wrist, and then he could remove his wet foot-gear, and, while it dried, he could keep his naked feet warm by the fire, rubbing them at first, of course, with snow. The fire was a success. He was safe. He remembered the advice of the old timer on Sulphur Creek, and smiled.
The old-timer had been very serious in laying down the law that no man must travel alone in the Klondike after fifty below. Well, here he was; he had had the accident; he was alone; and he had saved himself. Those old-timers were rather womanish, some of them, he thought. All a man had to do was to keep his head, and he was all right. Any man who was a man could travel alone. But it was surprising, the rapidity with which his cheeks and nose were freezing. And he had not thought his fingers could go lifeless in so short a time. Lifeless they were, for he could scarcely make them move together to grip a twig, and they seemed remote from his body and from him. When he touched a twig, he had to look and see whether or not he had hold of it. The wires were pretty well down between him and his finger-ends.

All of which counted for little. There was the fire, snapping and crackling and promising life with every dancing flame. He started to untie his moccasins. They were coated with ice; the thick German socks were like sheaths of iron halfway to the knees; and the moccasin strings were like rods of steel all twisted and knotted as by some conflagration. For a moment he tugged with his numb fingers, then, realizing the folly of it, he drew his sheath-knife.

But before he could cut the strings, it happened. It was his own fault or, rather, his mistake. He should not have built the fire under the spruce tree. He should have built it in the open. But it had been easier to pull the twigs from the brush and drop them directly on the fire. Now the tree under which he had done this carried a weight of snow on its boughs. No wind had blown for weeks, and each bough was fully freighted. Each time he had pulled a twig he had communicated a slight agitation to the tree—an imperceptible agitation, so far as he was concerned, but an agitation sufficient to bring about the disaster. High up in the tree one bough capsized its load of snow. This fell on the boughs beneath, capsizing them. This process continued, spreading out and involving the whole tree. It grew like an avalanche, and it descended without warning upon the man and the fire, and the fire was blotted out! Where it had burned was a mantle of fresh and disordered snow.

The man was shocked. It was as though he had just heard his own sentence of death. For a moment he sat and stared at the spot where the fire had been. Then he grew very calm. Perhaps the old-timer on Sulphur Creek was right. If he had only had a trail-mate he would have been in no danger now. The trail-mate could have built the fire. Well, it was up to him to build the fire over again, and this second time there must be no failure. Even if he succeeded, he would most likely lose some toes. His feet must be badly frozen by now, and there would be some time before the second fire was ready.

Such were his thoughts, but he did not sit and think them. He was busy all the time they were passing through his mind. He made a new foundation for a fire, this time in the open, where no treacherous tree could blot it out. Next, he gathered dry grasses and tiny twigs from the high-water flotsam. He could not bring his fingers together to pull them out, but he was able to gather them by the handful. In this way he got many rotten twigs and bits of green moss that were undesirable, but it was the best he could do. He worked methodically, even collecting an armful of the larger branches to be used later when the
fire gathered strength. And all the while the dog sat and watched him, a certain yearning wistfulness in its eyes, for it looked upon him as the fire-provider, and the fire was slow in coming.

When all was ready, the man reached in his pocket for a second piece of birch bark. He knew the bark was there, and, though he could not feel it with his fingers, he could hear its crisp rustling as he fumbled for it. Try as he would, he could not clutch hold of it. And all the time in his consciousness, was the knowledge that each instant his feet were freezing. This thought tended to put him in a panic, but he fought against it and kept calm. He pulled on his mittens with his teeth, and threshed his arms back and forth, beating his hands with all his might against his sides. He did this sitting down, and he stood up to do it; and all the while the dog sat in the snow, its wolf-brush of a tail curled around warmly over its forefeet, its sharp wolf-ears pricked forward intently as it watched the man. And the man, as he beat and threshed with his arms and hands, felt a great surge of envy as he regarded the creature that was warm and secure in its natural covering.

After a time he was aware of the first far-away signals of sensation in his beaten fingers. The faint tingling grew stronger till it evolved into a stinging ache that was excruciating, but which the man hailed with satisfaction. He stripped the mitten from his right hand and fetched forth the birch bark. The exposed fingers were quickly going numb again. Next he brought out his bunch of sulphur matches. But the tremendous cold had already driven the life out of his fingers. In his effort to separate one match from the others, the whole bunch fell in the snow. He tried to pick it out of the snow, but failed. The dead fingers could neither touch nor clutch. He was very careful. He drove the thought of his freezing feet, and nose, and cheeks, out of his mind, devoting his whole soul to the matches. He watched, using the sense of vision in place of that of touch, and when he saw his fingers on each side the bunch, he closed them—that is, he willed to close them, for the wires were down, and the fingers did not obey. He pulled the mitten on the right hand and beat it fiercely against his knee. Then, with both mittened hands, he scooped the bunch of matches, along with much snow, into his lap. Yet he was no better off.

After some manipulation he managed to get the bunch between the heels of his mittened hands. In this fashion he carried it to his mouth. The ice crackled and snapped when by a violent effort he opened his mouth. He drew the lower jaw in, curled the upper lip out of the way, and scraped the bunch with his upper teeth in order to separate a match. He succeeded in getting one, which he dropped on his lap. He was no better off. He could not pick it up. Then he devised a way. He picked it up in his teeth and scratched it on his leg. Twenty times he scratched before he succeeded in lighting it. As it flamed he held it with his teeth to the birch bark. But the burning brimstone went up his nostrils and into his lungs, causing him to cough spasmodically. The match fell into the snow and went out.

The old-timer on Sulphur Creek was right, he thought in the moment of controlled despair that ensued: after fifty below, a man should travel with a partner. He beat his hands, but failed in exciting any sensation. Suddenly he bared both hands, removing the
mittens with his teeth. He caught the whole bunch between the heels of his hands. His arm muscles not being frozen enabled him to press the hand-heels tightly against the matches. Then he scratched the bunch along his leg. It flared into flame, seventy sulphur matches at once! There was no wind to blow them out. He kept his head to one side to escape the strangling fumes, and held the blazing bunch to the birch-bark. As he so held it, he became aware of sensation in his hand. His flesh was burning. He could smell it. Deep down below the surface he could feel it. The sensation developed into pain that grew acute. And still he endured it, holding the flame of the matches clumsily to the bark that would not light readily because his own burning hands were in the way, absorbing most of the flame.

At last, when he could endure no more, he jerked his hands apart. The blazing matches fell sizzling into the snow, but the birch bark was alight. He began laying dry grasses and the tiniest twigs on the flame. He could not pick and choose, for he had to lift the fuel between the heels of his hands. Small pieces of rotten wood and green moss clung to the twigs, and he bit them off as well as he could with his teeth. He cherished the flame carefully and awkwardly. It meant life, and it must not perish. The withdrawal of blood from the surface of his body now made him begin to shiver, and he grew more awkward. A large piece of green moss fell squarely on the little fire. He tried to poke it out with his fingers, but his shivering frame made him poke too far and he disrupted the nucleus of the little fire, the burning grasses and tiny twigs separating and scattering. He tried to poke them together again, but in spite of the tenseness of the effort, his shivering got away with him, and the twigs were hopelessly scattered. Each twig gushed a puff of smoke and went out. The fire-provider had failed. As he looked apathetically about him, his eyes chanced on the dog, sitting across the ruins of the fire from him, in the snow, making restless, hunching movements, slightly lifting one forefoot and then the other, shifting its weight back and forth on them with wistful eagerness.

The sight of the dog put a wild idea into his head. He remembered the tale of the man, caught in a blizzard, who killed a steer and crawled inside the carcass, and so was saved. He would kill the dog and bury his hands in the warm body until the numbness went out of them. Then he could build another fire. He spoke to the dog, calling it to him; but in his voice was a strange note of fear that frightened the animal, who had never known the man to speak in such way before. Something was the matter, and its suspicious nature sensed danger—it knew not what danger, but somewhere, somehow, in its brain arose an apprehension of the man. It flattened its ears down at the sound of the man’s voice, and its restless, hunching movements and the liftings and shiftings of its forefeet became more pronounced; but it would not come to the man. He got on his hands and knees and crawled toward the dog. This unusual posture again excited suspicion, and the animal sidled mincingly away.

The man sat up in the snow for a moment and struggled for calmness. Then he pulled on his mittens, by means of his teeth, and got upon his feet. He glanced down at first in order to assure himself that he was really standing up, for the absence of sensation in his feet left him unrelated to the earth. His erect position in itself started to drive the webs of suspicion from the dog’s mind; and when he spoke peremptorily, with the sound of
whiplashes in his voice, the dog rendered its customary allegiance and came to him. As it came within reaching distance, the man lost his control. His arms flashed out to the dog, and he experienced genuine surprise when he discovered that his hands could not clutch, that there was neither bend nor feeling in the fingers. He had forgotten for the moment that they were frozen and that they were freezing more and more. All this happened quickly, and before the animal could get away, he encircled its body with his arms. He sat down in the snow, and in this fashion held the dog, while it snarled and whined and struggled.

But it was all he could do, hold its body encircled in his arms and sit there. He realized that he could not kill the dog. There was no way to do it. With his helpless hands he could neither draw nor hold his sheath knife nor throttle the animal. He released it, and it plunged wildly away, with tail between its legs, and still snarling. It halted forty feet away and surveyed him curiously, with ears sharply pricked forward. The man looked down at his hands in order to locate them, and found them hanging on the ends of his arms. It struck him as curious that one should have to use his eyes in order to find out where his hands were. He began threshing his arms back and forth, beating the mittened hands against his sides. He did this for five minutes, violently, and his heart pumped enough blood up to the surface to put a stop to his shivering. But no sensation was aroused in the hands. He had an impression that they hung like weights on the ends of his arms, but when he tried to run the impression down, he could not find it.

A certain fear of death, dull and oppressive, came to him. This fear quickly became poignant as he realized that it was no longer a mere matter of freezing his fingers and toes, or of losing his hands and feet, but that it was a matter of life and death with the chances against him. This threw him into a panic, and he turned and ran up the creek-bed along the old, dim trail. The dog joined in behind and kept up with him. He ran blindly, without intention, in fear such as he had never known in his life. Slowly, as he plowed and floundered through the snow, he began to see things again,—the banks of the creek, the old timber-jams, the leafless aspens, and the sky. The running made him feel better. He did not shiver. Maybe, if he ran on, his feet would thaw out; and, anyway, if he ran far enough, he would reach camp and the boys. Without doubt he would lose some fingers and toes and some of his face; but the boys would take care of him, and save the rest of him when he got there. And at the same time there was another thought in his mind that said he would never get to the camp and the boys; that it was too many miles away, that the freezing had too great a start on him, and that he would soon be stiff and dead. This thought he kept in the background and refused to consider. Sometimes it pushed itself forward and demanded to be heard, but he thrust it back and strove to think of other things.

It struck him as curious that he could run at all on feet so frozen that he could not feel them when they struck the earth and took the weight of his body. He seemed to himself to skim along above the surface, and to have no connection with the earth. Somewhere he had once seen a winged Mercury, and he wondered if Mercury felt as he felt when skimming over the earth.
His theory of running until he reached camp and the boys had one flaw in it: he lacked the endurance. Several times he stumbled, and finally he tottered, crumpled up, and fell. When he tried to rise, he failed. He must sit and rest, he decided, and next time he would merely walk and keep on going. As he sat and regained his breath, he noted that he was feeling quite warm and comfortable. He was not shivering, and it even seemed that a warm glow had come to his chest and trunk. And yet, when he touched his nose or cheeks, there was no sensation. Running would not thaw them out. Nor would it thaw out his hands and feet. Then the thought came to him that the frozen portions of his body must be extending. He tried to keep this thought down, to forget it, to think of something else; he was aware of the panicky feeling that it caused, and he was afraid of the panic. But the thought asserted itself, and persisted, until it produced a vision of his body totally frozen. This was too much, and he made another wild run along the trail. Once he slowed down to a walk, but the thought of the freezing extending itself made him run again.

And all the time the dog ran with him, at his heels. When he fell down a second time, it curled its tail over its forefeet and sat in front of him, facing him, curiously eager and intent. The warmth and security of the animal angered him, and he cursed it till it flattened down its ears appeasingly. This time the shivering came more quickly upon the man. He was losing in his battle with the frost. It was creeping into his body from all sides. The thought of it drove him on, but he ran no more than a hundred feet, when he staggered and pitched headlong. It was his last panic. When he had recovered his breath and control, he sat up and entertained in his mind the conception of meeting death with dignity. However, the conception did not come to him in such terms. His idea of it was that he had been making a fool of himself, running around like a chicken with its head cut off—such was the simile that occurred to him. Well, he was bound to freeze anyway, and he might as well take it decently. With this new-found peace of mind came the first glimmerings of drowsiness. A good idea, he thought, to sleep off to death. It was like taking an anaesthetic. Freezing was not so bad as people thought. There were lots worse ways to die.

He pictured the boys finding his body next day. Suddenly he found himself with them, coming along the trail and looking for himself. And, still with them, he came around a turn in the trail and found himself lying in the snow. He did not belong with himself any more, for even then he was out of himself, standing with the boys and looking at himself in the snow. It certainly was cold, was his thought. When he got back to the States he could tell the folks what real cold was. He drifted on from this to a vision of the old-timer on Sulphur Creek. He could see him quite clearly, warm and comfortable, and smoking a pipe.

“You were right, old hoss; you were right,” the man mumbled to the old-timer of Sulphur Creek.

Then the man drowsed off into what seemed to him the most comfortable and satisfying sleep he had ever known. The dog sat facing him and waiting. The brief day drew to a close in a long, slow twilight. There were no signs of a fire to be made, and, besides, never in the dog’s experience had it known a man to sit like that in the snow and
make no fire. As the twilight drew on, its eager yearning for the fire mastered it, and with a
great lifting and shifting of forefeet, it whined softly, then flattened its ears down in
anticipation of being chidden by the man. But the man remained silent. Later, the dog
whined loudly. And still later it crept close to the man and caught the scent of death. This
made the animal bristle and back away. A little longer it delayed, howling under the stars
that leaped and danced and shone brightly in the cold sky. Then it turned and trotted up
the trail in the direction of the camp it knew, where were the other food-providers and
fire-providers.
Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence contains the first and most authoritative statement of the American creed. In separating from Great Britain, the united colonies declared not only their independence as a distinct people but also the universal principles of legitimate political order. The birth announcement of the American Republic, on July 4, 1776, grounded the claim to political independence in a teaching about individual human rights—to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—to which rightful freedoms all human beings are said to be equally entitled. In articulating the four self-evident truths (natural equality, inalienable individual rights, government founded on the consent of the governed, and the people’s right of revolution) and compiling the list of the king’s abuses, Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) claimed to have done nothing more than “place before mankind the common sense of the subject.” “It was,” he said, “intended to be an expression of the American mind.”

What, according to the Declaration, makes the American colonists a distinct “people,” entitled to a “separate and equal station” among the peoples of the world? What is meant by the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God, and how are these related to our “peoplehood”? What is a “right,” and where do individual rights come from? What is a “self-evident” truth, and in what self-evidently true sense can we say that “all men are created equal”? How does the Declaration understand the relation between the individual and the collective? Between our rights and our responsibilities (or duties)? Do we Americans today still hold these truths (or any truths) to be self-evident?

IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776

The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America

When in the Course of human Events, it becomes necessary for one People to dissolve the Political Bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal Station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent Respect to the Opinions of Mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness—that to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed,—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles, and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient Causes; and accordingly all Experience hath shewn that Mankind are more disposed to suffer, while Evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the Forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long Train of Abuses and Usurpations, pursuing invariably the
same Object, evinces a Design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their Right, it is their Duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.—Such has been the patient Sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the Necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The History of the present King of Great-Britain is a History of repeated Injuries and Usurpations, all having in direct Object the Establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid World.

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public Good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing Importance, unless suspended in their Operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other Laws for the Accommodation of large Districts of People, unless those People would relinquish the Right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them, and formidable to Tyrants only.

He has called together Legislative Bodies at Places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the Depository of their Public Records, for the sole Purpose of fatiguing them into Compliance with his Measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly Firmness his Invasions on the Rights of the People.

He has refused for a long Time, after such Dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative Powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the Dangers of Invasion from without, and Convulsions within.

He has endeavoured to prevent the Population of these States; for that Purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their Migrations hither, and raising the Conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary Powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their Offices, and the Amount and Payment of their Salaries.

He has erected a Multitude of new Offices, and sent hither Swarms of Officers to harass our People and eat out their Substance.
THE AMERICAN CHARACTER

He has kept among us, in Times of Peace, Standing Armies without the consent of our Legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil Power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a Jurisdiction foreign to our Constitution, and unacknowledged by our Laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:

For quartering large Bodies of Armed Troops among us:

For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from Punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:

For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the World:

For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:

For depriving us, in many Cases, of the Benefits of Trial by Jury:

For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended Offences:

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an arbitrary Government, and enlarging its Boundaries, so as to render it at once an Example and fit Instrument for introducing the same absolute Rule into these Colonies:

For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:

For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with Power to legislate for us in all Cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

He has plundered our Seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our Towns, and destroyed the Lives of our People.

He is, at this Time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the Works of Death, Desolation, and Tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty and Perfidy, scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous Ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized Nation.
He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the Executioners of their Friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

He has excited domestic Insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the Inhabitants of our Frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known Rule of Warfare, is an undistinguished Destruction of all Ages, Sexes and Conditions.

In every stage of these Oppressions we have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble Terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated Injury. A Prince, whose Character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the Ruler of a free People.

Nor have we been wanting in Attentions to our British Brethren. We have warned them from Time to Time of Attempts by their Legislature to extend an unwarrantable Jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the Circumstances of our Emigration and Settlement here. We have appealed to their native Justice and Magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the Ties of our common Kindred to disavow these Usurpations, which, would inevitably interrupt our Connections and Correspondence. They too have been deaf to the Voice of Justice and of Consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the Necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of Mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace, Friends.

We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the World for the Rectitude of our Intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly Publish and Declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be, Free and Independent States; that they are absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political Connection between them and the State of Great-Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do.—And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm Reliance on the Protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.

John Hancock
Samuel Chase
Wm. Paca
Thos. Stone
Charles Carroll of Carrollton
George Wythe
Richard Henry Lee
Th. Jefferson
Benj. Harrison
Francis Lightfoot Lee
Carter Braxton
Robt. Morris
Benjamin Rush
Benj. Franklin
John Morton
Geo. Clymer
Jas. Smith
Geo. Taylor
James Wilson
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Caesar Rodney
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Jack London, like the unnamed man in this story, lived on the edge. Born in 1876, he died a short forty years later. As a young man, he was a full-fledged participant in the Yukon Gold Rush of 1897. Like many others at the time, London made the incredibly arduous journey by foot and handcrafted boat from Dyea in Alaska over Chilkoot Pass—a three-quarter-mile forty-five-degree-angled obstacle course—and eventually down the Yukon River into the Northwest Territories. The only gold he brought back, however, was an experience that he would mine for gems of literature for much of his writing life, as evidenced in his well-known novels like *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*, as well as in “To Build a Fire” (1908), all of which draw on the places he saw and the people he met during those hope-filled and brutal times in the Northwestern Yukon territory.

The story is set in the depth of winter in the Northwest Territories, a place profoundly inhospitable to human beings. The plot is straightforward: On a single, sunless day, an unnamed man undertakes a nine-hour walk along a faint and little-traveled trail in brutally cold weather—75 degrees below zero, 107 degrees of frost. Bound for the mining camp, where his companions are waiting, he takes a roundabout way so that he can scope out the “possibilities of getting out logs in the spring from the islands in the Yukon” (39). Save for the clothes he wears, a watch, his lunch, some chewing tobacco, some matches, and a few pieces of birch bark, he takes precious little with him. He is, however, accompanied by a husky, who seems far more impressed and depressed by—and instinctively aware of—the “tremendous cold” (38). He starts his trek at 9:00 a.m., pauses at 10:00, arrives at his lunch destination at 12:30 p.m.—exactly the time he had set for himself—builds a fire, eats, takes a leisurely smoke, and resumes walking, aiming to make camp by 6:00 p.m. But suddenly, “it happened” (42): he accidentally steps into an icy spring. To dry off, he successfully builds another fire, but he does so under a “fully freighted” tree, whose boughs soon capsize their loads of snow and snuff the fire out (44). Despite the frost that has already affected his fingers, he valiantly attempts to build a third fire, but, alas, he fails. He then makes a couple of attempts to run before deciding to meet death “decently,” “with dignity” (48). He sits down and slips into a frozen sleep, watched over by the increasingly bewildered dog, who eventually wanders off and presumably makes his way back to camp.
Citizens from many nations, for quite different reasons, sought to penetrate the Northwest Territories. We can imagine, for example, a story like London’s about a French Jesuit priest losing his life while trudging through the Northern winter for the purpose of baptizing a newborn Huron Indian. We would be invited by such a tale to admire or even be inspired by the deep piety, the sacrificial spirituality, of such a Frenchman. We also have an historical British example in Sir John Franklin, who set out in 1845 with 129 men and two amply stocked ships to find the Northwest Passage, a route through the Arctic from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. Although his expedition failed and all aboard were lost, Franklin stood for many decades as a proud symbol of British naval prowess and national, even imperial, honor. Noble impulses, like piety and honor, still inspire. But Jack London’s anonymous adventurer is out on the Yukon River, all alone in the dead of winter, searching for a profitable business opportunity: Jack London’s man is clearly an American. So are the story’s larger themes. But before getting to them, we need to look carefully at the protagonist of the story: his character, his deeds, and his purposes. We will also want to decide what we think of him.

A. The Man

1. Characterize the man, drawing on the descriptions of his attitudes, manner, and deeds.

IN CONVERSATION

In this conversation, Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass discuss London’s story with William Schambra, director of the Hudson Institute’s Bradley Center for Philanthropy and Civic Renewal.

Leon Kass: I would say that the man is certainly independent. He hears advice from the old-timer at Sulphur Creek, but he relies basically on his own judgment, on his own capacity. He is not only independent, but he is self-reliant. He is competent. Even though he is a newcomer to the territory, he is very observant. He’s a keen observer and knows the things around him. When the going gets tough, though he might panic for a moment, he’s able to beat down that panic with efforts of self-command. He’s practical and enduring. And not to be omitted is that which relates to the title of the story: he knows how to build a fire.

Amy Kass: He also knows that is what stands between life and death, even though we’re told “he has no imagination.” He knows that.

William Schambra: He has no imagination, and indeed, he seems to be out in the wilderness for the least imaginative of reasons, which is to scope out an island in the Yukon for logs that might be floated down in the spring flood. What’s that all about? Is that an American characteristic?
Leon Kass: This shows that he’s enterprising, that he’s looking for ways to turn the things that are about him—in this case, certain natural things—into things which are useful and profitable.

There are complexities to the character and maybe limitations. He’s out there, absolutely alone, in an inhospitable place, without fear; he is self-reliant, confident that he can master what has to be done, and he tries to do it on his own. I’m not sure that the fact that he fails means that we should simply think the less of him for these particular admirable qualities—qualities which it seems to me are also encouraged by American principles, the American way of life.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

2. Compare the man and the dog. How do they differ?
3. The man knows how to build a fire. What does this tell us about him?
4. The narrator says: “The trouble with him was that he was without imagination. He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances” (39). What does this mean? Is it inevitably a problem?

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: We’re told specifically that he has no imagination about the meanings or significance of things, which means he doesn’t really understand that one could die from doing what he’s doing.

If we turn to the ancient Greeks, we learn that this man is in possession of both of the gifts that Prometheus gives to human beings: fire, which is the beginning of all the arts and sciences, and blind hope. Prometheus gave human beings blind hope to keep them from always seeing death before their eyes. Hope allows them to go on, to be optimistic. And this is a man that shows us that.

Leon Kass: But, is having a lively imagination overrated? Aren’t we better off being nose-to-the-ground, practical-minded people who attend to the here and now, and go about our own business, and let destiny take care of itself?

William Schambra: The story occurs on a day without clouds, and as night draws on there is nothing but these sparkling stars that seem to be so close to Earth. There is nothing between this spot on Earth and the cosmos. And you need something; you need to draw something over that, to protect yourself from that. The dog understands this: in this cold weather,
you either snuggle under the snow or wait until a cloud cover comes. You need a horizon to protect yourself from the cold and indifferent cosmos. So you need imagination.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

5. Is this man recognizably American? Typically American? Why and how?

6. What is the significance of the fact that the man is not named?

IN CONVERSATION

William Schambra: It’s an odd circumstance. Even his friend Bud, who advised him on the one piece of equipment he regrets not having (a nose guard that would have protected his cheek) is named. And “Bud” goes back to this sort of fraternal gathering described earlier by London. The man is a type of human being. To give him a name would be to pin him down.

Amy Kass: I think the fact that he’s constantly the no-name man, “the man,” suggests that he’s nobody—and his death palpably shows us that. He’s not buried by anybody. He freezes to death by himself. But on the other hand, he is every American. He’s got all of the quintessential virtues and vices that are American.

Leon Kass: Let me embrace both of those and add a third thing, which cuts in a slightly different direction. This man is not governed by the desire to make a name for himself. In other words, he’s not moved by honor. He’s moved by gain.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

B. The Man’s Surroundings

1. Characterize the man’s surroundings.
2. Consider the images London uses to set the scene—for example, “the spittle crackled . . . in the air” (39); the “muzzle of ice held his lips so rigidly that he was unable to clear his chin when he expelled the [tobacco] juice” (40); “the cold of space smote the unprotected tip of the planet, and he, being on the unprotected tip, received the full force of the blow” (43). What kind of moods and feelings do these images create?
3. What attitude toward nature does the man display? What attitude toward nature do you, as reader, experience?
C. The Man’s Motives and Purposes

1. What moves the man to act as he does? What fundamentally drives him?
2. How do you explain his seeming indifference to the cold?
3. Trace his changing attitude toward the old-timer from Sulphur Creek. Why does he resist the old man’s advice? Why does he acknowledge, as he lies dying, that the old man was right?
4. Given the opportunity to make this journey again, under similar circumstances, do you think he would take it? Or do you think he learned something of significance from this experience that would alter his behavior or attitudes in the future?
5. What do you learn from his experience?

D. Assessing the Man

2. Had he successfully made it back to camp, would your judgment of him differ?
3. What do you think of the man’s purposes? Are they less worthy than those of other adventurers? Why, or why not?
4. What do you think London thinks of his own protagonist?
   a. Might the unforgiving, frigid environment that London depicts—an environment that seems altogether to resist human intentions—provide a clue?
   b. Might London’s own stylistic devices—for example, his numerous repetitions of words like “cold,” “know,” “fire,” and so forth—provide a clue?
5. Is the man (or a failing of his character) responsible for what happens to him? Or is he just an unlucky victim of an accident (“It happened”)?
6. Is the man a tragic hero? Is the story an American tragedy?

IV. Thinking with the Text

Americans have traditionally been known for, and generally proud of, their independence and self-reliance, their freedom and individualism, their enterprising and adventurous spirit, their courage and endurance in grappling with the forces of nature, their success through science and technology in making the world a more hospitable place for human life. These national traits of character, long celebrated in stories of exploration, adventure, the settling of the frontier, and the founding of industries are in fact encouraged by the American creed as it emerges through our founding principles and documents. So, for example, the Declaration of Independence conceives of human beings as free-standing, independent individuals, and it asserts that each of us has an inalienable right to pursue our own happiness, each according to his own lights. The United States Constitution established a large commercial republic, largely in the belief (defended in
Federalist 10) that encouragement of material self-interest is far less threatening to stable and free government than is a politics dominated by zeal for high-minded opinion (be it religious, philosophical, or political) or a politics dominated by passionate attachment to charismatic leaders and ambitious men. The Constitution also embraced the goal of progress in natural science and the useful arts by calling for copyright and patent protection for authors and inventors. (Students and readers are encouraged to read these founding documents to better appreciate the questions that follow.) London’s story invites reflection on these features of the American character, with an eye to identifying and assessing their strengths and their weaknesses.

A. American Individualism (For these questions, consider the story in conjunction with the Declaration of Independence on page 50.)

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the “rugged individual”? Of the self-reliant and enduring human being? Of the risk-taking individual? Give some examples of the rugged individual in literature, in movies, or in your own life. What do we admire about these people? What do we find lacking in them?
2. Could America have become what it is today without risk takers like London’s protagonist? Or is there a difference between him and the risk takers who tamed the wilderness and settled the frontier? If so, what is it?
3. Is America today running out of risk takers? Does it matter?
4. What can be said both for and against American individualism?
5. What might be the best way to correct its (our) excesses and deficiencies? Does London’s story provide any useful suggestions in this regard?
6. Could London’s no-named man be any man from anywhere? Could any other country or culture produce him?

B. American Acquisitiveness and Enterprise (For these questions, consider the story in conjunction with the Federalist 10 on page 120.)

1. How should we evaluate people who undertake dangerous enterprises not from piety or the love of honor, but from a desire for (honest) commercial gain?
2. Some people claim that the American Republic is based on a “low but solid foundation,” namely, a foundation comprising self-interest, the love of gain, and a primary concern for material well-being. What might be the consequences—both good and bad—of this orientation for the morality and character of American citizens?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: Unlike the rather romanticized Little House on the Prairie, these guys are on the frontier for gold. They’re not family men.

The conceit of human nature that’s behind the Declaration of Independence
doesn’t begin with us in families; it begins with us as isolated individuals. For the Declaration, it is the individuals who have rights—not groups, and not even families. There is a certain encouragement of this, though the perpetuation of life itself depends upon the bachelors giving up the gold, building the log cabins, and recognizing that they are mortal and need to provide for those that come after them.

**Amy Kass:** One other thing you didn’t mention is that this is a man without any tradition. That is evident in the way in which he stands with respect to the advice of the old-timer, the man from Sulphur Creek, who tells him that when it is fifty degrees below zero, you should build a fire or take a companion with you. So he takes the Declaration of Independence, the radical individuality, to its ultimate end.

**William Schambra:** On the one hand, though, we as a nation cannot do without that. We would not have been America without the bachelors who were willing to throw themselves into the wilderness from the very beginning of the nation—and yet you are suggesting that that is not enough.

**Leon Kass:** The Constitution does not simply rely on the solitary individual when it sets about constituting a republic that is going to safeguard the rights of individuals. Insofar as we are a large commercial republic, it encourages self-interest, but, at the same time, it requires additional things. It requires certain kinds of cooperation. There are certain virtues that go along with this in order for trade to be possible. Self-interest carries with it things that moderate the isolation and the mere selfishness that might otherwise be encouraged here.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

3. Should we be ashamed that we Americans are likely to be motivated more by material or commercial impulses than by other more exalted motives? Why, or why not?

**C. Science, Technology, and the Mastery of Nature**

1. Are there limits to our efforts to tame nature and to have her do our bidding? If so, what are they, and how can we discover them?
2. Does our reliance on science, with its emphasis on measurement and quantification of the appearances of things, blind us to certain deeper truths about nature and our relation to it? (Consider, in this regard, the strengths and weaknesses of living in the world guided by—as in the story—watches and thermometers.)
3. Can science and technology provide the wisdom needed for living with science and technology? If not, can we gain such wisdom from stories like this?
IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: This is a man who has a kind of technological expertise. First and foremost, he knows how to build a fire, and by the end of reading this story we all know how to build a fire. And we all know how cold it can get and how a fire really stands between you and death. But the other thing about him that really emphasizes this brute individualism or the separatism of this kind of American individual is that London has this take place on a sunless day, which we are reminded of many times. This means, among other things, that the man does not have a shadow, which means that he is somehow disconnected—and disconnected even from his inner life.

Leon Kass: There are lots of things that a man without imagination doesn’t imagine—and young people like this man perhaps more than others, thanks to the fact that they have more blind hope than the rest of us. They don’t see the day of doom before them: not just today and not just tomorrow, but not at all. To add to that, this man has got temperature. He has taken cold and measured it according to the tools of science and interpretation. But the human meaning of being cold in the world is not there. He has a watch, and when the fire is put out, the thing that bothers him is that he is going to be an hour late getting to camp. To live by the clock and to take confidence in the way in which we have measured time or measured the world is, in part, to give us great power in nature, but it blinds us to the things that the quantification of the world has made invisible to us. And that is modern man, it is technological man, and that is American life. This story shows us something of the insufficiency, the tragedy, and power of it.

Amy Kass: London seems to suggest, both through his language and through the numerous repetitions in the story, that necessity is much greater than you are. Nature is much bigger than you are. And, finally, when this man tips his hat to the old man whom he has been resisting all this time and acknowledges he was right, he seems to be suggesting we have to submit.

Leon Kass: Well, submit? Or that we have to acknowledge our dependence on one another? The old man did not say, “Don’t go out if it is colder than fifty degrees below zero.” He says, “Don’t go out alone.”

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

4. What is, and what should be, our attitude toward the natural world, especially if nature is indifferent to human beings and often hostile to our purposes? Who in the story is a better model, the man or the dog?
5. Is human life unavoidably tragic, technology or no technology (fire or no fire)?
6. What does the story teach us about death? The man realizes that he wants to “meet death with dignity” (as opposed to “running around like a chicken with
its head cut off”) (48). What do we mean when we talk of meeting death with dignity? What is the relationship between living well and dying well?
Equality
Central to the American creed is the principle of equality, beginning with the notion that all human beings possess certain fundamental rights and equal standing before the law. Our concern for equality has expanded over the past half century to focus also on inequalities in opportunities, wealth, achievement, and social condition. What good is an equal right to pursue happiness if one lacks the native gifts or the social means to exercise it successfully? In this satirical story (1961), set in a future time in which “everybody was finally equal . . . every which way,” Kurt Vonnegut Jr. (1922–2007) challenges our devotion to equality and invites us to consider the costs of pursuing it too zealously.

Does the society portrayed here represent a fulfillment of the ideal of equality in the Declaration of Independence, or rather a perversion of the principle? Does opposing invidious distinctions, envy, and feelings of inferiority require reducing all to the lowest common denominator, and is this the true path to “social justice”? Would homogeneity attained by artificially raising up the low, producing a nation of Harrisons rather than a nation of Hazels—a prospect offered by biotechnological “enhancement”—be any more attractive?

The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren’t only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General.

Some things about living still weren’t quite right, though. April, for instance, still drove people crazy by not being springtime. And it was in that month that the H-G men took George and Hazel Bergeron’s fourteen-year-old son, Harrison, away.

It was tragic, all right, but George and Hazel couldn’t think about it very hard. Hazel had a perfectly average intelligence, which meant she couldn’t think about anything except in short bursts. And George, while his intelligence was way above normal, had a little mental handicap radio in his ear. He was required by law to wear it at all times. It was tuned to a government transmitter. Every twenty seconds or so, the transmitter would send out some sharp noise to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of their brains.

George and Hazel were watching television. There were tears on Hazel’s cheeks, but she’d forgotten for the moment what they were about.

On the television screen were ballerinas.
A buzzer sounded in George’s head. His thoughts fled in panic, like bandits from a burglar alarm.

“That was a real pretty dance, that dance they just did,” said Hazel.

“Huh?” said George.

“That dance—it was nice,” said Hazel.

“That dance—and it was nice,” Hazel.

“Yup,” said George. He tried to think a little about the ballerinas. They weren’t really very good—no better than anybody else would have been, anyway. They were burdened with sash-weights and bags of birdshot, and their faces were masked, so that no one, seeing a free and graceful gesture or a pretty face, would feel like something the cat drug in. George was toying with the vague notion that maybe dancers shouldn’t be handicapped. But he didn’t get very far with it before another noise in his ear radio scattered his thoughts.

George winced. So did two out of the eight ballerinas.

Hazel saw him wince. Having no mental handicap herself, she had to ask George what the latest sound had been.

“Sounded like somebody hitting a milk bottle with a ball peen hammer,” said George.

“I’d think it would be real interesting, hearing all the different sounds,” said Hazel, a little envious. “All the things they think up.”

“Um,” said George.

“Only, if I was Handicapper General, you know what I would do?” said Hazel. Hazel, as a matter of fact, bore a strong resemblance to the Handicapper General, a woman named Diana Moon Glampers. “If I was Diana Moon Glampers,” said Hazel, “I’d have chimes on Sunday—just chimes. Kind of in honor of religion.”

“I could think, if it was just chimes,” said George.


“Good as anybody else,” said George.

“Who knows better’n I do what normal is?” said Hazel.

“Right,” said George. He began to think glimmeringly about his abnormal son who was now in jail, about Harrison, but a twenty-one-gun salute in his head stopped that.
“Boy!” said Hazel, “that was a doozy, wasn’t it?”

It was such a doozy that George was white and trembling, and tears stood on the rims of his red eyes. Two of the eight ballerinas had collapsed to the studio floor, were holding their temples.

“All of a sudden you look so tired,” said Hazel. “Why don’t you stretch out on the sofa, so’s you can rest your handicap bag on the pillows, honeybunch.” She was referring to the forty-seven pounds of birdshot in a canvas bag, which was padlocked around George’s neck. “Go on and rest the bag for a little while,” she said. “I don’t care if you’re not equal to me for a while.”

George weighed the bag with his hands. “I don’t mind it,” he said. “I don’t notice it any more. It’s just a part of me.”

“You been so tired lately—kind of wore out,” said Hazel. “If there was just some way we could make a little hole in the bottom of the bag, and just take out a few of them lead balls. Just a few.”

“Two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine for every ball I took out,” said George. “I don’t call that a bargain.”

“If you could just take a few out when you came home from work,” said Hazel. “I mean—you don’t compete with anybody around here. You just set around.”

“If I tried to get away with it,” said George, “then other people’d get away with it—and pretty soon we’d be right back to the dark ages again, with everybody competing against everybody else. You wouldn’t like that, would you?”

“I’d hate it,” said Hazel.

“There you are,” said George. “The minute people start cheating on laws, what do you think happens to society?”

If Hazel hadn’t been able to come up with an answer to this question, George couldn’t have supplied one. A siren was going off in his head.

“Reckon it’d fall all apart,” said Hazel.

“What would?” said George blankly.

“Society,” said Hazel uncertainly. “Wasn’t that what you just said?”

“Who knows?” said George.
The television program was suddenly interrupted for a news bulletin. It wasn’t clear at first as to what the bulletin was about, since the announcer, like all announcers, had a serious speech impediment. For about half a minute, and in a state of high excitement, the announcer tried to say, “Ladies and gentlemen—”

He finally gave up, handed the bulletin to a ballerina to read.

“That’s all right—” Hazel said of the announcer, “he tried. That’s the big thing. He tried to do the best he could with what God gave him. He should get a nice raise for trying so hard.”

“Ladies and gentlemen—” said the ballerina, reading the bulletin. She must have been extraordinarily beautiful, because the mask she wore was hideous. And it was easy to see that she was the strongest and most graceful of all the dancers, for her handicap bags were as big as those worn by two-hundred-pound men.

And she had to apologize at once for her voice, which was a very unfair voice for a woman to use. Her voice was a warm, luminous, timeless melody. “Excuse me—” she said, and she began again, making her voice absolutely uncompetitive.

“Harrison Bergeron, age fourteen,” she said in a grackle squawk, “has just escaped from jail, where he was held on suspicion of plotting to overthrow the government. He is a genius and an athlete, is under-handicapped, and should be regarded as extremely dangerous.”

A police photograph of Harrison Bergeron was flashed on the screen— upside down, then sideways, upside down again, then right side up. The picture showed the full length of Harrison against a background calibrated in feet and inches. He was exactly seven feet tall.

The rest of Harrison’s appearance was Halloween and hardware. Nobody had ever borne heavier handicaps. He had outgrown hindrances faster than the H-G men could think them up. Instead of a little ear radio for a mental handicap, he wore a tremendous pair of earphones, and spectacles with thick wavy lenses. The spectacles were intended to make him not only half blind, but to give him whanging headaches besides.

Scrap metal was hung all over him. Ordinarily, there was a certain symmetry, a military neatness to the handicaps issued to strong people, but Harrison looked like a walking junkyard. In the race of life, Harrison carried three hundred pounds.

And to offset his good looks, the H-G men required that he wear at all times a red rubber ball for a nose, keep his eyebrows shaved off, and cover his even white teeth with black caps at snaggle-tooth random.

“If you see this boy,” said the ballerina, “do not—I repeat, do not—try to reason with him.”
There was the shriek of a door being torn from its hinges.

Screams and barking cries of consternation came from the television set. The photograph of Harrison Bergeron on the screen jumped again and again, as though dancing to the tune of an earthquake.

George Bergeron correctly identified the earthquake, and well he might have—for many was the time his own home had danced to the same crashing tune. “My God—” said George, “that must be Harrison!”

The realization was blasted from his mind instantly by the sound of an automobile collision in his head.

When George could open his eyes again, the photograph of Harrison was gone. A living, breathing Harrison filled the screen.

Clanking, clownish, and huge, Harrison stood in the center of the studio. The knob of the uprooted studio door was still in his hand. Ballerinas, technicians, musicians, and announcers cowered on their knees before him, expecting to die.

“I am the Emperor!” cried Harrison. “Do you hear? I am the Emperor! Everybody must do what I say at once!” He stamped his foot and the studio shook.

“Even as I stand here—” he bellowed, “crippled, hobbled, sickened—I am a greater ruler than any man who ever lived! Now watch me become what I can become!”

Harrison tore the straps of his handicap harness like wet tissue paper, tore straps guaranteed to support five thousand pounds.

Harrison’s scrap-iron handicaps crashed to the floor.

Harrison thrust his thumbs under the bar of the padlock that secured his head harness. The bar snapped like celery. Harrison smashed his headphones and spectacles against the wall.

He flung away his rubber-ball nose, revealed a man that would have awed Thor, the god of thunder.

“I shall now select my Empress!” he said, looking down on the cowering people. “Let the first woman who dares rise to her feet claim her mate and her throne!”

A moment passed, and then a ballerina arose, swaying like a willow.

Harrison plucked the mental handicap from her ear, snapped off her physical handicaps with marvelous delicacy. Last of all, he removed her mask.
She was blindingly beautiful. “Now—” said Harrison, taking her hand, “shall we show the people the meaning of the word dance? Music!” he commanded.

The musicians scrambled back into their chairs, and Harrison stripped them of their handicaps, too. “Play your best,” he told them, “and I’ll make you barons and dukes and earls.”

The music began. It was normal at first—cheap, silly, false. But Harrison snatched two musicians from their chairs, waved them like batons as he sang the music as he wanted it played. He slammed them back into their chairs.

The music began again and was much improved.

Harrison and his Empress merely listened to the music for a while—listened gravely, as though synchronizing their heartbeats with it.

They shifted their weights to their toes.

Harrison placed his big hands on the girl’s tiny waist, letting her sense the weightlessness that would soon be hers.

And then, in an explosion of joy and grace, into the air they sprang!

Not only were the laws of the land abandoned, but the law of gravity and the laws of motion as well.

They reeled, whirled, swiveled, flounced, capered, gamboled, and spun.

They leaped like deer on the moon.

The studio ceiling was thirty feet high, but each leap brought the dancers nearer to it.

It became their obvious intention to kiss the ceiling.

They kissed it.

And then, neutralizing gravity with love and pure will, they remained suspended in air inches below the ceiling, and they kissed each other for a long, long time.

It was then that Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General, came into the studio with a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun. She fired twice, and the Emperor and the Empress were dead before they hit the floor.

Diana Moon Glampers loaded the gun again. She aimed it at the musicians and told them they had ten seconds to get their handicaps back on.
It was then that the Bergerons’ television tube burned out.

Hazel turned to comment about the blackout to George.

But George had gone out into the kitchen for a can of beer.

George came back in with the beer, paused while a handicap signal shook him up. And then he sat down again. “You been crying?” he said to Hazel.

“Yup,” she said.

“What about?” he said.

“I forget,” she said. “Something real sad on television.”

“What was it?” he said.

“It’s all kind of mixed up in my mind,” said Hazel.

“Forget sad things,” said George.

“I always do,” said Hazel.

“That’s my girl,” said George. He winced. There was the sound of a riveting gun in his head.

“Gee—I could tell that one was a doozy,” said Hazel.

“You can say that again,” said George.

“Gee—” said Hazel, “I could tell that one was a doozy.”
The creed of the American Republic, as enunciated in the Declaration of Independence, begins with the claim, offered as a self-evident truth, that “all men are created equal.” Yet our embrace of the principle was long embarrassed in practice by the existence of chattel slavery, present at the Founding but greatly increased through the first half of the nineteenth century. Critics of the Declaration openly called human equality “a self-evident lie,” and the infamous Dred Scott decision (1857) gave voice to a racist and exclusionary interpretation of the Declaration, insisting that its “all men” referred only to “all white men” who were the equals of British subjects living in Britain. No one did more to oppose this (mis)interpretation than our sixteenth president, Abraham Lincoln, who famously claimed that he had “never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence.” Lincoln’s most famous defense of equality appears in the Gettysburg Address, delivered on November 19, 1863, in the midst of a civil war whose deepest cause was the institution of slavery. Here Lincoln revisits the Declaration of Independence, summoning the nation to achieve a “new birth of freedom” through renewed dedication to the founding proposition of human equality.

How does Lincoln understand the key terms of the creed, and in particular, the relation between equality and freedom? What is the difference between “holding” equality as a “self-evident truth” and regarding it as a “proposition” to which we are dedicated? What is the difference between the “new birth of freedom,” coming from the bloody war, and the original birth of the nation, “conceived in liberty”? What do you think is the meaning of equality today, and what is its relation to freedom?

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

**Throughout his career, Lincoln offered numerous statements about the meaning of the Declaration, calling it “the father of all moral principle” in each subsequent generation of Americans and “the sheet anchor of republicanism.” In his speech on the Dred Scott decision, he sought to vindicate the inclusiveness of the Declaration’s assertion of human equality:**

I think the authors of that notable instrument intended to include all men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal in all respects. They did not mean to say all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness, in what respects they did consider all men created equal—equal in “certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” This they said, and this they meant. They did not mean to assert the obvious untruth, that all were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet, that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. In fact they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to declare the right, so that the enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit. They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere.
Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.
I. About the Author

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. (1922–2007) was born and raised in Indianapolis and later left college to enlist in the US Army during World War II. He spent time as a German prisoner of war and won a Purple Heart, a distinction he later mocked. After the war, he worked as a newspaper reporter and in public relations before selling his first story to *Collier’s* magazine in 1950. Shortly thereafter, he quit his regular job and embarked on a literary career, taking part-time jobs to pay the bills. Only with the publication, eighteen years later, of his second collection of stories, *Welcome to the Monkey House*—which included “Harrison Bergeron,” first published in 1961—did he gain some positive critical attention. A year later his autobiographical novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, made him a literary celebrity, a status he held for the rest of his life. Vonnegut was politically active in many liberal-left political causes, giving numerous speeches on political issues of the day: He was, among other things, an ardent defender of free speech, an outspoken opponent of the Vietnam War, and an advocate of socialism. His political views sometimes made it into his stories, which often combined science fiction, satire, and dark humor. His much-loved “Harrison Bergeron” is no exception, though there is considerable disagreement regarding the political message—if any—that Vonnegut was attempting to convey. Whatever the author’s intention, the story demands both careful reading and thoughtful reflection regarding the issues it raises.

II. Summary

“Harrison Bergeron” is a satire, set in the United States of the future (2081), when, thanks to our own legislative process—the passage of Constitutional Amendments 211, 212, and 213—and to the leveling interventions and vigilance of the Handicapper General and her agents, everyone is finally equal, not just before the law or before God but “every which way.” No one is smarter, stronger, or more beautiful than anyone else. The beautiful ones are made to wear ugly masks, nose balls, false teeth, and the like; the strong and speedy are made to wear sash-weights and bags of birdshot; the naturally smart are made to wear radios in their ears, which, tuned to a government transmitter, emit “sharp noises” to disrupt their thoughts every twenty seconds or so.

In the “clammy” month of April, Harrison Bergeron, a fourteen-year-old, seven-foot-tall boy of superior brain, beauty, and brawn, is in jail, accused of trying to overthrow the government. His parents, George and Hazel Bergeron, are at home watching handicapped
ballet on television and talking about the mind-numbing sounds that George, who is natively highly intelligent, endures from his radio transmitter. Hazel, average and unhandicapped, suggests that George bend the rules for the sake of comfort, but George defends the society and its laws: He does not want to go back to the “dark ages” of competition.

Suddenly, a news bulletin interrupts the dance program to announce Harrison’s escape from jail. Immediately thereafter, he bursts into the television studio, declaring his intention of becoming emperor. Harrison sheds his prodigious handicaps, appearing like a god. He selects his empress from among the ballerinas, instructs the musicians to play their best, and with his counterpart, leaps and dances gracefully and beautifully up to the ceiling, their love defying even the laws of gravity and motion. The Handicapper General arrives to shoot down Harrison and his partner. Hazel, witnessing her son’s death, is briefly sad. As the sound of a gun goes off in his head, George advises her to forget sad things. And so they do.

Kurt Vonnegut’s story paints a picture of a society that few of us would gladly embrace, even those of us who care deeply about social equality. It thus invites us to think about the society presented; its rebellious genius, Harrison Bergeron; as well as Vonnegut’s purpose.

III. Thinking about the Text

A. The Society

1. Describe Vonnegut’s America.
2. Why do you think it adopted its practices of making everyone equal in brains, beauty, and brawn?
3. Is it a good thing for people to believe that no one is better than anyone else?
   Would it be a good thing if, in fact, no person were better than any other person?
4. Are there positive aspects of this society?
5. What is lacking?
6. Why exactly do you dislike it?

IN CONVERSATION

In this conversation, Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass discuss Vonnegut’s story with Diana Schaub, coeditor of What So Proudly We Hail, and James W. Ceaser, professor of government at the University of Virginia.

Diana Schaub: Every good and worthy thing is missing from this society. There is no aspiration, no excellence, no love, no family, and at the end you see a kind of disruption of the family. Every good thing other than a certain kind of
equality is missing.

**Amy Kass:** There is no joy, no memory, no real civic life in any sense.

**Leon Kass:** I do not disagree with you, but we should at least mention a few things. There are no people worse off than anybody else; there is no envy; there is no resentment. Well, there is a tiny amount of envy, but when compared to our society, there is virtually none. People seem to be content with their lot. They have a kind view of the people who struggle with their handicaps to do their best.

**Diana Schaub:** Yes, there is a kind of civic peace, but I do not think that this is a society entirely without envy. In fact, this is a society that was founded on envy as a political principle, and even though it was founded on that principle, the people that it is supposed to benefit still feel envy. The first thing really said about Hazel is that she is envious of the interesting noises going off in her husband’s head.

**Leon Kass:** I agree with that, but Americans from the beginning are taught to embrace the view that no one is better than anyone else, at least in certain respects. We do not live in a world in which some people are by nature fit to rule over us, and we are rather proud of our sense of equal self-worth. Vonnegut’s society is a society which has enabled people to feel no worse than anybody else—admittedly by making everybody worse.

**Amy Kass:** But we are also a society that seems to esteem a certain kind of excellence.

**Leon Kass:** To be sure. But, again, it would not be interesting if the story did not somehow speak to certain things that attract many Americans a lot of the time and probably all Americans at least some of the time.

*For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.*

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**B. Harrison Bergeron, the Character**

1. What do you make of Harrison Bergeron himself? Is he an example of human excellence? Does he represent the American dream to “be all you can be”?
2. Do you cheer for his success? What do you admire about Harrison? Are there aspects of his behavior that concern you?
3. Do we have any idea of what sort of ruler he might have been and toward what end he would have ruled? Would he (and his goals) be better or worse than (those of) the Handicapper General and her agents?
4. Is his desire—and his capacity—to rule an expression of the problem that made the push for equality necessary?
IN CONVERSATION

**Amy Kass:** I would give Harrison a couple of cheers. Harrison Bergeron seems to stand for the rule of the best in the name of excellence, and insofar as I esteem excellence, I would like him to succeed. I would like to watch beautiful ballet on television instead of handicapped ballet. And yet there is an aspect of Harrison Bergeron that you certainly cannot cheer for. What is the first thing that he says when he comes in? “I am the emperor, and you're going to do the exact thing I say, and if you do that, you can become a duke or an earl.” He plans to establish an equally intrusive kind of government, only it is going to be *his* rule—and that I object to, of course.

**Diana Schaub:** I am not sure it will be equally intrusive; it will be the reintroduction of aristocracy.

**Amy Kass:** The government is not simply the best. It is Harrison who is going to tell you what the best is.

**Leon Kass:** You have a tiny clue as to what Harrison stands for when he declares himself emperor and he jostles the musicians and tells them to play their *best*. He does not want mediocrity, and he will reward excellence. Being an American, I am not in favor of monarchy, never mind tyranny, and I am not in favor of aristocracy. But I do admire excellence. While I wish he had come to the throne and liberated everybody else so that everybody could pursue this, and he came out as a champion of freedom, nevertheless, I sort of cheer for him with at least two cheers. He and his partner defy the laws of gravity and dance to kiss the ceiling. In a way, that is not human excellence. That is supernatural because real ballet depends upon gravity. You cannot try to escape to some other place. But the story seems to suggest you either must have everybody squashed down to the floor where the state holds them even lower than gravity would, or the only possible alternative is this kind of inhuman escape, and it seems to me that the truth is somewhere closer to the way we now live, where all the full range of human possibilities are there, partly weighted down with cares and failure, but with a real opportunity for a human success.

*For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.*

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**C. “Harrison Bergeron,” the Story**

1. With whom do you think Vonnegut sympathizes in the story? Does he present Harrison as a hero, or is the story heroless? Why?
2. What is being satirized in this story? Why do you think Vonnegut wrote it?
3. Is Vonnegut’s story finally a cautionary tale about the importance of freedom? Of individuality? Of excellence? Or is he aiming at something else?
4. What is the relation between the sort of equality attained in the story and the sort of equality that you regard as most important?

**IN CONVERSATION**

**Diana Schaub:** I did come across a little quote from Vonnegut where he indicated that the feelings that he put himself in touch with while he wrote this story were the feelings that he himself experienced as a boy in high school when he was not part of the in crowd. As a young person, Vonnegut was very aware of these feelings of envy and tapped into what might motivate both Hazel and Diana Moon Glampers. As an adult, then, he must have gained some perspective on those feelings, and so he really is writing a kind of dystopia of what political order would look like when motivated by envy.

**Amy Kass:** I think that if we take his socialism seriously, he is trying to show you that a socialist society would not necessarily look this ridiculous.

**Diana Schaub:** Right, because socialism would be motivated by some understanding of social justice. And I do not actually see any sort of real concern for social justice in this story; it just seems to be this hatred of excellence.

**Leon Kass:** Sometimes authors write a story with one intention, and the story they produce gets away from that intention. I do not think anybody reading the story today would say, “Here’s Vonnegut caricaturing those people who say that this is what socialism will look like. That’s what you people think is socialism—and that is not socialism.” So that is not the story we have. The story we have shows that the love of equality destroys all possible human excellence, and it produces souls without aspiration or longing. There is no love, and it absolutely dehumanizes people. That is the story Vonnegut has produced, and it should be chastening for us lovers of equality to wonder about whether the praise of equality in this day and age would not in a way lead us to countenance this, unless we are careful.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

**IV. Thinking with the Text**

Vonnegut’s satire invites us to think, first and foremost, about the implications of the pursuit of equality in relation to the American creed. But the way of life he depicts also invites us to think anew about the meaning and importance of the “American Dream,” and about whether technology helps or hinders the American character and our prospects for happiness.
A. Equality and the American Creed (For these questions, consider the story in conjunction with the Declaration of Independence, on page 50, and the Gettysburg Address, on page 72.)

1. What is the American ideal of equality as conceived in both the Declaration and the Gettysburg Address? Where does it come from, and what does it look like? Do the two documents differ? What does it mean when we say that “all men are created equal” or that they are all “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights” (Declaration of Independence)?

2. Is the society described in Vonnegut’s story a fulfillment of the American principle or ideal of equality or a perversion of that principle or ideal?

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: If you take your bearings from the Declaration of Independence—“all men are created equal”—I suspect that this society does not fit that idea. That idea seems to be coherent with a kind of political equality, but not the social equality that is enforced and insisted upon in this society.

Diana Schaub: Vonnegut is well aware of that distinction. In the opening lines, he says they were not only equal before God and the law, which I’d take to mean the original founding understanding of equality, but instead he says they were equal “every which way.” The fact that it takes the 211th, 212th, and 213th amendments to the US Constitution in order to achieve this seems to indicate the distance between the original principles and this distortion or perversion.

Leon Kass: But it did take the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to in fact make good on the principle of equality in those other respects. So you could say, look, the idea of all men being “created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” that is very good. But suppose somebody says, “I have the right to pursue happiness, but I do not have the opportunity do so.” You say, “All right, we will provide you with minimum education at public expense, we will be sure you are vaccinated and receive the minimum amount of health care so you are not harmed by your lack of health, and we will even provide you with unemployment compensation if you cannot get a job, and we do all this so that we help to improve your opportunity to seek happiness.” And it turns out that the real obstacle to your obtaining happiness has to do with the fact that you do not have the internal gifts to have happiness in a big sense. So somebody will say look, this right to pursue happiness, to enjoy happiness, that is all rather hollow unless I have the equipment to do so. And since you cannot give me the equipment to make me equal to the rest in the race of life, let us not just level the playing field, but let us level the players, let’s eliminate the game, and we can all go about our business and watch handicapped dancing on television.
James W. Ceaser: I would say that equality of opportunity, even if you bring people up to begin the race, is really a soft name for inequality. Equality of opportunity means you start at a certain point, the race begins at a certain point, but then the race results in vastly different outcomes—and that seems to be the original meaning of equality. It is almost an aristocratic principle, or it at least allows for great differences.

I’m not sure that all Americans accept this. A large number of people in Western society are sliding slowly toward this other view, that it is the equality of results that is important. And perhaps that is what this story points to—that at some point, slowly, slowly, slowly, two hundred amendments down the line, we are going to get there, unless we realize the different character of those principles. And not just the different character of these principles, because it is one thing to say it is yours by tradition, but you would have to say why one was better than another. That still remains.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

3. What is the relation between the kind of equality pursued in Vonnegut’s fictional society and the political idea of equality described in the Declaration of Independence or the democratic social and cultural ideal of equality discussed, for example, by Alexis de Tocqueville in Democracy in America? See, in particular, Volume II, Book 2, Chapter 1, “Why Democratic Nations Show a More Ardent and Enduring Love of Equality Than of Liberty”:

It is possible to imagine an extreme point at which freedom and equality would meet and blend. Let us suppose that all the people take a part in the government, and that each one of them has an equal right to take a part in it. As no one is different from his fellows, none can exercise a tyrannical power; men will be perfectly free because they are all entirely equal; and they will all be perfectly equal because they are entirely free. To this ideal state democratic nations tend. This is the only complete form that equality can assume upon earth; but there are a thousand others which, without being equally perfect, are not less cherished by those nations.

The principle of equality may be established in civil society without prevailing in the political world. There may be equal rights of indulging in the same pleasures, of entering the same professions, of frequenting the same places; in a word, of living in the same manner and seeking wealth by the same means, although all men do not take an equal share in the government. A kind of equality may even be established in the political world though there should be no political freedom there. A man may be the equal of all his countrymen save one, who is the master of all without distinction and who selects equally from among them all the agents of his power. Several other combinations might be
easily imagined by which very great equality would be united to institutions more or less free or even to institutions wholly without freedom.

4. Is the possession of a right to pursue happiness hollow if we lack the wherewithal to exercise it? Do the sharp divisions between haves and have-nots—whether of wealth, opportunity, or native gifts—render problematic in fact the American dedication to the proposition of human equality?

5. Why do Americans love equality? Should we? Can the desire for it ever be satisfied?

6. What do we owe those of our fellow citizens who are worse off through no fault of their own? What do we owe those of our fellow citizens who were dealt a poor hand of native gifts?

7. Is it true that a society riven by inequality—based especially on the inequality of talents—cannot cultivate the virtues required for citizenship and cannot retain the attachment of all of its citizens?

8. Does the love of equality (or the push for “social justice”), if pursued single-mindedly, implicitly accept the flattening of human possibility as an acceptable price to be paid for eliminating invidious distinctions, envy, resentments, and feelings of inferiority? If the two ideals—human excellence and equality—are in conflict, which one should we hold more dear? Must one be pursued at the expense of the other? Are there some areas in life in which we wish for equality more than human excellence and others we don’t?

9. In what way(s) or under what circumstances might the love of equality be compatible with competition? With the pursuit of excellence?

10. Can the private pursuit of happiness, in the absence of standards of excellence and of social judgments ranking better and worse paths to happiness, lead to a society in which all are equally debased?

B. The American Dream

1. The tagline for the 1995 movie version of “Harrison Bergeron” was: “All men are not created equal. It is the purpose of Government to make them so.” Under such a view, what happens to the “American Dream”—that anyone can rise and prosper as a result of hard work and the application of his or her God-given talents?

2. What happens to the American Dream if it should turn out that God-given talents are profoundly unequal in their allotment?

3. Is the love of material comfort and prosperity—and the possibility of socioeconomic mobility—in tension with a commitment to equality?

4. Is the American Dream fair or just?

5. Which should society reward and respect most: personal effort or actual accomplishment?

C. Technology and the American Character
1. Would you object if society sought equality not by handicapping the gifted but by lifting up the not gifted, say through genetic engineering or biotechnological enhancement?

IN CONVERSATION

**Amy Kass:** What if we leveled up in a very benign way? Instead of manipulating genes, we can just alter the food supply or recommend a certain kind of diet for all pregnant women so that the next generation through diet will have all the benefits of intelligence and brawn and so on. Would that be equally objectionable?

**Leon Kass:** Well, some people are born with wonderful teeth and do not get cavities, but we now fluoridate the water so that everybody can have teeth that get fewer cavities. While that is small change compared to the things that are talked about here, let’s assume that you really could lift up, without coercive means. Do we have objections to equalization of talents as such? Do we like the fact that some people are vastly more gifted than others? Or would you like a world in which everybody starts not only on a level playing field, but with the same internal equipment—and then you will find out what they will make of themselves? And the internal equipment includes, by the way, not just smarts, but drive, desire, will, and those sorts of things which make a telling difference with respect to the results.

**James W. Ceaser:** This brings us to the point where we are asking whether there is such a thing as nature or not. Whether there is some limit beyond which, even if we wished, we could not make happen without changing nature. It does seem to me that nature gives us these differences, or at least some of them, which cannot ever be eradicated. To alter this might be a hope that someone has in a fantasy, but which would fundamentally change everything we know about human beings and society and the world we have come to know. In some ways, it is almost a vain exercise to speculate, but if I had to choose, I would say no, I prefer to keep the world we live in.

*For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.*

2. In May 1961, about five months prior to the appearance of Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron,” Newton Minow, then chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, gave a memorable speech titled “Television and the Public Interest,” which challenged his audience as follows:

*I invite each of you to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air and stay there, for a day, without a book, without a magazine, without a newspaper, without a profit and loss sheet or rating*
book to distract you. Keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that what you will observe is a vast wasteland.

You will see a procession of game shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder . . . and cartoons. And endlessly commercials—many screaming, cajoling, and offending. And most of all boredom. True, you’ll see a few things you will enjoy. But they will be very, very, very few. And if you think I exaggerate, I only ask you to try it.

Since 1961, TV has grown in leaps and bounds, making Americans even more addicted to it than George and Hazel and their society were. But has it remained the “vast wasteland” that Vonnegut parodied and of which Minow spoke?

3. Do other technologies like the Internet, Twitter, or instant messaging improve the American character? Our prospects for happiness? If so, how? If not, why?
Enterprise and Commerce
The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg

MARK TWAIN

The principles of freedom and equality influence the character not only of individual Americans but also of our communal life, which, in turn, shapes us as individuals. For most Americans, the freedom to pursue happiness becomes a search for prosperity. The ensuing multiplication of economic interests, the Federalist’s solution to the problem of majority faction, can affect the character of citizens: benign acquisitiveness can grow into a worship of Mammon, selfishness, envy, and hardening of the heart, and can lead to civic division and class conflict. At the same time, the love of equality can lead toward homogeneity and conformity, through the rule of public opinion and the “tyranny of the majority.”

This story (1899) by satirist Mark Twain (born Samuel Langhorne Clemens, 1835–1910) is a biting commentary on American civic life. In Hadleyburg, Twain offers a microcosm of America as it appeared in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a time Twain dubbed “the Gilded Age.” Hadleyburg, a commercial town renowned for the honesty of its citizens, happens to offend a passing stranger—how, we are not told—who, bent on revenge, devises a plan to expose the hollowness of the town’s reputed virtue.

Twain’s hilarious account sheds serious light on several important phenomena, including the fragility of honesty under the prospect of gain; the tyranny of public opinion and the fickleness of the herd mentality; the gap between reputation and genuine virtue; and the foolish pride in untested virtue. What is the civic character of the citizens of Hadleyburg, and what is their conception of virtue and goodness? What is responsible for their “corruption”: the commercial republic, with its licensing of acquisitiveness; democratic equality; lack of worldly experience with temptation; insufficient or hypocritical piety; “human nature”; prideful “original sin”; the diabolical man—a Satan figure—who brings about the town’s fall from innocence? What can we learn from Twain’s exposé? Can laughter at others’ pretentiousness or hypocrisy moderate similar tendencies in ourselves? Or does it only make us feel superior to the laughed-at? Can humor provide a bond of society and encourage the virtues needed to sustain it?

I

It was many years ago. Hadleyburg was the most honest and upright town in all the region round about. It had kept that reputation unsmirched during three generations, and was prouder of it than of any other of its possessions. It was so proud of it, and so anxious to insure its perpetuation, that it began to teach the principles of honest dealing to its babies in the cradle, and made the like teachings the staple of their culture.

* As Tocqueville remarked, “At periods of equality men have no faith in one another, by reason of their common resemblance; but this very resemblance gives them almost unbounded confidence in the judgment of the public; for it would not seem probable, as they are all endowed with equal means of judging, but that the greater truth should go with the greater number.”
thenceforward through all the years devoted to their education. Also, throughout the formative years temptations were kept out of the way of the young people, so that their honesty could have every chance to harden and solidify, and become a part of their very bone. The neighboring towns were jealous of this honorable supremacy, and affected to sneer at Hadleyburg’s pride in it and call it vanity; but all the same they were obliged to acknowledge that Hadleyburg was in reality an incorruptible town; and if pressed they would also acknowledge that the mere fact that a young man hailed from Hadleyburg was all the recommendation he needed when he went forth from his natal town to seek for responsible employment.

But at last, in the drift of time, Hadleyburg had the ill luck to offend a passing stranger—possibly without knowing it, certainly without caring, for Hadleyburg was sufficient unto itself, and cared not a rap for strangers or their opinions. Still, it would have been well to make an exception in this one’s case, for he was a bitter man and revengeful. All through his wanderings during a whole year he kept his injury in mind, and gave all his leisure moments to trying to invent a compensating satisfaction for it. He contrived many plans, and all of them were good, but none of them was quite sweeping enough; the poorest of them would hurt a great many individuals, but what he wanted was a plan which would comprehend the entire town, and not let so much as one person escape unhurt. At last he had a fortunate idea, and when it fell into his brain it lit up his whole head with an evil joy. He began to form a plan at once, saying to himself, “That is the thing to do—I will corrupt the town.”

Six months later he went to Hadleyburg, and arrived in a buggy at the house of the old cashier of the bank about ten at night. He got a sack out of the buggy, shouldered it, and staggered with it through the cottage yard, and knocked at the door. A woman’s voice said “Come in,” and he entered, and set his sack behind the stove in the parlor, saying politely to the old lady who sat reading the Missionary Herald by the lamp:

“Pray keep your seat, madam, I will not disturb you. There—now it is pretty well concealed; one would hardly know it was there. Can I see your husband a moment, madam?”

No, he was gone to Brixton, and might not return before morning.

“Very well, madam, it is no matter. I merely wanted to leave that sack in his care, to be delivered to the rightful owner when he shall be found. I am a stranger; he does not know me; I am merely passing through the town tonight to discharge a matter which has been long in my mind. My errand is now completed, and I go pleased and a little proud, and you will never see me again. There is a paper attached to the sack which will explain everything. Good-night, madam.”

The old lady was afraid of the mysterious big stranger, and was glad to see him go. But her curiosity was roused, and she went straight to the sack and brought away the paper. It began as follows:
TO BE PUBLISHED; or, the right man sought out by private inquiry—either will answer. This sack contains gold coin weighing a hundred and sixty pounds four ounces—

“Mercy on us, and the door not locked!”

Mrs. Richards flew to it all in a tremble and locked it, then pulled down the window-shades and stood frightened, worried, and wondering if there was anything else she could do toward making herself and the money more safe. She listened awhile for burglars, then surrendered to curiosity and went back to the lamp and finished reading the paper:

I am a foreigner, and am presently going back to my own country, to remain there permanently. I am grateful to America for what I have received at her hands during my long stay under her flag; and to one of her citizens—a citizen of Hadleyburg—I am especially grateful for a great kindness done me a year or two ago. Two great kindnesses in fact. I will explain. I was a gambler. I say I was. I was a ruined gambler. I arrived in this village at night, hungry and without a penny. I asked for help—in the dark; I was ashamed to beg in the light. I begged of the right man. He gave me twenty dollars—that is to say, he gave me life, as I considered it. He also gave me fortune; for out of that money I have made myself rich at the gaming-table. And finally, a remark which he made to me has remained with me to this day, and has at last conquered me; and in conquering has saved the remnant of my morals: I shall gamble no more. Now I have no idea who that man was, but I want him found, and I want him to have this money, to give away, throw away, or keep, as he pleases. It is merely my way of testifying my gratitude to him. If I could stay, I would find him myself; but no matter, he will be found. This is an honest town, an incorruptible town, and I know I can trust it without fear. This man can be identified by the remark which he made to me; I feel persuaded that he will remember it.

And now my plan is this: If you prefer to conduct the inquiry privately, do so. Tell the contents of this present writing to any one who is likely to be the right man. If he shall answer, “I am the man; the remark I made was so-and-so,” apply the test—to wit: open the sack, and in it you will find a sealed envelope containing that remark. If the remark mentioned by the candidate tallies with it, give him the money, and ask no further questions, for he is certainly the right man.

But if you shall prefer a public inquiry, then publish this present writing in the local paper— with these instructions added, to wit: Thirty days from now, let the candidate appear at the town-hall at eight in the evening (Friday), and hand his remark, in a sealed envelope, to the Rev. Mr. Burgess (if he will be kind enough to act); and let Mr. Burgess there and then destroy the seals of the sack, open it, and see if the remark is correct; if correct, let the money be delivered, with my sincere gratitude, to my benefactor thus identified.
Mrs. Richards sat down, gently quivering with excitement, and was soon lost in thinkings—after this pattern: “What a strange thing it is! . . . And what a fortune for that kind man who set his bread afloat upon the waters! . . . If it had only been my husband that did it!—for we are so poor, so old and poor! . . .” Then, with a sigh—“But it was not my Edward; no, it was not he that gave a stranger twenty dollars. It is a pity too; I see it now. . . .” Then, with a shudder—“But it is gambler’s money! the wages of sin; we couldn’t take it; we couldn’t touch it. I don’t like to be near it; it seems a defilement.” She moved to a farther chair. . . . “I wish Edward would come, and take it to the bank; a burglar might come at any moment; it is dreadful to be here all alone with it.”

At eleven Mr. Richards arrived, and while his wife was saying, “I am so glad you’ve come!” he was saying, “I’m so tired—tired clear out; it is dreadful to be poor, and have to make these dismal journeys at my time of life. Always at the grind, grind, grind, on a salary—another man’s slave, and he sitting at home in his slippers, rich and comfortable.”

“I am so sorry for you, Edward, you know that; but be comforted; we have our livelihood; we have our good name—”

“Yes, Mary, and that is everything. Don’t mind my talk—it’s just a moment’s irritation and doesn’t mean anything. Kiss me—there, it’s all gone now, and I am not complaining any more. What have you been getting? What’s in the sack?”

Then his wife told him the great secret. It dazed him for a moment; then he said:

“It weighs a hundred and sixty pounds? Why, Mary, it’s for-ty thou-sand dollars—think of it—a whole fortune! Not ten men in this village are worth that much. Give me the paper.”

He skimmed through it and said:

“Isn’t it an adventure! Why, it’s a romance; it’s like the impossible things one reads about in books, and never sees in life.” He was well stirred up now; cheerful, even gleeful. He tapped his old wife on the cheek, and said humorously, “Why, we’re rich, Mary, rich; all we’ve got to do is to bury the money and burn the papers. If the gambler ever comes to inquire, we’ll merely look coldly upon him and say: ‘What is this nonsense you are talking? We have never heard of you and your sack of gold before’; and then he would look foolish, and—”

“And in the meantime, while you are running on with your jokes, the money is still here, and it is fast getting along toward burglar-time.”

“True. Very well, what shall we do—make the inquiry private? No, not that; it would spoil the romance. The public method is better. Think what a noise it will make! And it will make all the other towns jealous; for no stranger would trust such a thing to any town
but Hadleyburg, and they know it. It’s a great card for us. I must get to the printing-office now, or I shall be too late.”

“But stop—stop—don’t leave me here alone with it, Edward!”

But he was gone. For only a little while, however. Not far from his own house he met the editor-proprietor of the paper, and gave him the document, and said, “Here is a good thing for you, Cox—put it in.”

“It may be too late, Mr. Richards, but I’ll see.”

At home again he and his wife sat down to talk the charming mystery over; they were in no condition for sleep. The first question was, Who could the citizen have been who gave the stranger the twenty dollars? It seemed a simple one; both answered it in the same breath—

“Barclay Goodson.”

“Yes,” said Richards, “he could have done it, and it would have been like him, but there’s not another in the town.”

“Everybody will grant that, Edward—grant it privately, anyway. For six months, now, the village has been its own proper self once more—honest, narrow, self-righteous, and stingy.”

“It is what he always called it, to the day of his death—said it right out publicly, too.”

“Yes, and he was hated for it.”

“Oh, of course; but he didn’t care. I reckon he was the best-hated man among us, except the Reverend Burgess.”

“Well, Burgess deserves it—he will never get another congregation here. Mean as the town is, it knows how to estimate him. Edward, doesn’t it seem odd that the stranger should appoint Burgess to deliver the money?”

“Well, yes—it does. That is—that is—”

“Why so much that-is-ing? Would you select him?”

“Mary, maybe the stranger knows him better than this village does.”

“Much that would help Burgess!”
The husband seemed perplexed for an answer; the wife kept a steady eye upon him, and waited. Finally Richards said, with the hesitancy of one who is making a statement which is likely to encounter doubt,

“Mary, Burgess is not a bad man.”

His wife was certainly surprised.

“Nonsense!” she exclaimed.

“He is not a bad man. I know. The whole of his unpopularity had its foundation in that one thing—the thing that made so much noise.”

“That ‘one thing,’ indeed! As if that ‘one thing’ wasn’t enough, all by itself.”

“Plenty. Plenty. Only he wasn’t guilty of it.”

“How you talk! Not guilty of it! Everybody knows he was guilty.”

“Mary, I give you my word—he was innocent.”

“I can’t believe it, and I don’t. How do you know?”

“It is a confession. I am ashamed, but I will make it. I was the only man who knew he was innocent. I could have saved him, and—and—well, you know how the town was wrought up—I hadn’t the pluck to do it. It would have turned everybody against me. I felt mean, ever so mean; but I didn’t dare; I hadn’t the manliness to face that.”

Mary looked troubled, and for a while was silent. Then she said stammeringly:

“I—I don’t think it would have done for you to—to—One mustn’t—er—public opinion—one has to be so careful—so—” It was a difficult road, and she got mired; but after a little she got started again. “It was a great pity, but—Why, we couldn’t afford it, Edward—we couldn’t indeed. Oh, I wouldn’t have had you do it for anything!”

“It would have lost us the good-will of so many people, Mary; and then—and then—”

“What troubles me now is, what he thinks of us, Edward.”

“He? He doesn’t suspect that I could have saved him.”

“Oh,” exclaimed the wife, in a tone of relief, “I am glad of that. As long as he doesn’t know that you could have saved him, he—he—well that makes it a great deal better. Why, I might have known he didn’t know, because he is always trying to be friendly with us, as little encouragement as we give him. More than once people have twitted me with it. There’s the Wilsons, and the Wilcoxes, and the Harknesses, they take a mean pleasure
in saying, ‘Your friend Burgess,’ because they know it pesters me. I wish he wouldn’t persist in liking us so; I can’t think why he keeps it up.”

“I can explain it. It’s another confession. When the thing was new and hot, and the town made a plan to ride him on a rail, my conscience hurt me so that I couldn’t stand it, and I went privately and gave him notice, and he got out of the town and staid out till it was safe to come back.”

“Edward! If the town had found it out—”

“Don’t! It scares me yet, to think of it. I repented of it the minute it was done; and I was even afraid to tell you, lest your face might betray it to somebody. I didn’t sleep any that night, for worrying. But after a few days I saw that no one was going to suspect me, and after that I got to feeling glad I did it. And I feel glad yet, Mary—glad through and through.”

“So do I, now, for it would have been a dreadful way to treat him. Yes, I’m glad; for really you did owe him that, you know. But, Edward, suppose it should come out yet, some day!”

“It won’t.”

“Why?”

“Because everybody thinks it was Goodson.”

“Of course they would!”

“Certainly. And of course he didn’t care. They persuaded poor old Sawlsberry to go and charge it on him, and he went blustering over there and did it. Goodson looked him over, like as if he was hunting for a place on him that he could despise the most, then he says, ‘So you are the Committee of Inquiry, are you?’ Sawlsberry said that was about what he was. ‘Hm. Do they require particulars, or do you reckon a kind of a general answer will do?’ ‘If they require particulars, I will come back, Mr. Goodson; I will take the general answer first.’ ‘Very well, then, tell them to go to hell—I reckon that’s general enough. And I’ll give you some advice, Sawlsberry: when you come back for the particulars, fetch a basket to carry the relics of yourself home in.’”

“Just like Goodson; it’s got all the marks. He had only one vanity; he thought he could give advice better than any other person.”

“It settled the business, and saved us, Mary. The subject was dropped.”

“Bless you, I’m not doubting that.”
Then they took up the gold-sack mystery again, with strong interest. Soon the conversation began to suffer breaks—interruptions caused by absorbed thinkings. The breaks grew more and more frequent. At last Richards lost himself wholly in thought. He sat long, gazing vacantly at the floor, and by-and-by he began to punctuate his thoughts with little nervous movements of his hands that seemed to indicate vexation. Meantime his wife too had relapsed into a thoughtful silence, and her movements were beginning to show a troubled discomfort. Finally Richards got up and strode aimlessly about the room, ploughing his hands through his hair, much as a somnambulist might do who was having a bad dream. Then he seemed to arrive at a definite purpose; and without a word he put on his hat and passed quickly out of the house. His wife sat brooding, with a drawn face, and did not seem to be aware that she was alone. Now and then she murmured, “Lead us not into t. . . . but—but—we are so poor, so poor! . . . Lead us not into. . . . Ah, who would be hurt by it?—and no one would ever know. . . . Lead us. . . .” The voice died out in mumblings. After a little she glanced up and muttered in a half-frightened, half-glad way—

“He is gone! But, oh dear, he may be too late—too late. . . . Maybe not—maybe there is still time.” She rose and stood thinking, nervously clasping and unclasping her hands. A slight shudder shook her frame, and she said, out of a dry throat, “God forgive me—it’s awful to think such things—but. . . . Lord, how we are made—how strangely we are made!”

She turned the light low, and slipped stealthily over and kneeled down by the sack and felt of its ridgy sides with her hands, and fondled them lovingly; and there was a gloating light in her poor old eyes. She fell into fits of absence; and came half out of them at times to mutter, “If we had only waited!—oh, if we had only waited a little, and not been in such a hurry!”

Meantime Cox had gone home from his office and told his wife all about the strange thing that had happened, and they had talked it over eagerly, and guessed that the late Goodson was the only man in the town who could have helped a suffering stranger with so noble a sum as twenty dollars. Then there was a pause, and the two became thoughtful and silent. And by-and-by nervous and fidgety. At last the wife said, as if to herself,

“No one knows this secret but the Richardses. . . . and us. . . . nobody.”

The husband came out of his thinkings with a slight start, and gazed wistfully at his wife, whose face was become very pale; then he hesitatingly rose, and glanced furtively at his hat, then at his wife—a sort of mute inquiry. Mrs. Cox swallowed once or twice, with her hand at her throat, then in place of speech she nodded her head. In a moment she was alone, and mumbling to herself.

And now Richards and Cox were hurrying through the deserted streets, from opposite directions. They met, panting, at the foot of the printing-office stairs; by the night-light there they read each other’s face. Cox whispered,
“Nobody knows about this but us?”

The whispered answer was,

“Not a soul—on honor, not a soul!”

“If it isn’t too late to—”

The men were starting up stairs; at this moment they were overtaken by a boy, and Cox asked,

“I see that you, Johnny?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You needn’t ship the early mail—nor any mail; wait till I tell you.”

“It’s already gone, sir.”

“Gone?” It had the sound of an unspeakable disappointment in it.

“Yes, sir. Time-table for Brixton and all the towns beyond changed to-day, sir—had to get the papers in twenty minutes earlier than common. I had to rush; if I had been two minutes later—”

The men turned and walked slowly away, not waiting to hear the rest. Neither of them spoke during ten minutes; then Cox said, in a vexed tone,

“What possessed you to be in such a hurry, I can’t make out.”

The answer was humble enough:

“I see it now, but somehow I never thought, you know, until it was too late. But the next time—”

“Next time be hanged! It won’t come in a thousand years.”

Then the friends separated without a good-night, and dragged themselves home with the gait of mortally stricken men. At their homes their wives sprang up with an eager “Well?”—then saw the answer with their eyes and sank down sorrowing, without waiting for it to come in words. In both houses a discussion followed of a heated sort—a new thing; there had been discussions before, but not heated ones, not ungentle ones. The discussions to-night were a sort of seeming plagiarisms of each other. Mrs. Richards said:

“If you had only waited, Edward—if you had only stopped to think; but no, you must run straight to the printing-office and spread it all over the world.”
“It said publish it.”

“That is nothing; it also said do it privately, if you liked. There, now—is that true, or not?”

“Why, yes—yes, it is true; but when I thought what a stir it would make, and what a compliment it was to Hadleyburg that a stranger should trust it so—”

“Oh, certainly, I know all that; but if you had only stopped to think, you would have seen that you couldn’t find the right man, because he is in his grave, and hasn’t left chick nor child nor relation behind him; and as long as the money went to somebody that awfully needed it, and nobody would be hurt by it, and—and—”

She broke down, crying. Her husband tried to think of some comforting thing to say, and presently came out with this:

“But after all, Mary, it must be for the best—it must be; we know that. And we must remember that it was so ordered—”

“Ordered! Oh, everything’s ordered, when a person has to find some way out when he has been stupid. Just the same, it was ordered that the money should come to us in this special way, and it was you that must take it on yourself to go meddling with the designs of Providence—and who gave you the right? It was wicked, that is what it was—just blasphemous presumption, and no more becoming to a meek and humble professor of—”

“But, Mary, you know how we have been trained all our lives long, like the whole village, till it is absolutely second nature to us to stop not a single moment to think when there’s an honest thing to be done—”

“Oh, I know it, I know it—it’s been one everlasting training and training and training in honesty—honesty shielded, from the very cradle, against every possible temptation, and so it’s artificial honesty, and weak as water when temptation comes, as we have seen this night. God knows I never had shade nor shadow of a doubt of my petrified and indestructible honesty until now—and now, under the very first big and real temptation, I—Edward, it is my belief that this town’s honesty is as rotten as mine is; as rotten as yours is. It is a mean town, a hard, stingy town, and hasn’t a virtue in the world but this honesty it is so celebrated for and so conceited about; and so help me, I do believe that if ever the day comes that its honesty falls under great temptation, its grand reputation will go to ruin like a house of cards. There, now, I’ve made confession, and I feel better; I am a humbug, and I’ve been one all my life, without knowing it. Let no man call me honest again—I will not have it.”

“I—Well, Mary, I feel a good deal as you do; I certainly do. It seems strange, too, so strange. I never could have believed it—never.”
A long silence followed; both were sunk in thought. At last the wife looked up and said,

“I know what you are thinking, Edward.”

Richards had the embarrassed look of a person who is caught.

“I am ashamed to confess it, Mary, but—”

“It’s no matter, Edward, I was thinking the same question myself.”

“I hope so. State it.”

“You were thinking, if a body could only guess out what the remark was that Goodson made to the stranger.”

“It’s perfectly true. I feel guilty and ashamed. And you?”

“I’m past it. Let us make a pallet here; we’ve got to stand watch till the bank vault opens in the morning and admits the sack. . . . Oh, dear, oh, dear—if we hadn’t made the mistake!”

The pallet was made, and Mary said:

“The open sesame—what could it have been? I do wonder what that remark could have been. But come; we will get to bed now.”

“And sleep?”

“No; think.”

“Yes, think.”

By this time the Coxes too had completed their spat and their reconciliation, and were turning in—to think, to think, and toss, and fret, and worry over what the remark could possibly have been which Goodson made to the stranded derelict: that golden remark; that remark worth forty thousand dollars, cash.

The reason that the village telegraph-office was open later than usual that night was this: The foreman of Cox’s paper was the local representative of the Associated Press. One might say its honorary representative, for it wasn’t four times a year that he could furnish thirty words that would be accepted. But this time it was different. His despatch stating what he had caught got an instant answer:

“Send the whole thing—all the details—twelve hundred words.”
A colossal order! The foreman filled the bill; and he was the proudest man in the State. By breakfast-time the next morning the name of Hadleyburg the Incorruptible was on every lip in America, from Montreal to the Gulf, from the glaciers of Alaska to the orange-groves of Florida; and millions and millions of people were discussing the stranger and his money-sack, and wondering if the right man would be found, and hoping some more news about the matter would come soon—right away.

II

Hadleyburg village woke up world-celebrated—astonished—happy—vain. Vain beyond imagination. Its nineteen principal citizens and their wives went about shaking hands with each other, and beaming, and smiling, and congratulating, and saying this thing adds a new word to the dictionary—Hadleyburg, synonym for incorruptible—destined to live in dictionaries forever! And the minor and unimportant citizens and their wives went around acting in much the same way. Everybody ran to the bank to see the gold-sack; and before noon grieved and envious crowds began to flock in from Brixton and all neighboring towns; and that afternoon and next day reporters began to arrive from everywhere to verify the sack and its history and write the whole thing up anew, and make dashing free-hand pictures of the sack, and of Richards’s house, and the bank, and the Presbyterian church, and the Baptist church, and the public square, and the town-hall where the test would be applied and the money delivered; and damnable portraits of the Richardses, and Pinkerton the banker, and Cox, and the foreman, and Reverend Burgess, and the postmaster—and even of Jack Halliday, who was the loafing, good-natured, no-account, irreverent fisherman, hunter, boys’ friend, stray-dogs’ friend, typical “Sam Lawson” of the town. The little mean, smirking, oily Pinkerton showed the sack to all comers, and rubbed his sleek palms together pleasantly, and enlarged upon the town’s fine old reputation for honesty and upon this wonderful endorsement of it, and hoped and believed that the example would now spread far and wide over the American world, and be epoch-making in the matter of moral regeneration. And so on, and so on.

By the end of a week things had quieted down again; the wild intoxication of pride and joy had sobered to a soft, sweet, silent delight—a sort of deep, nameless, unutterable content. All faces bore a look of peaceful, holy happiness.

Then a change came. It was a gradual change: so gradual that its beginnings were hardly noticed; maybe were not noticed at all, except by Jack Halliday, who always noticed everything; and always made fun of it, too, no matter what it was. He began to throw out chaffing remarks about people not looking quite so happy as they did a day or two ago; and next he claimed that the new aspect was deepening to positive sadness; next, that it was taking on a sick look; and finally he said that everybody was become so moody, thoughtful, and absent-minded that he could rob the meanest man in town of a cent out of the bottom of his breeches pocket and not disturb his revery.

At this stage—or at about this stage—a saying like this was dropped at bedtime—with a sigh, usually—by the head of each of the nineteen principal households:
“Ah, what could have been the remark that Goodson made?”

And straightway—with a shudder—came this, from the man’s wife:

“Oh, don’t! What horrible thing are you mulling in your mind? Put it away from you, for God’s sake!”

But that question was wrung from those men again the next night—and got the same retort. But weaker.

And the third night the men uttered the question yet again—with anguish, and absently. This time—and the following night—the wives fidgeted feebly, and tried to say something. But didn’t.

And the night after that they found their tongues and responded—longingly,

“Oh, if we could only guess!”

Halliday’s comments grew daily more and more sparkingly disagreeable and disparaging. He went diligently about, laughing at the town, individually and in mass. But his laugh was the only one left in the village: it fell upon a hollow and mournful vacancy and emptiness. Not even a smile was findable anywhere. Halliday carried a cigar-box around on a tripod, playing that it was a camera, and halted all passers and aimed the thing and said, “Ready!—now look pleasant, please,” but not even this capital joke could surprise the dreary faces into any softening.

So three weeks passed—one week was left. It was Saturday evening—after supper. Instead of the aforetime Saturday-evening flutter and bustle and shopping and larking, the streets were empty and desolate. Richards and his old wife sat apart in their little parlor—miserable and thinking. This was become their evening habit now: the life-long habit which had preceded it, of reading, knitting, and contented chat, or receiving or paying neighborly calls, was dead and gone and forgotten, ages ago—two or three weeks ago; nobody talked now, nobody read, nobody visited—the whole village sat at home, sighing, worrying, silent. Trying to guess out that remark.

The postman left a letter. Richards glanced listlessly at the superscription and the post-mark—unfamiliar, both—and tossed the letter on the table and resumed his might-have-beens and his hopeless dull miseries where he had left them off. Two or three hours later his wife got wearily up and was going away to bed without a good-night—custom now—but she stopped near the letter and eyed it awhile with a dead interest, then broke it open, and began to skim it over. Richards, sitting there with his chair tilted back against the wall and his chin between his knees, heard something fall. It was his wife. He sprang to her side, but she cried out:

“Leave me alone, I am too happy. Read the letter—read it!”
He did. He devoured it, his brain reeling. The letter was from a distant State, and it
said:

I am a stranger to you, but no matter: I have something to tell. I have just arrived
home from Mexico, and learned about that episode. Of course you do not know
who made that remark, but I know, and I am the only person living who does
know. It was Goodson. I knew him well, many years ago. I passed through your
village that very night, and was his guest till the midnight train came along. I
overheard him make that remark to the stranger in the dark—it was in Hale Alley.
He and I talked of it the rest of the way home, and while smoking in his house. He
mentioned many of your villagers in the course of his talk—most of them in a
very uncomplimentary way, but two or three favorably: among these latter
yourself. I say “favorably”—nothing stronger. I remember his saying he did not
actually like any person in the town—not one; but that you—I think he said you—
am almost sure—had done him a very great service once, possibly without
knowing the full value of it, and he wished he had a fortune, he would leave it to
you when he died, and a curse apiece for the rest of the citizens. Now, then, if it
was you that did him that service, you are his legitimate heir, and entitled to the
sack of gold. I know that I can trust to your honor and honesty, for in a citizen of
Hadleyburg these virtues are an unfailing inheritance, and so I am going to reveal
to you the remark, well satisfied that if you are not the right man you will seek
and find the right one and see that poor Goodson’s debt of gratitude for the
service referred to is paid. This is the remark: “You are far from being a bad man:
go, and reform.”

Howard L. Stephenson.

“Oh, Edward, the money is ours, and I am so grateful, oh, so grateful—kiss me, dear,
it’s forever since we kissed—and we needed it so—the money—and now you are free of
Pinkerton and his bank, and nobody’s slave any more; it seems to me I could fly for joy.”

It was a happy half-hour that the couple spent there on the settee caressing each other;
it was the old days come again—days that had begun with their courtship and lasted
without a break till the stranger brought the deadly money. By-and-by the wife said:

“Oh, Edward, how lucky it was you did him that grand service, poor Goodson! I
never liked him, but I love him now. And it was fine and beautiful of you never to
mention it or brag about it.” Then, with a touch of reproach, “But you ought to have told
me, Edward, you ought to have told your wife, you know.”

“Well, I—er—well, Mary, you see—”

“Now stop hemming and hawing, and tell me about it, Edward. I always loved you,
and now I’m proud of you. Everybody believes there was only one good generous soul in
this village, and now it turns out that you—Edward, why don’t you tell me?”
“Well—er—er—Why, Mary, I can’t!”

“You can’t? Why can’t you?”

“You see, he—well, he—he made me promise I wouldn’t.”

The wife looked him over, and said, very slowly,

“Made—you—promise? Edward, what do you tell me that for?”

“Mary, do you think I would lie?”

She was troubled and silent for a moment, then she laid her hand within his and said:

“No. . . no. We have wandered far enough from our bearings—God spare us that! In all your life you have never uttered a lie. But now—now that the foundations of things seem to be crumbling from under us, we—we—” She lost her voice for a moment, then said, brokenly, “Lead us not into temptation. . . . I think you made the promise, Edward. Let it rest so. Let us keep away from that ground. Now—that is all gone by; let us be happy again; it is no time for clouds.”

Edward found it something of an effort to comply, for his mind kept wandering—trying to remember what the service was that he had done Goodson.

The couple lay awake the most of the night, Mary happy and busy, Edward busy, but not so happy. Mary was planning what she would do with the money. Edward was trying to recall that service. At first his conscience was sore on account of the lie he had told Mary—if it was a lie. After much reflection—suppose it was a lie? What then? Was it such a great matter? Aren’t we always acting lies? Then why not tell them? Look at Mary—look what she had done. While he was hurrying off on his honest errand, what was she doing? Lamenting because the papers hadn’t been destroyed and the money kept. Is theft better than lying?

That point lost its sting—the lie dropped into the background and left comfort behind it. The next point came to the front: had he rendered that service? Well, here was Goodson’s own evidence as reported in Stephenson’s letter; there could be no better evidence than that—it was even proof that he had rendered it. Of course. So that point was settled . . . No, not quite. He recalled with a wince that this unknown Mr. Stephenson was just a trifle unsure as to whether the performer of it was Richards or some other—and, oh dear, he had put Richards on his honor! He must himself decide whither that money must go—and Mr. Stephenson was not doubting that if he was the wrong man he would go honorably and find the right one. Oh, it was odious to put a man in such a situation—ah, why couldn’t Stephenson have left out that doubt? What did he want to intrude that for?
Further reflection. How did it happen that Richards’s name remained in Stephenson’s mind as indicating the right man, and not some other man’s name? That looked good. Yes, that looked very good. In fact, it went on looking better and better, straight along—until by-and-by it grew into positive proof. And then Richards put the matter at once out of his mind, for he had a private instinct that a proof once established is better left so.

He was feeling reasonably comfortable now, but there was still one other detail that kept pushing itself on his notice: of course he had done that service—that was settled; but what was that service? He must recall it—he would not go to sleep till he had recalled it; it would make his peace of mind perfect. And so he thought and thought. He thought of a dozen things—possible services, even probable services—but none of them seemed adequate, none of them seemed large enough, none of them seemed worth the money—worth the fortune Goodson had wished he could leave in his will. And besides, he couldn’t remember having done them, anyway. Now, then—now, then—what kind of a service would it be that would make a man so inordinately grateful? Ah—the saving of his soul! That must be it. Yes, he could remember, now, how he once set himself the task of converting Goodson, and labored at it as much as—he was going to say three months; but upon closer examination it shrunk to a month, then to a week, then to a day, then to nothing. Yes, he remembered, now, and with unwelcome vividness, that Goodson had told him to go to thunder and mind his own business—he wasn’t hankering to follow Hadleyburg to heaven!

So that solution was a failure—he hadn’t saved Goodson’s soul. Richards was discouraged. Then after a little came another idea: had he saved Goodson’s property? No, that wouldn’t do—he hadn’t any. His life? That is it! Of course. Why, he might have thought of it before. This time he was on the right track, sure. His imagination-mill was hard at work in a minute, now.

Thereafter during a stretch of two exhausting hours he was busy saving Goodson’s life. He saved it in all kinds of difficult and perilous ways. In every case he got it saved satisfactorily up to a certain point; then, just as he was beginning to get well persuaded that it had really happened, a troublesome detail would turn up which made the whole thing impossible. As in the matter of drowning, for instance. In that case he had swum out and tugged Goodson ashore in an unconscious state with a great crowd looking on and applauding, but when he had got it all thought out and was just beginning to remember all about it a whole swarm of disqualifying details arrived on the ground: the town would have known of the circumstance, Mary would have known of it, it would glare like a limelight in his own memory instead of being an inconspicuous service which he had possibly rendered “without knowing its full value.” And at this point he remembered that he couldn’t swim, anyway.

Ah—there was a point which he had been overlooking from the start: it had to be a service which he had rendered “possibly without knowing the full value of it.” Why, really, that ought to be an easy hunt—much easier than those others. And sure enough, by-and-by he found it. Goodson, years and years ago, came near marrying a very sweet and pretty girl, named Nancy Hewitt, but in some way or other the match had been
broken off; the girl died, Goodson remained a bachelor, and by-and-by became a soured one and a frank despiser of the human species. Soon after the girl’s death the village found out, or thought it had found out, that she carried a spoonful of negro blood in her veins. Richards worked at these details a good while, and in the end he thought he remembered things concerning them which must have gotten mislaid in his memory through long neglect. He seemed to dimly remember that it was he that found out about the negro blood; that it was he that told the village; that the village told Goodson where they got it; that he thus saved Goodson from marrying the tainted girl; that he had done him this great service “without knowing the full value of it,” in fact without knowing that he was doing it; but that Goodson knew the value of it, and what a narrow escape he had had, and so went to his grave grateful to his benefactor and wishing he had a fortune to leave him. It was all clear and simple now, and the more he went over it the more luminous and certain it grew; and at last, when he nestled to sleep satisfied and happy, he remembered the whole thing just as if it had been yesterday. In fact, he dimly remembered Goodson’s telling him his gratitude once. Meantime Mary had spent six thousand dollars on a new house for herself and a pair of slippers for her pastor, and then had fallen peacefully to rest.

That same Saturday evening the postman had delivered a letter to each of the other principal citizens—nineteen letters in all. No two of the envelopes were alike, and no two of the superscriptions were in the same hand, but the letters inside were just like each other in every detail but one. They were exact copies of the letter received by Richards—handwriting and all—and were all signed by Stephenson, but in place of Richards’s name each receiver’s own name appeared.

All night long eighteen principal citizens did what their caste-brother Richards was doing at the same time—they put in their energies trying to remember what notable service it was that they had unconsciously done Barclay Goodson. In no case was it a holiday job; still they succeeded.

And while they were at this work, which was difficult, their wives put in the night spending the money, which was easy. During that one night the nineteen wives spent an average of seven thousand dollars each out of the forty thousand in the sack—a hundred and thirty-three thousand altogether.

Next day there was a surprise for Jack Halliday. He noticed that the faces of the nineteen chief citizens and their wives bore that expression of peaceful and holy happiness again. He could not understand it, neither was he able to invent any remarks about it that could damage it or disturb it. And so it was his turn to be dissatisfied with life. His private guesses at the reasons for the happiness failed in all instances, upon examination. When he met Mrs. Wilcox and noticed the placid ecstasy in her face, he said to himself, “Her cat has had kittens”—and went and asked the cook; it was not so, the cook had detected the happiness, but did not know the cause. When Halliday found the duplicate ecstasy in the face of “Shadbelly” Billson (village nickname), he was sure some neighbor of Billson’s had broken his leg, but inquiry showed that this had not happened. The subdued ecstasy in Gregory Yates’s face could mean but one thing—he
was a mother-in-law short; it was another mistake. “And Pinkerton—Pinkerton—he has collected ten cents that he thought he was going to lose.” And so on, and so on. In some cases the guesses had to remain in doubt, in the others they proved distinct errors. In the end Halliday said to himself, “Anyway it foots up that there’s nineteen Hadleyburg families temporarily in heaven; I don’t know how it happened; I only know Providence is off duty to-day.”

An architect and builder from the next State had lately ventured to set up a small business in this unpromising village, and his sign had now been hanging out a week. Not a customer yet; he was a discouraged man, and sorry he had come. But his weather changed suddenly now. First one and then another chief citizen’s wife said to him privately:

“Come to my house Monday week—but say nothing about it for the present. We think of building.”

He got eleven invitations that day. That night he wrote his daughter and broke off her match with her student. He said she could marry a mile higher than that.

Pinkerton the banker and two or three other well-to-do men planned country-seats—but waited. That kind don’t count their chickens until they are hatched.

The Wilsons devised a grand new thing—a fancy-dress ball. They made no actual promises, but told all their acquaintance in confidence that they were thinking the matter over and thought they should give it—and if we do, you will be invited, of course.” People were surprised, and said, one to another, “Why, they are crazy, those poor Wilsons, they can’t afford it.” Several among the nineteen said privately to their husbands, “It is a good idea; we will keep still till their cheap thing is over, then we will give one that will make it sick.”

The days drifted along, and the bill of future squanderings rose higher and higher, wilder and wilder, more and more foolish and reckless. It began to look as if every member of the nineteen would not only spend his whole forty thousand dollars before receiving-day, but be actually in debt by the time he got the money. In some cases light-headed people did not stop with planning to spend, they really spent—on credit. They bought land, mortgages, farms, speculative stocks, fine clothes, horses, and various other things, paid down the bonus, and made themselves liable for the rest—at ten days. Presently the sober second thought came, and Halliday noticed that a ghastly anxiety was beginning to show up in a good many faces. Again he was puzzled, and didn’t know what to make of it. “The Wilcox kittens aren’t dead, for they weren’t born; nobody’s broken a leg; there’s no shrinkage in mother-in-laws; nothing has happened—it is an insolvable mystery.”

There was another puzzled man, too—the Rev. Mr. Burgess. For days, wherever he went, people seemed to follow him or to be watching out for him; and if he ever found himself in a retired spot, a member of the nineteen would be sure to appear, thrust an
envelope privately into his hand, whisper “To be opened at the town-hall Friday evening,” then vanish away like a guilty thing. He was expecting that there might be one claimant for the sack—doubtful, however, Goodson being dead—but it never occurred to him that all this crowd might be claimants. When the great Friday came at last, he found that he had nineteen envelopes.

III

The town-hall had never looked finer. The platform at the end of it was backed by a showy draping of flags; at intervals along the walls were festoons of flags; the gallery fronts were clothed in flags; the supporting columns were swathed in flags; all this was to impress the stranger, for he would be there in considerable force, and in a large degree he would be connected with the press. The house was full. The 412 fixed seats were occupied; also the 68 extra chairs which had been packed into the aisles; the steps of the platform were occupied; some distinguished strangers were given seats on the platform; at the horseshoe of tables which fenced the front and sides of the platform sat a strong force of special correspondents who had come from everywhere. It was the best-dressed house the town had ever produced. There were some tolerably expensive toilets there, and in several cases the ladies who wore them had the look of being unfamiliar with that kind of clothes. At least the town thought they had that look, but the notion could have arisen from the town’s knowledge of the fact that these ladies had never inhabited such clothes before.

The gold-sack stood on a little table at the front of the platform where all the house could see it. The bulk of the house gazed at it with a burning interest, a mouth-watering interest, a wistful and pathetic interest; a minority of nineteen couples gazed at it tenderly, lovingly, proprietarily, and the male half of this minority kept saying over to themselves the moving little impromptu speeches of thankfulness for the audience’s applause and congratulations which they were presently going to get up and deliver. Every now and then one of these got a piece of paper out of his vest pocket and privately glanced at it to refresh his memory.

Of course there was a buzz of conversation going on—there always is; but at last, when the Rev. Mr. Burgess rose and laid his hand on the sack he could hear his microbes gnaw, the place was so still. He related the curious history of the sack, then went on to speak in warm terms of Hadleyburg’s old and well-earned reputation for spotless honesty, and of the town’s just pride in this reputation. He said that this reputation was a treasure of priceless value; that under Providence its value had now become inestimably enhanced, for the recent episode had spread this fame far and wide, and thus had focused the eyes of the American world upon this village, and made its name for all time, as he hoped and believed, a synonym for commercial incorruptibility. (Applause.) “And who is to be the guardian of this noble treasure—the community as a whole? No! The responsibility is individual, not communal. From this day forth each and every one of you is in his own person its special guardian, and individually responsible that no harm shall come to it. Do you—does each of you—accept this great trust? [Tumultuous assent.] Then all is well. Transmit it to your children and to your children’s children. To-day your
purity is beyond reproach—see to it that it shall remain so. To-day there is not a person in your community who could be beguiled to touch a penny not his own—see to it that you abide in this grace. ["We will! we will!"] This is not the place to make comparisons between ourselves and other communities—some of them ungracious towards us; they have their ways, we have ours; let us be content. [Applause.] I am done. Under my hand, my friends, rests a stranger’s eloquent recognition of what we are; through him the world will always henceforth know what we are. We do not know who he is, but in your name I utter your gratitude, and ask you to raise your voices in indorsement."

The house rose in a body and made the walls quake with the thunders of its thankfulness for the space of a long minute. Then it sat down, and Mr. Burgess took an envelope out of his pocket. The house held its breath while he slit the envelope open and took from it a slip of paper. He read its contents—slowly and impressively—the audience listening with tranced attention to this magic document, each of whose words stood for an ingot of gold:

"The remark which I made to the distressed stranger was this: "You are very far from being a bad man; go, and reform."" Then he continued: "We shall know in a moment now whether the remark here quoted corresponds with the one concealed in the sack; and if that shall prove to be so—and it undoubtedly will—this sack of gold belongs to a fellow-citizen who will henceforth stand before the nation as the symbol of the special virtue which has made our town famous throughout the land—Mr. Billson!"

The house had gotten itself all ready to burst into the proper tornado of applause; but instead of doing it, it seemed stricken with a paralysis; there was a deep hush for a moment or two, then a wave of whispered murmurs swept the place—of about this tenor: "Billson! oh, come, this is too thin! Twenty dollars to a stranger—or anybody—Billson! Tell it to the marines!" And now at this point the house caught its breath all of a sudden in a new access of astonishment, for it discovered that whereas in one part of the hall Deacon Billson was standing up with his head meekly bowed, in another part of it Lawyer Wilson was doing the same. There was a wondering silence now for a while. Everybody was puzzled, and nineteen couples were surprised and indignant.

Billson and Wilson turned and stared at each other. Billson asked, bitingly:

"Why do you rise, Mr. Wilson?"

"Because I have a right to. Perhaps you will be good enough to explain to the house why you rise."

"With great pleasure. Because I wrote that paper."

"It is an impudent falsity! I wrote it myself."
It was Burgess’s turn to be paralyzed. He stood looking vacantly at first one of the men and then the other, and did not seem to know what to do. The house was stupefied. Lawyer Wilson spoke up, now, and said,

“I ask the Chair to read the name signed to that paper.”

That brought the Chair to itself, and it read out the name,

“John Wharton Billson.”

“There!” shouted Billson, “what have you got to say for yourself now? And what kind of apology are you going to make to me and to this insulted house for the imposture which you have attempted to play here?”

“No apologies are due, sir; and as for the rest of it, I publicly charge you with pilfering my note from Mr. Burgess and substituting a copy of it signed with your own name. There is no other way by which you could have gotten hold of the test-remark; I alone, of living men, possessed the secret of its wording.”

There was likely to be a scandalous state of things if this went on; everybody noticed with distress that the shorthand scribes were scribbling like mad; many people were crying “Chair, Chair! Order! order!” Burgess rapped with his gavel, and said:

“Let us not forget the proprieties due. There has evidently been a mistake somewhere, but surely that is all. If Mr. Wilson gave me an envelope—and I remember now that he did—I still have it.”

He took one out of his pocket, opened it, glanced at it, looked surprised and worried, and stood silent a few moments. Then he waved his hand in a wandering and mechanical way, and made an effort or two to say something, then gave it up, despondently. Several voices cried out:

“Read it! read it! What is it?”

So he began, in a dazed and sleep-walker fashion:

“The remark which I made to the unhappy stranger was this: “You are far from being a bad man. [The house gazed at him, marvelling.] Go, and reform.” [Murmurs: “Amazing! what can this mean?”] This one,” said the Chair, “is signed Thurlow G. Wilson.”

“There!” cried Wilson, “I reckon that settles it! I knew perfectly well my note was purloined.”

“Purloined!” retorted Billson. “I’ll let you know that neither you nor any man of your kidney must venture to—”
The Chair: “Order, gentlemen, order! Take your seats, both of you, please.”

They obeyed, shaking their heads and grumbling angrily. The house was profoundly puzzled; it did not know what to do with this curious emergency. Presently Thompson got up. Thompson was the hatter. He would have liked to be a Nineteener; but such was not for him; his stock of hats was not considerable enough for the position. He said:

“Mr. Chairman, if I may be permitted to make a suggestion, can both of these gentlemen be right? I put it to you, sir, can both have happened to say the very same words to the stranger? It seems to me—”

The tanner got up and interrupted him. The tanner was a disgruntled man; he believed himself entitled to be a Nineteener, but he couldn’t get recognition. It made him a little unpleasant in his ways and speech. Said he:

“Sho, that’s not the point! That could happen—twice in a hundred years—but not the other thing. Neither of them gave the twenty dollars!” (A ripple of applause.)

Billson. “I did!”

Wilson. “I did!”

Then each accused the other of pilfering.

The Chair. “Order! Sit down, if you please—both of you. Neither of the notes has been out of my possession at any moment.”

A Voice. “Good—that settles that!”

The Tanner. “Mr. Chairman, one thing is now plain: one of these men has been eavesdropping under the other one’s bed, and filching family secrets. If it is not unparliamentary to suggest it, I will remark that both are equal to it. [The Chair. “Order! order!”] I withdraw the remark, sir, and will confine myself to suggesting that if one of them has overheard the other reveal the test-remark to his wife, we shall catch him now.”

A Voice. “How?”

The Tanner. “Easily. The two have not quoted the remark in exactly the same words. You would have noticed that, if there hadn’t been a considerable stretch of time and an exciting quarrel inserted between the two readings.”

A Voice. “Name the difference.”

The Tanner. “The word very is in Billson’s note, and not in the other.”

Many Voices. “That’s so—he’s right!”
"The Tanner. "And so, if the Chair will examine the test-remark in the sack, we shall know which of these two frauds—[The Chair. "Order!"]—which of these two adventurers—[The Chair. "Order! order!"]—which of these two gentlemen—[laughter and applause]—is entitled to wear the belt as being the first dishonest blatherskite ever bred in this town—which he has dishonored, and which will be a sultry place for him from now out!" [Vigorous applause.]

Many Voices. "Open it!—open the sack!"

Mr. Burgess made a slit in the sack, slid his hand in, and brought out an envelope. In it were a couple of folded notes. He said:

"One of these is marked, 'Not to be examined until all written communications which have been addressed to the Chair—if any—shall have been read.' The other is marked 'The Test.' Allow me. It is worded—to wit:

"'I do not require that the first half of the remark which was made to me by my benefactor shall be quoted with exactness, for it was not striking, and could be forgotten; but its closing fifteen words are quite striking, and I think easily rememberable; unless these shall be accurately reproduced, let the applicant be regarded as an impostor. My benefactor began by saying he seldom gave advice to any one, but that it always bore the hall-mark of high value when he did give it. Then he said this—and it has never faded from my memory: 'You are far from being a bad man—'"


People jumped up and crowded around Wilson, wringing his hand and congratulating fervently—meantime the Chair was hammering with the gavel and shouting:

"Order, gentlemen! Order! Order! Let me finish reading, please." When quiet was restored, the reading was resumed—as follows:

"'Go, and reform—or, mark my words—some day, for your sins, you will die and go to Hell or Hadleyburg—TRY AND MAKE IT THE FORMER.'"

A ghastly silence followed. First an angry cloud began to settle darkly upon the faces of the citizenship; after a pause the cloud began to rise, and a tickled expression tried to take its place; tried so hard that it was only kept under with great and painful difficulty; the reporters, the Brixtonites, and other strangers bent their heads down and shielded their faces with their hands, and managed to hold in by main strength and heroic courtesy. At this most inopportune time burst upon the stillness the roar of a solitary voice—Jack Halliday's:

"That's got the hall-mark on it!"
Then the house let go, strangers and all. Even Mr. Burgess’s gravity broke down presently, then the audience considered itself officially absolved from all restraint, and it made the most of its privilege. It was a good long laugh, and a tempestuously whole-hearted one, but it ceased at last—long enough for Mr. Burgess to try to resume, and for the people to get their eyes partially wiped; then it broke out again; and afterward yet again; then at last Burgess was able to get out these serious words:

“It is useless to try to disguise the fact—we find ourselves in the presence of a matter of grave import. It involves the honor of your town—it strikes at the town’s good name. The difference of a single word between the test-remarks offered by Mr. Wilson and Mr. Billson was itself a serious thing, since it indicated that one or the other of these gentlemen had committed a theft—”

The two men were sitting limp, nerveless, crushed; but at these words both got up—

“Sit down!” said the Chair, sharply, and they obeyed. “That, as I have said, was a serious thing. And it was—but for only one of them. But the matter has become graver; for the honor of both is now in formidable peril. Shall I go even further, and say in inextricable peril? Both left out the crucial fifteen words.” He paused. During several moments he allowed the pervading stillness to gather and deepen its impressive effects, then added: “There would seem to be but one way whereby this could happen. I ask these gentlemen—Was there collusion?—agreement?”

A low murmur sifted through the house; its import was, “He’s got them both.”

Billson was not used to emergencies; he sat in a helpless collapse. But Wilson was a lawyer. He struggled to his feet, pale and worried, and said:

“I ask the indulgence of the house while I explain this most painful matter. I am sorry to say what I am about to say, since it must inflict irreparable injury upon Mr. Billson, whom I have always esteemed and respected until now, and in whose invulnerability to temptation I entirely believed—as did you all. But for the preservation of my own honor I must speak—and with frankness. I confess with shame—and I now beseech your pardon for it—that I said to the ruined stranger all of the words contained in the test-remark, including the disparaging fifteen. [Sensation.] When the late publication was made I recalled them, and I resolved to claim the sack of coin, for by every right I was entitled to it. Now I will ask you to consider this point, and weigh it well: that stranger’s gratitude to me that night knew no bounds; he said himself that he could find no words for it that were adequate, and that if he should ever be able he would repay me a thousandfold. Now, then, I ask you this: could I expect—could I believe—could I even remotely imagine—that, feeling as he did, he would do so ungrateful a thing as to add those quite unnecessary fifteen words to his test?—set a trap for me?—expose me as a slanderer of my own town before my own people assembled in a public hall? It was preposterous; it was impossible. His test would contain only the kindly opening clause of my remark. Of that I had no shadow of doubt. You would have thought as I did. You would not have
expected a base betrayal from one whom you had befriended and against whom you had committed no offence. And so, with perfect confidence, perfect trust, I wrote on a piece of paper the opening words—ending with ‘Go, and reform,’—and signed it. When I was about to put it in an envelope I was called into my back office, and without thinking I left the paper lying open on my desk.” He stopped, turned his head slowly toward Billson, waited a moment, then added: “I ask you to note this: when I returned, a little later, Mr. Billson was retiring by my street door.” (Sensation.)

In a moment Billson was on his feet and shouting:

“It’s a lie! It’s an infamous lie!”

The Chair. “Be seated, sir! Mr. Wilson has the floor.”

Billson’s friends pulled him into his seat and quieted him, and Wilson went on:

“Those are the simple facts. My note was now lying in a different place on the table from where I had left it. I noticed that, but attached no importance to it, thinking a draught had blown it there. That Mr. Billson would read a private paper was a thing which could not occur to me; he was an honorable man, and he would be above that. If you will allow me to say it, I think his extra word ‘very’ stands explained; it is attributable to a defect of memory. I was the only man in the world who could furnish here any detail of the test-mark—by honorable means. I have finished.”

There is nothing in the world like a persuasive speech to fuddle the mental apparatus and upset the convictions and debauch the emotions of an audience not practised in the tricks and delusions of oratory. Wilson sat down victorious. The house submerged him in tides of approving applause; friends swarmed to him and shook him by the hand and congratulated him, and Billson was shouted down and not allowed to say a word. The Chair hammered and hammered with its gavel, and kept shouting,

“But let us proceed, gentlemen, let us proceed!”

At last there was a measurable degree of quiet, and the hatter said,

“But what is there to proceed with, sir, but to deliver the money?”

Voices. “That’s it! That’s it! Come forward, Wilson!”

The Hatter. “I move three cheers for Mr. Wilson, Symbol of the special virtue which—”

The cheers burst forth before he could finish; and in the midst of them—and in the midst of the clamor of the gavel also—some enthusiasts mounted Wilson on a big friend’s shoulder and were going to fetch him in triumph to the platform. The Chair’s voice now rose above the noise—
“Order! To your places! You forget that there is still a document to be read.” When quiet had been restored he took up the document, and was going to read it, but laid it down again, saying, “I forgot; this is not to be read until all written communications received by me have first been read.” He took an envelope out of his pocket, removed its enclosure, glanced at it—seemed astonished—held it out and gazed at it—stared at it.

Twenty or thirty voices cried out:

“What is it? Read it! read it!”

And he did—slowly, and wondering:

“‘The remark which I made to the stranger—[Voices. “Hello! how’s this?”]—was this: ‘You are far from being a bad man. [Voices. “Great Scott!”] Go, and reform.’” [Voice. “Oh, saw my leg off!”] Signed by Mr. Pinkerton the banker.”

The pandemonium of delight which turned itself loose now was of a sort to make the judicious weep. Those whose withers were unwrung laughed till the tears ran down; the reporters, in throes of laughter, set down disordered pot-hooks which would never in the world be decipherable; and a sleeping dog jumped up, scared out of its wits, and barked itself crazy at the turmoil. All manner of cries were scattered through the din: “We’re getting rich—two Symbols of Incorruptibility!—without counting Billson!” “Three!—count Shadbelly in—we can’t have too many!” “All right—Billson’s elected!” “Alas, poor Wilson—victim of two thieves!”

A Powerful Voice. “Silence! The Chair’s fished up something more out of its pocket.”

Voices. “Hurrah! Is it something fresh? Read it! read! read!”

The Chair (reading). “‘The remark which I made,’ etc. ‘You are far from being a bad man. Go,’ etc. Signed, ‘Gregory Yates.’”

Tornado of Voices. “Four Symbols!” “‘Rah for Yates!’ “Fish again!”

The house was in a roaring humor now, and ready to get all the fun out of the occasion that might be in it. Several Nineteeners, looking pale and distressed, got up and began to work their way toward the aisles, but a score of shouts went up:

“The doors, the doors—close the doors; no Incorruptible shall leave this place! Sit down, everybody!”

The mandate was obeyed.

“Fish again! Read! read!”
The Chair fished again, and once more the familiar words began to fall from its lips—
"You are far from being a bad man—"

"Name! name! What’s his name?"

"L. Ingoldsby Sargent."

“Five elected! Pile up the Symbols! Go on, go on!”

“Name! name!”

“Nicholas Whitworth."

“Hooray! hooray! it’s a symbolical day!”

Somebody wailed in, and began to sing this rhyme (leaving out “it’s”) to the lovely Mikado tune of “When a man’s afraid of a beautiful maid”; the audience joined in, with joy; then, just in time, somebody contributed another line—

“And don’t you this forget—"

The house roared it out. A third line was at once furnished—

“Corruptibles far from Hadleyburg are—"

The house roared that one too. As the last note died, Jack Halliday’s voice rose high and clear, freighted with a final line—

“But the Symbols are here, you bet!”

That was sung, with booming enthusiasm. Then the happy house started in at the beginning and sang the four lines through twice, with immense swing and dash, and finished up with a crashing three-times-three and a tiger for “Hadleyburg the Incorruptible and all Symbols of it which we shall find worthy to receive the hall-mark to-night.”

Then the shoutings at the Chair began again, all over the place:

“Go on! go on! Read! read some more! Read all you’ve got!”

“That’s it—go on! We are winning eternal celebrity!”
A dozen men got up now and began to protest. They said that this farce was the work of some abandoned joker, and was an insult to the whole community. Without a doubt these signatures were all forgeries—

“Sit down! sit down! Shut up! You are confessing. We’ll find your names in the lot.”

“Mr. Chairman, how many of those envelopes have you got?”

The Chair counted.

“Together with those that have been already examined, there are nineteen.”

A storm of derisive applause broke out.

“Perhaps they all contain the secret. I move that you open them all and read every signature that is attached to a note of that sort—and read also the first eight words of the note.”

“Second the motion!”

It was put and carried—uproariously. Then poor old Richards got up, and his wife rose and stood at his side. Her head was bent down, so that none might see that she was crying. Her husband gave her his arm, and so supporting her, he began to speak in a quavering voice:

“My friends, you have known us two—Mary and me—all our lives, and I think you have liked us and respected us—”

The Chair interrupted him:

“Allow me. It is quite true—that which you are saying, Mr. Richards; this town does know you two; it does like you; it does respect you; more—it honors you and loves you—”

Halliday’s voice rang out:

“That’s the hall-marked truth, too! If the Chair is right, let the house speak up and say it. Rise! Now, then—hip! hip! hip!—all together!”

The house rose in mass, faced toward the old couple eagerly, filled the air with a snow-storm of waving handkerchiefs, and delivered the cheers with all its affectionate heart.

The Chair then continued:
“What I was going to say is this: We know your good heart, Mr. Richards, but this is not a time for the exercise of charity toward offenders. [Shouts of “Right! right!”] I see your generous purpose in your face, but I cannot allow you to plead for these men—”

“But I was going to—”

“Please take your seat, Mr. Richards. We must examine the rest of these notes—simple fairness to the men who have already been exposed requires this. As soon as that has been done—I give you my word for this—you shall be heard.”

Many voices. “Right!—the Chair is right—no interruption can be permitted at this stage! Go on!—the names! the names!—according to the terms of the motion!”

The old couple sat reluctantly down, and the husband whispered to the wife, “It is pitifully hard to have to wait; the shame will be greater than ever when they find we were only going to plead for ourselves.”

Straightway the jollity broke loose again with the reading of the names.

“‘You are far from being a bad man—’ Signature, ‘Robert J. Titmarsh.’”

“‘You are far from being a bad man—’ Signature, ‘Eliphalet Weeks.’”

“‘You are far from being a bad man—’ Signature, ‘Oscar B. Wilder.’”

At this point the house lit upon the idea of taking the eight words out of the Chairman’s hands. He was not unthankful for that. Thenceforward he held up each note in its turn, and waited. The house droned out the eight words in a massed and measured and musical deep volume of sound (with a daringly close resemblance to a well-known church chant)—“‘You are f-a-r from being a b-a-a-d man.’” Then the Chair said, “Signature, ‘Archibald Wilcox.’” And so on, and so on, name after name, and everybody had an increasingly and gloriously good time except the wretched Nineteen. Now and then, when a particularly shining name was called, the house made the Chair wait while it chanted the whole of the test-remark from the beginning to the closing words, “And go to hell or Hadleyburg—try and make it the for-or-m-e-r!” and in these special cases they added a grand and agonised and imposing “A-a-a-men!”

The list dwindled, dwindled, dwindled, poor old Richards keeping tally of the count, wincing when a name resembling his own was pronounced, and waiting in miserable suspense for the time to come when it would be his humiliating privilege to rise with Mary and finish his plea, which he was intending to word thus: “... for until now we have never done any wrong thing, but have gone our humble way un reproached. We are very poor, we are old, and have no chick nor child to help us; we were sorely tempted, and we fell. It was my purpose when I got up before to make confession and beg that my name might not be read out in this public place, for it seemed to us that we could not bear it; but I was prevented. It was just; it was our place to suffer with the rest. It has been
hard for us. It is the first time we have ever heard our name fall from any one’s lips—sullied. Be merciful—for the sake of the better days; make our shame as light to bear as in your charity you can.” At this point in his revery Mary nudged him, perceiving that his mind was absent. The house was chanting, “You are f-a-r,” etc.

“Be ready,” Mary whispered. “Your name comes now; he has read eighteen.”

The chant ended.

“Next! next! next!” came volleying from all over the house.

Burgess put his hand into his pocket. The old couple, trembling, began to rise. Burgess fumbled a moment, then said,

“I find I have read them all.”

Faint with joy and surprise, the couple sank into their seats, and Mary whispered,

“Oh, bless God, we are saved!—he has lost ours—I wouldn’t give this for a hundred of those sacks!”

The house burst out with its Mikado travesty, and sang it three times with ever-increasing enthusiasm, rising to its feet when it reached for the third time the closing line—

“But the Symbols are here, you bet!”

and finishing up with cheers and a tiger for “Hadleyburg purity and our eighteen immortal representatives of it.”

Then Wingate, the saddler, got up and proposed cheers “for the cleanest man in town, the one solitary important citizen in it who didn’t try to steal that money—Edward Richards.”

They were given with great and moving heartiness; then somebody proposed that Richards be elected sole Guardian and Symbol of the now Sacred Hadleyburg Tradition, with power and right to stand up and look the whole sarcastic world in the face.

Passed, by acclamation; then they sang the Mikado again, and ended it with

“And there’s one Symbol left, you bet!”

There was a pause; then—

A Voice. “Now, then, who’s to get the sack?”
The Tanner (with bitter sarcasm). “That’s easy. The money has to be divided among the eighteen Incorruptibles. They gave the suffering stranger twenty dollars apiece—and that remark—each in his turn—it took twenty-two minutes for the procession to move past. Staked the stranger—total contribution, $360. All they want is just the loan back—and interest—forty thousand dollars altogether.”

Many Voices (derisively). “That’s it! Divvy! divvy! Be kind to the poor—don’t keep them waiting!”

The Chair. “Order! I now offer the stranger’s remaining document. It says: ‘If no claimant shall appear [grand chorus of groans], I desire that you open the sack and count out the money to the principal citizens of your town, they to take it in trust [Cries of “Oh! Oh! Oh!”], and use it in such ways as to them shall seem best for the propagation and preservation of your community’s noble reputation for incorruptible honesty [more cries]—a reputation to which their names and their efforts will add a new and far-reaching lustre.’ [Enthusiastic outburst of sarcastic applause.] That seems to be all. No—here is a postscript:

“P.S.—CITIZENS OF HADLEYBURG: There is no test-remark—nobody made one. [Great sensation.] There wasn’t any pauper stranger, nor any twenty-dollar contribution, nor any accompanying benediction and compliment—these are all inventions. [General buzz and hum of astonishment and delight.] Allow me to tell my story—it will take but a word or two. I passed through your town at a certain time, and received a deep offence which I had not earned. Any other man would have been content to kill one or two of you and call it square, but to me that would have been a trivial revenge, and inadequate; for the dead do not suffer. Besides, I could not kill you all—and, anyway, made as I am, even that would not have satisfied me. I wanted to damage every man in the place, and every woman—and not in their bodies or in their estate, but in their vanity—the place where feeble and foolish people are most vulnerable. So I disguised myself, and came back and studied you. You were easy game. You had an old and lofty reputation for honesty, and naturally you were proud of it—it was your treasure of treasures, the very apple of your eye. As soon as I found out that you carefully and vigilantly kept yourselves and your children out of temptation, I knew how to proceed. Why, you simple creatures, the weakest of all weak things is a virtue which has not been tested in the fire. I laid a plan, and gathered a list of names. My project was to corrupt Hadleyburg the Incorruptible. My idea was to make liars and thieves of nearly half a hundred smirchless men and women who had never in their lives uttered a lie or stolen a penny. I was afraid of Goodson. He was neither born nor reared in Hadleyburg. I was afraid that if I started to operate my scheme by getting my letter laid before you, you would say to yourselves, “Goodson is the only man among us who would give away twenty dollars to a poor devil”—and then you might not bite at my bait. But Heaven took Goodson; then I knew I was safe, and I set my trap and baited it. It may be that I shall not catch all the men to whom I mailed the pretended test secret, but I shall catch the most of them, if I know Hadleyburg nature. [Voices. “Right—he got every last one of them.”] I believe they will even steal ostensible gamble-money, rather than miss, poor, tempted, and mistrained fellows. I am hoping to eternally and everlastingly squelch your vanity and give Hadleyburg a new renown—one
that will stick—and spread far. If I have succeeded, open the sack and summon the Committee on Propagation and Preservation of the Hadleyburg Reputation.”

A Cyclone of Voices. “Open it! Open it! The Eighteen to the front! Committee on Propagation of the Tradition! Forward—the Incorruptibles!”

The Chair ripped the sack wide, and gathered up a handful of bright, broad, yellow coins, shook them together, then examined them—

“Friends, they are only gilded disks of lead!”

There was a crashing outbreak of delight over this news, and when the noise had subsided, the tanner called out:

“By right of apparent seniority in this business, Mr. Wilson is Chairman of the Committee on Propagation of the Tradition. I suggest that he step forward on behalf of his pals, and receive in trust the money.”


Wilson (in a voice trembling with anger). “You will allow me to say, and without apologies for my language, damn the money!”

A Voice. “Oh, and him a Baptist!”

A Voice. “Seventeen Symbols left! Step up, gentlemen, and assume your trust!”

There was a pause—no response.

The Saddler. “Mr. Chairman, we’ve got one clean man left, anyway, out of the late aristocracy; and he needs money, and deserves it. I move that you appoint Jack Halliday to get up there and auction off that sack of gilt twenty-dollar pieces, and give the result to the right man—the man whom Hadleyburg delights to honor—Edward Richards.”

This was received with great enthusiasm, the dog taking a hand again; the saddler started the bids at a dollar, the Brixton folk and Barnum’s representative fought hard for it, the people cheered every jump that the bids made, the excitement climbed moment by moment higher and higher, the bidders got on their mettle and grew steadily more and more daring, more and more determined, the jumps went from a dollar up to five, then to ten, then to twenty, then fifty, then to a hundred, then—

At the beginning of the auction Richards whispered in distress to his wife: “Oh, Mary, can we allow it? It—it—you see, it is an honor-reward, a testimonial to purity of character, and—and—can we allow it? Hadn’t I better get up and—Oh, Mary, what ought we to do?—what do you think we—” (Halliday’s voice. “Fifteen I’m bid!—fifteen for the sack!—twenty!—ah, thanks!—thirty—thanks again! Thirty, thirty, thirty!—do I hear
forty?—forty it is! Keep the ball rolling, gentlemen, keep it rolling!—fifty!—thanks, noble Roman!—going at fifty, fifty, fifty!—seventy!—ninety!—splendid!—a hundred!—pile it up, pile it up!—hundred and twenty—forty!—just in time!—hundred and fifty!—two hundred!—superb! Do I hear two h—thanks!—two hundred and fifty!—"

“It is another temptation, Edward—I’m all in a tremble—but, oh, we’ve escaped one temptation, and that ought to warn us, to—[“Six did I hear?— thanks!—six fifty, six f—seven hundred!”] And yet, Edward, when you think—nobody susp—[“Eight hundred dollars!—hurrah!—make it nine!—Mr. Parsons, did I hear you say—thanks!—nine!—this noble sack of virgin lead going at only nine hundred dollars, gilding and all—come! do I hear—a thousand!— gratefully yours!—did some one say eleven?—a sack which is going to be the most celebrated in the whole Uni—’"] Oh, Edward” (beginning to sob), “we are so poor!—but—but—do as you think best—do as you think best.”

Edward fell—that is, he sat still; sat with a conscience which was not satisfied, but which was overpowered by circumstances.

Meantime a stranger, who looked like an amateur detective gotten up as an impossible English earl, had been watching the evening’s proceedings with manifest interest, and with a contented expression in his face; and he had been privately commenting to himself. He was now soliloquizing somewhat like this: “None of the Eighteen are bidding; that is not satisfactory; I must change that—the dramatic unities require it; they must buy the sack they tried to steal; they must pay a heavy price, too—some of them are rich. And another thing, when I make a mistake in Hadleyburg nature the man that puts that error upon me is entitled to a high honorarium, and some one must pay it. This poor old Richards has brought my judgment to shame: he is an honest man:—I don’t understand it, but I acknowledge it. Yes, he saw my deuces—and with a straight flush, and by rights the pot is his. And it shall be a jack-pot, too, if I can manage it. He disappointed me, but let that pass.”

He was watching the bidding. At a thousand, the market broke; the prices tumbled swiftly. He waited—and still watched. One competitor dropped out; then another, and another. He put in a bid or two, now. When the bids had sunk to ten dollars, he added a five; some one raised him a three; he waited a moment, then flung in a fifty-dollar jump, and the sack was his—at $1,282. The house broke out in cheers—then stopped; for he was on his feet, and had lifted his hand. He began to speak.

“I desire to say a word, and ask a favor. I am a speculator in rarities, and I have dealings with persons interested in numismatics all over the world. I can make a profit on this purchase, just as it stands; but there is a way, if I can get your approval, whereby I can make every one of these leaden twenty-dollar pieces worth its face in gold, and perhaps more. Grant me that approval, and I will give part of my gains to your Mr. Richards, whose invulnerable probity you have so justly and so cordially recognised to-night; his share shall be ten thousand dollars, and I will hand him the money to-morrow. [Great applause from the house. But the “invulnerable probity” made the Richardses blush prettily; however, it went for modesty, and did no harm.] If you will pass my
proposition by a good majority—I would like a two-thirds vote—I will regard that as the town’s consent, and that is all I ask. Rarities are always helped by any device which will rouse curiosity and compel remark. Now if I may have your permission to stamp upon the faces of each of these ostensible coins the names of the eighteen gentlemen who—”

Nine-tenths of the audience were on their feet in a moment—dog and all—and the proposition was carried with a whirlwind of approving applause and laughter.

They sat down, and all the Symbols except “Dr.” Clay Harkness got up, violently protesting against the proposed outrage, and threatening to—

“I beg you not to threaten me,” said the stranger, calmly. “I know my legal rights, and am not accustomed to being frightened at bluster.” (Applause.) He sat down. “Dr.” Harkness saw an opportunity here. He was one of the two very rich men of the place, and Pinkerton was the other. Harkness was proprietor of a mint; that is to say, a popular patent medicine. He was running for the Legislature on one ticket, and Pinkerton on the other. It was a close race and a hot one, and getting hotter every day. Both had strong appetites for money; each had bought a great tract of land, with a purpose: there was going to be a new railway, and each wanted to be in the Legislature and help locate the route to his own advantage; a single vote might make the decision, and with it two or three fortunes. The stake was large, and Harkness was a daring speculator. He was sitting close to the stranger. He leaned over while one or another of the other Symbols was entertaining the house with protests and appeals, and asked, in a whisper,

“What is your price for the sack?”

“Forty thousand dollars.”

“I’ll give you twenty.”

“No.”

“Twenty-five.”

“No.”

“Say thirty.”

“The price is forty thousand dollars; not a penny less.”

“All right, I’ll give it. I will come to the hotel at ten in the morning. I don’t want it known; will see you privately.”

“Very good.” Then the stranger got up and said to the house:
“I find it late. The speeches of these gentlemen are not without merit, not without interest, not without grace; yet if I may be excused I will take my leave. I thank you for the great favor which you have shown me in granting my petition. I ask the Chair to keep the sack for me until to-morrow, and to hand these three five-hundred-dollar notes to Mr. Richards.” They were passed up to the Chair. “At nine I will call for the sack, and at eleven will deliver the rest of the ten thousand to Mr. Richards in person, at his home. Good-night.”

Then he slipped out, and left the audience making a vast noise, which was composed of a mixture of cheers, the Mikado song, dog-disapproval, and the chant, “You are f-a-r from being a b-a-a-d man—a-a-a a-men!”

IV

At home the Richardses had to endure congratulations and compliments until midnight. Then they were left to themselves. They looked a little sad, and they sat silent and thinking. Finally Mary sighed and said,

“Do you think we are to blame, Edward—much to blame?” and her eyes wandered to the accusing triplet of big bank-notes lying on the table, where the congratulators had been gloating over them and reverently fingering them. Edward did not answer at once; then he brought out a sigh and said, hesitatingly:

“We—we couldn’t help it, Mary. It—well it was ordered. All things are.”

Mary glanced up and looked at him steadily, but he didn’t return the look. Presently she said:

“I thought congratulations and praises always tasted good. But—it seems to me, now—Edward?”

“Well?”

“Are you going to stay in the bank?”

“N-no.”

“Resign?”

“In the morning—by note.”

“It does seem best.”

Richards bowed his head in his hands and muttered:
“Before, I was not afraid to let oceans of people’s money pour through my hands, but—Mary, I am so tired, so tired—”

“We will go to bed.”

At nine in the morning the stranger called for the sack and took it to the hotel in a cab. At ten Harkness had a talk with him privately. The stranger asked for and got five checks on a metropolitan bank—drawn to “Bearer,”—four for $1500 each, and one for $34,000. He put one of the former in his pocket-book, and the remainder, representing $38,500, he put in an envelope, and with these he added a note, which he wrote after Harkness was gone. At eleven he called at the Richards house and knocked. Mrs. Richards peeped through the shutters, then went and received the envelope, and the stranger disappeared without a word. She came back flushed and a little unsteady on her legs, and gasped out:

“I am sure I recognised him! Last night it seemed to me that maybe I had seen him somewhere before.”

“He is the man that brought the sack here?”

“I am almost sure of it.”

“Then he is the ostensible Stephenson too, and sold every important citizen in this town with his bogus secret. Now if he has sent checks instead of money, we are sold too, after we thought we had escaped. I was beginning to feel fairly comfortable once more, after my night’s rest, but the look of that envelope makes me sick. It isn’t fat enough; $8500 in even the largest bank-notes makes more bulk than that.”

“Edward, why do you object to checks?”

“Checks signed by Stephenson! I am resigned to take the $8500 if it could come in bank-notes—for it does seem that it was so ordered, Mary—but I have never had much courage, and I have not the pluck to try to market a check signed with that disastrous name. It would be a trap. That man tried to catch me; we escaped somehow or other; and now he is trying a new way. If it is checks—”

“Oh, Edward, it is too bad!” And she held up the checks and began to cry.

“Put them in the fire! quick! we mustn’t be tempted. It is a trick to make the world laugh at us, along with the rest, and—Give them to me, since you can’t do it!” He snatched them and tried to hold his grip till he could get to the stove; but he was human, he was a cashier, and he stopped a moment to make sure of the signature. Then he came near to fainting.

“Fan me, Mary, fan me! They are the same as gold!”

“Oh, how lovely, Edward! Why?”
“Signed by Harkness. What can the mystery of that be, Mary?”

“Edward, do you think—”

“Look here—look at this! Fifteen—fifteen—fifteen—thirty-four. Thirty-eight thousand five hundred! Mary, the sack isn’t worth twelve dollars, and Harkness—apparently—has paid about par for it.”

“And does it all come to us, do you think—instead of the ten thousand?”

“Why, it looks like it. And the checks are made to ‘Bearer,’ too.”

“Is that good, Edward? What is it for?”

“A hint to collect them at some distant bank, I reckon. Perhaps Harkness doesn’t want the matter known. What is that—a note?”

“Yes. It was with the checks.”

It was in the “Stephenson” handwriting, but there was no signature. It said:

I am a disappointed man. Your honesty is beyond the reach of temptation. I had a different idea about it, but I wronged you in that, and I beg pardon, and do it sincerely. I honor you—and that is sincere, too. This town is not worthy to kiss the hem of your garment. Dear sir, I made a square bet with myself that there were nineteen debauchable men in your self-righteous community. I have lost. Take the whole pot, you are entitled to it.

Richards drew a deep sigh, and said:

“It seems written with fire—it burns so. Mary—I am miserable again.”

“I, too. Ah, dear, I wish—”

“To think, Mary—he believes in me.”

“Oh, don’t, Edward—I can’t bear it.”

“If those beautiful words were deserved, Mary—and God knows I believed I deserved them once—I think I could give the forty thousand dollars for them. And I would put that paper away, as representing more than gold and jewels, and keep it always. But now—We could not live in the shadow of its accusing presence, Mary.”

He put it in the fire.
A messenger arrived and delivered an envelope. Richards took from it a note and read it; it was from Burgess.

You saved me, in a difficult time. I saved you last night. It was at cost of a lie, but I made the sacrifice freely, and out of a grateful heart. None in this village knows so well as I know how brave and good and noble you are. At bottom you cannot respect me, knowing as you do of that matter of which I am accused, and by the general voice condemned; but I beg that you will at least believe that I am a grateful man; it will help me to bear my burden.

[Signed] Burgess.

"Saved, once more. And on such terms!" He put the note in the fire. "I—I wish I were dead, Mary, I wish I were out of it all."

"Oh, these are bitter, bitter days, Edward. The stabs, through their very generosity, are so deep—and they come so fast!"

Three days before the election each of two thousand voters suddenly found himself in possession of a prized memento—one of the renowned bogus double-eagles. Around one of its faces was stamped these words: "THE REMARK I MADE TO THE POOR STRANGER WAS—" Around the other face was stamped these: "GO, AND REFORM. (SIGNED) PINKERTON." Thus the entire remaining refuse of the renowned joke was emptied upon a single head, and with calamitous effect. It revived the recent vast laugh and concentrated it upon Pinkerton; and Harkness’s election was a walk-over.

Within twenty-four hours after the Richardses had received their checks their consciences were quieting down, discouraged; the old couple were learning to reconcile themselves to the sin which they had committed. But they were to learn, now, that a sin takes on new and real terrors when there seems a chance that it is going to be found out. This gives it a fresh and most substantial and important aspect. At church the morning sermon was of the usual pattern; it was the same old things said in the same old way; they had heard them a thousand times and found them innocuous, next to meaningless, and easy to sleep under; but now it was different: the sermon seemed to bristle with accusations; it seemed aimed straight and specially at people who were concealing deadly sins. After church they got away from the mob of congratulators as soon as they could, and hurried homeward, chilled to the bone at they did not know what—vague, shadowy, indefinite fears. And by chance they caught a glimpse of Mr. Burgess as he turned a corner. He paid no attention to their nod of recognition! He hadn’t seen it; but they did not know that. What could his conduct mean? It might mean—it might mean—oh, a dozen dreadful things. Was it possible that he knew that Richards could have cleared him of guilt in that bygone time, and had been silently waiting for a chance to even up accounts? At home, in their distress they got to imagining that their servant might have been in the next room listening when Richards revealed the secret to his wife that he knew of Burgess’s innocence; next, Richards began to imagine that he had heard the swish of a gown in there at that time; next, he was sure he had heard it. They would call Sarah in, on a pretext, and watch her face; if she had been betraying them to Mr. Burgess,
it would show in her manner. They asked her some questions—questions which were so random and incoherent and seemingly purposeless that the girl felt sure that the old people’s minds had been affected by their sudden good fortune; the sharp and watchful gaze which they bent upon her frightened her, and that completed the business. She blushed, she became nervous and confused, and to the old people these were plain signs of guilt—guilt of some fearful sort or other—without doubt she was a spy and a traitor. When they were alone again they began to piece many unrelated things together and get horrible results out of the combination. When things had got about to the worst Richards was delivered of a sudden gasp, and his wife asked,

“Oh, what is it?—what is it?”

“The note—Burgess’s note! Its language was sarcastic, I see it now.” He quoted: “‘At bottom you cannot respect me, knowing, as you do, of that matter of which I am accused’—oh, it is perfectly plain, now, God help me! He knows that I know! You see the ingenuity of the phrasing. It was a trap—and like a fool, I walked into it. And Mary?”

“Oh, it is dreadful—I know what you are going to say—he didn’t return your transcript of the pretended test-remark.”

“No—kept it to destroy us with. Mary, he has exposed us to some already. I know it—I know it well. I saw it in a dozen faces after church. Ah, he wouldn’t answer our nod of recognition—_he_ knew what he had been doing!”

In the night the doctor was called. The news went around in the morning that the old couple were rather seriously ill—prostrated by the exhausting excitement growing out of their great windfall, the congratulations, and the late hours, the doctor said. The town was sincerely distressed; for these old people were about all it had left to be proud of, now.

Two days later the news was worse. The old couple were delirious, and were doing strange things. By witness of the nurses, Richards had exhibited checks—for $8500? No—for an amazing sum—$38,500! What could be the explanation of this gigantic piece of luck?

The following day the nurses had more news—and wonderful. They had concluded to hide the checks, lest harm come to them; but when they searched they were gone from under the patient’s pillow—vanished away. The patient said:

“Let the pillow alone; what do you want?”

“We thought it best that the checks—”

“You will never see them again—they are destroyed. They came from Satan. I saw the hell-brand on them, and I knew they were sent to betray me to sin.” Then he fell to gabbling strange and dreadful things which were not clearly understandable, and which the doctor admonished them to keep to themselves.
Richards was right; the checks were never seen again.

A nurse must have talked in her sleep, for within two days the forbidden gabblings were the property of the town; and they were of a surprising sort. They seemed to indicate that Richards had been a claimant for the sack himself, and that Burgess had concealed that fact and then maliciously betrayed it.

Burgess was taxed with this and stoutly denied it. And he said it was not fair to attach weight to the chatter of a sick old man who was out of his mind. Still, suspicion was in the air, and there was much talk.

After a day or two it was reported that Mrs. Richards’s delirious deliveries were getting to be duplicates of her husband’s. Suspicion flamed up into conviction, now, and the town’s pride in the purity of its one undiscredited important citizen began to dim down and flicker toward extinction.

Six days passed, then came more news. The old couple were dying. Richards’s mind cleared in his latest hour, and he sent for Burgess. Burgess said:

“Let the room be cleared. I think he wishes to say something in privacy.”

“No!” said Richards; “I want witnesses. I want you all to hear my confession, so that I may die a man, and not a dog. I was clean—artificially—like the rest; and like the rest I fell when temptation came. I signed a lie, and claimed the miserable sack. Mr. Burgess remembered that I had done him a service, and in gratitude (and ignorance) he suppressed my claim and saved me. You know the thing that was charged against Burgess years ago. My testimony, and mine alone, could have cleared him, and I was a coward, and left him to suffer disgrace—”

“No—no—Mr. Richards, you—”

“My servant betrayed my secret to him—”

“No one has betrayed anything to me—”

—and then he did a natural and justifiable thing; he repented of the saving kindness which he had done me, and he exposed me—as I deserved—”

“Never!—I make oath—”

“Out of my heart I forgive him.”

Burgess’s impassioned protestations fell upon deaf ears; the dying man passed away without knowing that once more he had done poor Burgess a wrong. The old wife died that night.
The last of the sacred Nineteen had fallen a prey to the fiendish sack; the town was stripped of the last rag of its ancient glory. Its mourning was not showy, but it was deep.

By act of the Legislature—upon prayer and petition—Hadleyburg was allowed to change its name to (never mind what—I will not give it away), and leave one word out of the motto that for many generations had graced the town’s official seal.

It is an honest town once more, and the man will have to rise early that catches it napping again.

Former motto: LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION.

Revised motto: LEAD US INTO TEMPTATION.
Federalist No. 10

Publius

The Federalist Papers, originally published in New York newspapers between October 1787 and August 1788, were intended to encourage ratification of the new federal Constitution. The eighty-five essays by Publius (the collective pseudonym for James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay) have become a much-respected source for understanding the intentions of the Founders in creating our complex governmental structure. Seeking to achieve stable and energetic government while preserving republican liberty, the Founders developed a new science of politics, relying on such institutional mechanisms as the separation of powers, checks and balances, an independent judiciary, representative government, and something called “the enlargement of the orbit.”

This last innovation, first mentioned in Federalist No. 9, is the subject of Federalist No. 10, the most cited of the essays. Here Publius (in this case, Madison) sketches a highly original solution to the problem of majority faction (when ruling majorities ignore the legitimate rights of the minority). He argues that representative government (as opposed to direct democracy) helps avert majority faction by refining and tempering majority opinion. But beyond mere representation he recommends, paradoxically, more factions. Thus he argues for a large republic rather than a small one, for the larger the republic, the greater the number and types of interests and factions, and the more they will be able to balance and counteract one another. Political struggle will be moderated not by moral and religious instruction aimed at making citizens more moderate and virtuous, but instead by the moderating effects of multiplicity and the requirements of effective commercial activity. By design, America’s greatest bulwark against the danger of majority faction is the large commercial republic and competition of rival interests in pursuit of gain and personal advancement.

What assumptions about human nature inform this ingenious solution? Why is heterogeneity preferable to homogeneity, and what, if any, might be its defects or costs? What sort of human character—with what sorts of passions, virtues, and vices—is produced by a large commercial republic? The Anti-Federalists, who opposed the large federal union, held that freedom can be experienced and preserved only in small communities, in which citizens know one another, are like-minded, and actively participate in public life. Might they have been right? Does our federal system, through its division of authority among national, state, and local powers, manage to secure the advantages of both bigness and smallness? What should we think today about the relation among commerce, freedom, and stability?

To the People of the State of New York:

Among the numerous advantages promised by a well-constructed Union, none deserves to be more accurately developed than its tendency to break and control the violence of faction. The friend of popular governments never finds himself so much
alarmed for their character and fate, as when he contemplates their propensity to this dangerous vice. He will not fail, therefore, to set a due value on any plan which, without violating the principles to which he is attached, provides a proper cure for it. The instability, injustice, and confusion introduced into the public councils, have, in truth, been the mortal diseases under which popular governments have everywhere perished; as they continue to be the favorite and fruitful topics from which the adversaries to liberty derive their most specious declamations. The valuable improvements made by the American constitutions on the popular models, both ancient and modern, cannot certainly be too much admired; but it would be an unwarrantable partiality, to contend that they have as effectually obviated the danger on this side, as was wished and expected. Complaints are everywhere heard from our most considerate and virtuous citizens, equally the friends of public and private faith, and of public and personal liberty, that our governments are too unstable, that the public good is disregarded in the conflicts of rival parties, and that measures are too often decided, not according to the rules of justice and the rights of the minor party, but by the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority. However anxiously we may wish that these complaints had no foundation, the evidence of known facts will not permit us to deny that they are in some degree true. It will be found, indeed, on a candid review of our situation, that some of the distresses under which we labor have been erroneously charged on the operation of our governments; but it will be found, at the same time, that other causes will not alone account for many of our heaviest misfortunes; and, particularly, for that prevailing and increasing distrust of public engagements, and alarm for private rights, which are echoed from one end of the continent to the other. These must be chiefly, if not wholly, effects of the unsteadiness and injustice with which a factious spirit has tainted our public administrations.

By a faction, I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.

There are two methods of curing the mischiefs of faction: the one, by removing its causes; the other, by controlling its effects.

There are again two methods of removing the causes of faction: the one, by destroying the liberty which is essential to its existence; the other, by giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests.

It could never be more truly said than of the first remedy, that it was worse than the disease. Liberty is to faction what air is to fire, an aliment without which it instantly expires. But it could not be less folly to abolish liberty, which is essential to political life, because it nourishes faction, than it would be to wish the annihilation of air, which is essential to animal life, because it imparts to fire its destructive agency.

The second expedient is as impracticable as the first would be unwise. As long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will
be formed. As long as the connection subsists between his reason and his self-love, his opinions and his passions will have a reciprocal influence on each other; and the former will be objects to which the latter will attach themselves. The diversity in the faculties of men, from which the rights of property originate, is not less an insuperable obstacle to a uniformity of interests. The protection of these faculties is the first object of government. From the protection of different and unequal faculties of acquiring property, the possession of different degrees and kinds of property immediately results; and from the influence of these on the sentiments and views of the respective proprietors, ensues a division of the society into different interests and parties.

The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man; and we see them everywhere brought into different degrees of activity, according to the different circumstances of civil society. A zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points, as well of speculation as of practice; an attachment to different leaders ambitiously contending for pre-eminence and power; or to persons of other descriptions whose fortunes have been interesting to the human passions, have, in turn, divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good. So strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities, that where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts. But the most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society. Those who are creditors, and those who are debtors, fall under a like discrimination. A landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a moneyed interest, with many lesser interests, grow up of necessity in civilized nations, and divide them into different classes, actuated by different sentiments and views. The regulation of these various and interfering interests forms the principal task of modern legislation, and involves the spirit of party and faction in the necessary and ordinary operations of the government.

No man is allowed to be a judge in his own cause, because his interest would certainly bias his judgment, and, not improbably, corrupt his integrity. With equal, nay with greater reason, a body of men are unfit to be both judges and parties at the same time; yet what are many of the most important acts of legislation, but so many judicial determinations, not indeed concerning the rights of single persons, but concerning the rights of large bodies of citizens? And what are the different classes of legislators but advocates and parties to the causes which they determine? Is a law proposed concerning private debts? It is a question to which the creditors are parties on one side and the debtors on the other. Justice ought to hold the balance between them. Yet the parties are, and must be, themselves the judges; and the most numerous party, or, in other words, the most powerful faction must be expected to prevail. Shall domestic manufactures be encouraged, and in what degree, by restrictions on foreign manufactures? are questions which would be differently decided by the landed and the manufacturing classes, and probably by neither with a sole regard to justice and the public good. The apportionment of taxes on the various descriptions of property is an act which seems to require the most
exact impartiality; yet there is, perhaps, no legislative act in which greater opportunity and temptation are given to a predominant party to trample on the rules of justice. Every shilling with which they overburden the inferior number, is a shilling saved to their own pockets.

It is in vain to say that enlightened statesmen will be able to adjust these clashing interests, and render them all subservient to the public good. Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm. Nor, in many cases, can such an adjustment be made at all without taking into view indirect and remote considerations, which will rarely prevail over the immediate interest which one party may find in disregarding the rights of another or the good of the whole.

The inference to which we are brought is, that the causes of faction cannot be removed, and that relief is only to be sought in the means of controlling its effects.

If a faction consists of less than a majority, relief is supplied by the republican principle, which enables the majority to defeat its sinister views by regular vote. It may clog the administration, it may convulse the society; but it will be unable to execute and mask its violence under the forms of the Constitution. When a majority is included in a faction, the form of popular government, on the other hand, enables it to sacrifice to its ruling passion or interest both the public good and the rights of other citizens. To secure the public good and private rights against the danger of such a faction, and at the same time to preserve the spirit and the form of popular government, is then the great object to which our inquiries are directed. Let me add that it is the great desideratum by which this form of government can be rescued from the opprobrium under which it has so long labored, and be recommended to the esteem and adoption of mankind.

By what means is this object attainable? Evidently by one of two only. Either the existence of the same passion or interest in a majority at the same time must be prevented, or the majority, having such coexistent passion or interest, must be rendered, by their number and local situation, unable to concert and carry into effect schemes of oppression. If the impulse and the opportunity be suffered to coincide, we well know that neither moral nor religious motives can be relied on as an adequate control. They are not found to be such on the injustice and violence of individuals, and lose their efficacy in proportion to the number combined together, that is, in proportion as their efficacy becomes needful.

From this view of the subject it may be concluded that a pure democracy, by which I mean a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person, can admit of no cure for the mischiefs of faction. A common passion or interest will, in almost every case, be felt by a majority of the whole; a communication and concert result from the form of government itself; and there is nothing to check the inducements to sacrifice the weaker party or an obnoxious individual. Hence it is that such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their
deaths. Theoretic politicians, who have patronized this species of government, have erroneously supposed that by reducing mankind to a perfect equality in their political rights, they would, at the same time, be perfectly equalized and assimilated in their possessions, their opinions, and their passions.

A republic, by which I mean a government in which the scheme of representation takes place, opens a different prospect, and promises the cure for which we are seeking. Let us examine the points in which it varies from pure democracy, and we shall comprehend both the nature of the cure and the efficacy which it must derive from the Union.

The two great points of difference between a democracy and a republic are: first, the delegation of the government, in the latter, to a small number of citizens elected by the rest; secondly, the greater number of citizens, and greater sphere of country, over which the latter may be extended.

The effect of the first difference is, on the one hand, to refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations. Under such a regulation, it may well happen that the public voice, pronounced by the representatives of the people, will be more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves, convened for the purpose. On the other hand, the effect may be inverted. Men of factious tempers, of local prejudices, or of sinister designs, may, by intrigue, by corruption, or by other means, first obtain the suffrages, and then betray the interests, of the people. The question resulting is, whether small or extensive republics are more favorable to the election of proper guardians of the public weal; and it is clearly decided in favor of the latter by two obvious considerations:

In the first place, it is to be remarked that, however small the republic may be, the representatives must be raised to a certain number, in order to guard against the cabals of a few; and that, however large it may be, they must be limited to a certain number, in order to guard against the confusion of a multitude. Hence, the number of representatives in the two cases not being in proportion to that of the two constituents, and being proportionally greater in the small republic, it follows that, if the proportion of fit characters be not less in the large than in the small republic, the former will present a greater option, and consequently a greater probability of a fit choice.

In the next place, as each representative will be chosen by a greater number of citizens in the large than in the small republic, it will be more difficult for unworthy candidates to practice with success the vicious arts by which elections are too often carried; and the suffrages of the people being more free, will be more likely to centre in men who possess the most attractive merit and the most diffusive and established characters.
It must be confessed that in this, as in most other cases, there is a mean, on both sides of which inconveniences will be found to lie. By enlarging too much the number of electors, you render the representatives too little acquainted with all their local circumstances and lesser interests; as by reducing it too much, you render him unduly attached to these, and too little fit to comprehend and pursue great and national objects. The federal Constitution forms a happy combination in this respect; the great and aggregate interests being referred to the national, the local and particular to the State legislatures.

The other point of difference is, the greater number of citizens and extent of territory which may be brought within the compass of republican than of democratic government; and it is this circumstance principally which renders factious combinations less to be dreaded in the former than in the latter. The smaller the society, the fewer probably will be the distinct parties and interests composing it; the fewer the distinct parties and interests, the more frequently will a majority be found of the same party; and the smaller the number of individuals composing a majority, and the smaller the compass within which they are placed, the more easily will they concert and execute their plans of oppression. Extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other. Besides other impediments, it may be remarked that, where there is a consciousness of unjust or dishonorable purposes, communication is always checked by distrust in proportion to the number whose concurrence is necessary.

Hence, it clearly appears, that the same advantage which a republic has over a democracy, in controlling the effects of faction, is enjoyed by a large over a small republic,—is enjoyed by the Union over the States composing it. Does the advantage consist in the substitution of representatives whose enlightened views and virtuous sentiments render them superior to local prejudices and schemes of injustice? It will not be denied that the representation of the Union will be most likely to possess these requisite endowments. Does it consist in the greater security afforded by a greater variety of parties, against the event of any one party being able to outnumber and oppress the rest? In an equal degree does the increased variety of parties comprised within the Union, increase this security. Does it, in fine, consist in the greater obstacles opposed to the concert and accomplishment of the secret wishes of an unjust and interested majority? Here, again, the extent of the Union gives it the most palpable advantage.

The influence of factious leaders may kindle a flame within their particular States, but will be unable to spread a general conflagration through the other States. A religious sect may degenerate into a political faction in a part of the Confederacy; but the variety of sects dispersed over the entire face of it must secure the national councils against any danger from that source. A rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked project, will be less apt to pervade the whole body of the Union than a particular member of it; in the same
proportion as such a malady is more likely to taint a particular county or district, than an entire State.

In the extent and proper structure of the Union, therefore, we behold a republican remedy for the diseases most incident to republican government. And according to the degree of pleasure and pride we feel in being republicans, ought to be our zeal in cherishing the spirit and supporting the character of Federalists.

Publius.
Discussion Guide for
“The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg”

I. About the Author
II. Summary
III. Thinking about the Text
IV. Thinking with the Text

I. About the Author

Mark Twain (born Samuel Langhorne Clemens, 1835–1910) is well known as a humorist and satirist. But like many satirists, he had serious things in view. Writing in the latter part of the nineteenth century, as the so-called “robber barons”—the giants of the steel and oil industries, including Carnegie, Vanderbilt, and Rockefeller—were growing their monopolies, and as the railroads and national wire services were literally forging one nation out of our many communities, the character of our emergent national life was much on Twain’s mind. It was Twain who coined the phrase “the Gilded Age” to describe this period of American history (from the 1860s through the 1890s)—though Twain himself was a big (but not always successful) speculator in financial markets. Twain was also concerned with the growing power of public opinion and the conformity and hypocrisy that it might cause. All these themes are present in “The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg” (1899), regarded by many as Twain’s most successful fiction after his two celebrated novels, Tom Sawyer and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

II. Summary

The town of Hadleyburg, known for its honesty and incorruptibility, somehow offends a stranger, “the man” of the title. Bent on revenge, the man hatches a plan that will punish the entire town and expose the hollowness of its proud claim to virtue.

He deposits a sack of gold coins, allegedly worth $40,000, at the home of Edward Richards, one the town’s best citizens. In a note affixed to it, he describes himself as a reformed gambler who wishes to reward the Hadleyburg citizen who once did him a great kindness and who gave him the good advice that changed his life. The note also provides the test: whoever can remember what he said to the stranger (the remark is sealed in an envelope inside the sack) should receive the reward.

Mr. Richards assumes, as do all Hadleyburgians, that only Barclay Goodson, a man now deceased, would have done a good deed to a passing stranger. But he resists the temptation to keep the sack for himself and elects to pursue the matter publicly. A note is published in the local newspaper inviting the person in question to submit his remarks in writing to the Rev. Mr. Burgess, who will announce the name of the winner at a town hall meeting a month hence. Thanks to national publicity given to it by the Associated Press, the incorruptible reputation of Hadleyburg—as well as its own civic pride—quickly
reaches an all-time high. But not for long.

The town’s “wild intoxication” (96) soon gives way to general moodiness and absent-mindedness, as each of its citizens in turn tries to guess the remark that Barclay Goodson might have made. But moods soon change again, en masse, when each one of the town’s nineteen most notable families receives an identical letter, from one Howard L. Stephenson, passing on to them the remark that Goodson had made to the stranger, and which he is sending to them because Goodson had once singled them out as “having done him a very great service” (98). Like the “caste-brothers” they are said to be, each household has the same response: each husband struggles to invent an account of the great service he might have once bestowed on Goodson, while his wife fantasizes about spending the money in ever wilder and more foolish “future squanderings” (102). By the time the town hall meeting is held, Rev. Burgess finds himself in possession of nineteen submitted answers.

A huge crowd of over five hundred packs the town hall. As Burgess prepares to announce the name on the first claim, each of the nineteen quietly rehearses the humble acceptance speech he is about to make. But as the notes are read in turn and compared with the original, pandemonium erupts as each of the nineteen but one is proved guilty of lying, or “humbug.” In return for a kindness he once showed him, Burgess suppressed Edward Richards’s note, and he and his wife become heroes. The sack is opened, and its contents turn out to be worthless gilded disks of lead. Still, to reward the Richardses, a decision is made to auction off the worthless coins and give them the money thus raised. To increase the bidding, a stranger in the crowd—“the man”?—noticing that none of the exposed eighteen are participating, draws them in by entering the bidding himself. He wins the sack for $1,282 but contrives a scheme that enables him to sell the sack for $40,000, the original estimate of its worth. Surprised by the existence of one honest man in Hadleyburg, he gives the lump sum to the Richardses as a reward.

But, alas, Mr. and Mrs. Richards, at first relieved and even pleased by the turn of events, soon become distraught, filled with guilt and fear of exposure. Mr. Richards falls ill and dies shortly thereafter. But before he dies, he insists on exposing himself and Burgess’s cover-up. His wife dies shortly thereafter. Hadleyburg, with its reputation irreparably damaged, decides to rename itself and to change its motto from “Lead Us Not Into Temptation” to “Lead Us Into Temptation.” The story ends with the claim, “It is an honest town once more, and the man will have to rise early that catches it napping again” (125).

III. Thinking about the Text

Given Twain’s known penchant for irony, comedy, and satire, some readers have seen this story as a replay of the Garden of Eden story—recounting the Fall of Hadleyburg, the innocent or virtuous “city on a hill”—and see the source of its corruption—the “Man” of its title—as the incarnation of Satan. In fact, in his hilarious autobiography, Twain himself encourages such a reading. “I have always felt friendly toward Satan,” he confesses. He reports how, as a seven year old, he thought to write a biography of Satan,
a project Mr. Barclay, his Sunday School teacher, nipped in the bud. But Twain often returned to this subject in stories such as “Letters to Satan,” “Sold to Satan,” “A Humane World for Satan,” “That Day in Eden,” and “The Mysterious Stranger.” Others, however, see this as a story about an already corrupt human nature, in which people merely reveal their lack of integrity just as soon as temptation is at hand or when countervailing forces are absent. Consider, in this regard, that the plot begins only after Barclay Goodson (“God’s son”) dies and that the sack of gold is placed in the hands of Edward Richards (“son of riches”). To figure out which view, if either, is most plausible, we need carefully to consider the evidence.

A. Hadleyburg and Hadleyburgians

1. List the various ways in which the Hadleyburgians are described.
   a. What animates them?
   b. What are their chief virtues and vices?
   c. What do they revere?
   d. What are their religious beliefs, and how firmly do they hold them?

IN CONVERSATION


David Brooks: What are we to make of the town of Hadleyburg? How is it a virtuous town? In what does that virtue consist?

Leon Kass: It’s an honest town—it’s honest in its dealings, it’s commercially honest. For someone who has grown up in Hadleyburg, it’s enough to say, “I’ve come from Hadleyburg,” to have a recommendation for a job if you go elsewhere. It’s not a generous town. It’s rather tough on strangers; it doesn’t give a fig for the opinions of strangers. And at several points, people point out that the town is not only ungenerous, but downright stingy. It’s rather narrow-minded; it’s rather self-righteous. They are very proud of their virtue, which has been something that they’ve boasted of for generations.

David Brooks: Are we supposed to take them as examples of America? Is Twain saying America is sort of a smug, narrow, bourgeois society? And that the Hadleyburgians are examples of it?

Amy Kass: It’s not clear whether it’s an example of America as such, but it seems to me that the town itself is supposed to be “Anywhere, USA.” Whether it’s our national character he’s exposing, I’m not sure. But he’s certainly exposing a commercial town and small-town life.

Leon Kass: These people, their honesty seems to be confined to business dealings.
And one shouldn’t make light of it. Commerce depends on a fair bargain, that people deliver what they promise, and that they keep their contracts.

*For more discussion on this question,*
*watch the video online.*

2. Consider Edward and Mary Richards, the primary couple in the story.
   a. Do they differ from the other townspeople? If so, how?
   b. What is the meaning of their frequent “confessions”?
   c. What happens to them at the end of the story, and why?
3. Consider the Rev. Mr. Burgess (the name means “town citizen”), the victim of the town’s hatred for an alleged crime of which he was in fact innocent.
   a. What is he like?
   b. What does his fate tell us about the town?
4. Two other characters are never blamed or made fun of: Jack Halliday and the mysterious Barclay Goodson.
   a. Describe them. What distinguishes them?
   b. Why do you think Twain (or the narrator) spares them his ridicule?
5. What do we learn about the town itself, Hadleyburg, as a result of the plot?
   Could this be “Any Town, USA”?
6. What is responsible for the town’s “corruption”?

**B. “The Man”**

1. What is the character and purpose of his project of revenge? Do you sympathize with (and enjoy) it?
2. What kind of offense might have been committed against the stranger such that the only possible retribution was to ruin the reputation of the whole town?

**IN CONVERSATION**

**David Brooks:** The traditional debate about this story has been: Is this stranger Satan who is taking a good town and corrupting it, or is he an avenging angel who is merely exposing the rottenness which they should have been aware of all along? How are we to view this stranger?

**Amy Kass:** I think there are more than two sides. There’s plenty of evidence in the text that it could be Satan—for example, the fire that he carries with him or the way in which he has various disguises and portrays himself as some kind of strange earl at the town meeting. The town meeting itself seems to be a kind of Devil’s Mass over which he presides. Another argument could be made that the very title—“The
Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg,” as opposed to “The Man Who Corrupted”—suggests it’s not one man who is responsible for the town’s corruption. It might be the result of human nature itself.

Leon Kass: This is a fellow who is certainly not a Christian. He’s driven by revenge; it eats at him constantly. And he’s not content to take his revenge on the one or two people who gave him offense. He wants to destroy this whole town. The town has for its original motto “Lead Us Not Into Temptation”—the verse from Matthew and also part of the Lord’s Prayer. He wants to undo that kind of aspiration. There are people who are envious of virtue, or apparent virtue, and they’d like to bring it down. They might be in league with the devil, if there is a devil. It’s not necessarily the case that you have to invoke a figure called Satan. The story does have something of the character of the fall of innocence—the fall of an innocent, untested town. But I’m not sure we need to decide the question as between these alternatives.

David Brooks: There’s ambiguity there. The original sin committed against the man is never described. We just know something bad happened. And that may universalize it, I suppose. It’s sort of an odd omission; it makes you wonder. But it also makes the man mysterious.

Amy Kass: The fact that he is described as a mysterious stranger is further evidence for the argument that it might be Satan. But we are given a hint in what he says at the town meeting, or in the note that’s read during the town meeting—the postscript to the note—about what his purpose was and what actually happened. It seems that it was the vanity of the town itself—their pride in their honesty, their honest dealings—that really disturbed him. And it’s that that he wants to undermine.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

C. Laughter

1. What’s funny in the story?
2. Who laughs in the story, and why? Who doesn’t, and why?
3. When, why, and at what do we readers laugh?

IV. Thinking with the Text

The story invites questions about a number of interesting themes important for thinking about the meaning of America: the virtues (real and apparent) of civic life; civic pride; the desire for gain and the commercial spirit; the strengths and weaknesses of religious belief; the power of public opinion, especially in democratic societies and democratic times; the treatment of strangers (and nonconformists); honesty, dishonesty, and

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hypocrisy; and the role of humor in the education of citizens. Here are a few worth your attention.

**A. Virtue and Civic Pride**

1. How important is honest dealing for healthy civic life? What other virtues are most needed?
2. Is honesty good in itself, or is it simply good policy?
3. Is it foolish for a city to pride itself on its virtue? Is it possible to cultivate civic pride without also cultivating vanity?
4. Should hypocrisy always be exposed? Would unhypocritical dishonesty be preferable to hypocritical—or artificial or pretentious—honesty?
5. How should a unified, proud town treat strangers? Eccentrics?
6. Are the problems of this small-town America different from those facing big-city America or those we face as a nation? More generally, are the ethical problems in this story problems of human beings everywhere, or is there something peculiarly American about them?
7. Is middle-class, small-town (or suburban) life in America deserving of the ridicule and contempt that Twain—and many writers and intellectuals since—have heaped upon it?

**IN CONVERSATION**

**David Brooks:** One of the questions about this story is “What sort of person does capitalism create?” You have to cooperate if you’re going to work in a business. You have to have some level of trust if you’re going to work, if you’re going to do deals. The question is whether that’s a real fraternity or whether it’s simply contractual. In this town, it suggests they are doing deals, but there’s no actual fellow-feeling. They’re just a bunch of struggling individualists or families without any real cohesion.

**Amy Kass:** They are described as being neighborly. How would they spend the evenings? They would go visiting their neighbors. And it’s perfectly clear that everybody knows everybody else.

**David Brooks:** I want to press this point about the nature of capitalist relationships, because, fundamentally, I think Twain is wrong. I think it’s an inaccurate portrayal of what America is, of what towns are. One of the things he gets wrong is exactly the nature of what capitalism does to people, or what democratic capitalism does to people. I think people get together for self-interested reasons, but these relationships get enchanted. They develop affections for their neighbors which transcend the capitalist impulse it started with, and they are quite real relationships.

**Leon Kass:** I’m inclined to agree with your view that if this was meant to be a
caricature of American commercial society, it’s partial and unfair—the way satire very often is unfair. But to join with Amy’s point, this is small-town America; this isn’t big industrial society yet. There’s the hatter, there’s the tanner, and there’s the saddler—there’s one of each in the town. Second, in addition to the commercial spirit and the reputation for honest dealings, we also have a certain homogeneity of public opinion that is also said to be characteristic of small-town America. There’s a kind of self-righteousness that goes with their pride in their own virtue. They do have religion, but religion serves mostly in the form of public opinion.

**David Brooks:** I think he’s taking the intellectuals’ false sense of superiority about a town. And my main beef with this story is that it created the formula that was then recreated by every single novel and movie about American small-town and suburban life ever since. And the model is virtuous on the surface, rotten at the bottom—and only us intellectuals can see that.

*For more discussion on this question,*

*watch the video online.*

**B. The Commercial Spirit and Religion** *(For these questions, consider the story in conjunction with *Federalist 10* on page 126.)*

1. Can one square the commercial spirit and its encouragement of the love of gain with religious teachings that encourage duties to others and love of Heaven? With Christian teachings that seem hostile to the pursuit of wealth?
2. What is the relation in America between our Judeo-Christian religious teachings and our devotion to getting ahead and the pursuit of material well-being?

**IN CONVERSATION**

**Amy Kass:** One of the problems is the state of religion in this town. What we see here is that the Reverend Burgess has been disgraced, and so whatever the town once looked up to—if it ever looked up to something higher—is very ambiguous now.

**David Brooks:** I think we would agree that capitalism has to be embedded in a deeper value system. But I would say, especially in this country, that value system is deeply embedded and it’s not washed away simply because your minister gets disgraced. My shorthand version of the American character is that Europeans came here and they saw a vast forest, and two thoughts occurred to these Europeans. One, that God’s plans for humanity could be realized here. This could be the last, the final eschatology of the human race. And, second, they could get really rich in the process.
So you had intense spiritual and intense material drive. And this moral materialism fused and really has been driving America ever since.

**Leon Kass:** There are in a way two strands to the early American Founding. One is a strand embodied in the *Mayflower Compact*: that we are here for the greater glory of God. The other is the strand you find in the individual rights of the *Declaration of Independence* and encouraged by the commercial republic envisioned by *Federalist 10* and the Constitution for material well-being.

The spirit of religion and the spirit of liberty and enterprise live side by side, even though in pure form they would seem to be opposed to each other. The Scripture says it’s easier for a camel to get through an eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, and the love of money is the root of all evil. What happens in America is religion manages to make its peace with acquisitiveness, provided it’s done honestly.

Twain is going after that sort of compromise that religion, with its general suspicion of wealth, has made in America for honest dealings. Honest dealings are where the spirit of religion and the spirit of enterprise merge, and the question is whether that’s sufficient and whether it isn’t precarious when push comes to shove, when temptation appears.

**David Brooks:** If I wanted to defend the story, I’d say it’s not an accurate sociological description of who we are, and I think it’s led to a lot of pernicious snobbery, but it may be a corrective.

One of the things that America does to religion is that it makes religion very happy. [The historian] Henry Steele Commager wrote that “In the nineteenth century, religion prospered while theology slowly went bankrupt,” meaning that we don’t do doctrine very well. Our God is someone who is encouraging; there’s very little sin involved, very little evil involved. He’s more of a friendly coach, telling you to work hard and be a good person. We have a tendency to deny our own sinfulness, and Twain could be reminding us of that.

**Amy Kass:** It’s perfectly clear this couldn’t have happened if Barclay Goodson hadn’t died. The name itself suggests the Son of God—unless the Son of God hadn’t died.

*For more discussion on this question,*

*watch the video online.*

3. How can a commercial society best inculcate moral and spiritual teachings and habits in the young?
4. Is Hadleyburg’s new motto, “Lead Us Into Temptation,” really preferable to the old one, “Lead Us Not Into Temptation” (Matthew 6:13 and the Lord’s Prayer)? Why or why not?

**IN CONVERSATION**

**Leon Kass:** I’m sort of sad for the town at the end. I’m not sure that the new motto that they proposed for themselves is an improvement. The old motto of the town is “Lead Us Not Into Temptation;” the new motto of the town is “Lead Us Into Temptation.” I’m not sure that’s what you want to teach your young people.

**David Brooks:** Could you expand because that befuddled me? I didn’t understand what Twain meant by that.

**Amy Kass:** They were raised from the cradle to believe that they ought never to be led into temptation. That’s what they’re told from the very beginning. What makes them succumb so easily to the first temptation that comes their way is that they’ve never been tested. So you change the motto from “Lead Us Not Into Temptation” to “Lead Us Into Temptation” because only by being tried and tested will your virtue really emerge.

**Leon Kass:** It’s got to also be a dig at Christian teaching. This is the heart of the Lord’s Prayer; that was what was left of the Lord’s Prayer in this town. It’s certainly true that untested virtue may be hollow and may be artificial. Mary Richards says herself, “I’m a humbug.” But I think there’s a doctrinal question here that’s being attacked. The town becomes anonymous—we don’t know where the town is—it’s taken a new name to avoid its previous disgrace. It’s now going to encourage people to have temptations, and you could say, look, America has followed the new model of Hadleyburg all too well.

**David Brooks:** So Las Vegas is our new model because there’s a lot of temptation in Vegas?

**Amy Kass:** What do you think? Three cheers for hypocrisy?

**Leon Kass:** I’ll give two. Hypocrisy, [François de] La Rochefoucauld says, is the tribute that vice pays to virtue. You’d much rather live in a community in which there was public scrupulosity and some private corruption than if you lived in a community in which everybody was vicious and they made no bones about it. There are things wrong with the town as caricatured, but I’m not sure the town has been improved as a result of having abandoned its aspirations to be virtuous.

*For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.*
C. Individualism and Public Opinion (For these questions, consider the story in conjunction with the Tocqueville passage below and *Federalist 10* on page 126.)

In his *Democracy in America*, in the chapter on “The Principal Source of Belief among Democratic Nations,” Alexis de Tocqueville helps us understand the power of public opinion in the age of equality and individualism:

*The nearer the citizens are drawn to . . . an equal and similar condition, the less prone does each man become to place implicit faith in a certain man or a certain class of men. But his readiness to believe the multitude increases, and opinion is more than ever mistress of the world. Not only is common opinion the only guide which private judgment retains amongst a democratic people, but amongst such a people it possesses a power infinitely beyond what it has elsewhere. At periods of equality men have no faith in one another, by reason of their common resemblance; but this very resemblance gives them almost unbounded confidence in the judgment of the public; for it would not seem probable, as they are all endowed with equal means of judging, but that the greater truth should go with the greater number.*

As Twain’s story makes evident, the rule of public opinion can easily lead to prideful pretentiousness and the tyranny of the majority.

1. What is the role of public opinion in contemporary American life? What can be said both for and against its influence?

2. Mr. and Mrs. Richards are greatly concerned about their reputation in the eyes of their fellow citizens. Should they be? Should we be? To what extent, and at what cost? Would you like to live among people who did not care about their reputations? What if their reputations were all they cared about? How does one strike the proper balance?

3. The American Republic, by design of the Founders, chose to combat the danger of tyranny by a majority faction by encouraging commerce, self-interest, and the multiplication of economic factions (see *Federalist 10* for the rationale for a large, commercial republic). How well does the encouragement of enterprise counteract the danger of the tyranny of majority opinion? What role does self-interest play?

**IN CONVERSATION**

**David Brooks:** Throughout the story, there are people who are wrongly accused in the town, and Richards, one of the main burghers of the town and a bank cashier, has the opportunity to present evidence which would have exonerated Burgess, the minister. Because he didn’t want the town to think ill of him, he did not actually go forward and say, “Hey, I have some facts about this guy you should know about.” He didn’t want to appear as though he was on his side when he was out of favor. The conforming force of public opinion is, in addition to their vanity and their pride,
one of the sins that’s already sitting there in the town.

**Leon Kass:** The story powerfully shows how public opinion and reputation is a dominant consideration in the minds of absolutely everybody in this story. It’s not simply terrible to care about your reputation. You wouldn’t want to live amongst people in which nobody cared what anyone else thought of them. In this story, and as we know from experience, public opinion can be tyrannical, and it can get in the way of people doing the honorable thing.

**David Brooks:** The people of the town are acutely interested in the opinions of others. And while I think this story is very bad sociology, I think it’s pretty good psychology.

Tocqueville thought this was a particular American problem. Do you think Tocqueville was right? Or is it a universal problem?

**Leon Kass:** Under democratic rule, we don’t think anybody else has more purchase on the truth of things than we do, and yet we can’t really sort out everything for ourselves. We tend to give much more weight to the opinion of the majority. That’s both good and bad. There is the danger of the tyranny of the majority; it wreaks havoc on unconventional opinion which is sometimes better than that of the multitude. It makes it difficult for nonconformists, for artists, among others.

On the other hand, public opinion is where mores exist and are taught. It’s not unimportant for civil peace that we don’t violate those opinions. And very often those opinions carry the moral teachings, norms, and standards of the community.

**Amy Kass:** That’s very important. You don’t want to teach people to live in the opinions of others. On the other hand, you don’t want them to ignore the opinions of others.

*For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.*

**D. Humor and Citizenship**

Twain’s remedy for the foibles of America—or of America in the Gilded Age—seems to be laughter. He turns his biting wit against the commercial spirit, religion, and the narrowness and pretentiousness of small-town America—and we all laugh with him. But we should also consider the significance of (his) humor for civic life and its possible improvement.

1. Can laughter at others’ pretentiousness or hypocrisy help to moderate similar tendencies in ourselves? Or does it only make us feel superior to the laughed-at? What is the difference between laughing at someone as opposed to
laughing with him—or at ourselves? Which are the citizens of Hadleyburg engaged in? What are we as readers engaged in?

2. Can humor provide a bond of society and encourage the virtues to sustain it? Or is it good only at mockery and tearing down, not for building up?

3. Is the pursuit of civic virtue and virtuous reputation in itself deserving of ridicule?
Freedom and Religion
The May-Pole of Merry Mount

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

With the possible exception of Herman Melville, no American writer wrote more deeply about the complexities of the American character than Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–64). In this story (1837), we witness an early version of the culture war, each side representing in extreme form one of two guiding ideas of the American Republic: the pursuit of happiness (see the Declaration of Independence) and the spirit of reverence (see the Mayflower Compact), each unmoderated by the other. The Merry-Mounters, the party of jollity, live carelessly for the pleasure of the moment. The Puritans, the party of gloom, live austerely in fear of Heaven. The story invites us to see both strands as part of the American character, and to ponder whether and how they can be reconciled. In the character of the young couple, Edgar and Edith, the story may be suggesting a third option based on love, at once joyous and earnest, winning the respect even of the most Puritan of Puritans.

What can be said for and against the two dominant parties? Is there really some middle way combining the virtues of each without their correlative vices? Where in the American idea do we find support for the blend of self-sacrifice and self-fulfillment implicit in love, marriage, and family?

There is an admirable foundation for a philosophic romance, in the curious history of the early settlement of Mount Wollaston, or Merry Mount. In the slight sketch here attempted, the facts, recorded on the grave pages of our New England annalists, have wrought themselves, almost spontaneously, into a sort of allegory. The masques, mummeries, and festive customs, described in the text, are in accordance with the manners of the age. Authority on these points may be found in Strutt’s Book of English Sports and Pastimes.

Bright were the days at Merry Mount, when the May-Pole was the banner-staff of that gay colony! They who reared it, should their banner be triumphant, were to pour sunshine over New England’s rugged hills, and scatter flower-seeds throughout the soil. Jollity and gloom were contending for an empire. Midsummer eve had come, bringing deep verdure to the forest, and roses in her lap, of a more vivid hue than the tender buds of Spring. But May, or her mirthful spirit, dwelt all the year round at Merry Mount, sporting with the Summer months, and revelling with Autumn, and basking in the glow of Winter’s fireside. Through a world of toil and care she flitted with a dreamlike smile, and came hither to find a home among the lightsome hearts of Merry Mount.

Never had the May-Pole been so gayly decked as at sunset on midsummer eve. This venerated emblem was a pine tree, which had preserved the slender grace of youth, while it equaled the loftiest height of the old wood monarchs. From its top streamed a silken banner, colored like the rainbow. Down nearly to the ground, the pole was dressed with birchen boughs, and others of the liveliest green, and some with silvery leaves, fastened by ribbons that fluttered in fantastic knots of twenty different colors, but no sad ones.
Garden flowers, and blossoms of the wilderness, laughed gladly forth amid the verdure, so fresh and dewy, that they must have grown by magic on that happy pine tree. Where this green and flowery splendor terminated, the shaft of the May-Pole was stained with the seven brilliant hues of the banner at its top. On the lowest green bough hung an abundant wreath of roses, some that had been gathered in the sunniest spots of the forest, and others, of still richer blush, which the colonists had reared from English seed. Oh, people of the Golden Age, the chief of your husbandry, was to raise flowers!

But what was the wild throng that stood hand in hand about the May-Pole? It could not be, that the Fauns and Nymphs, when driven from their classic groves and homes of ancient fable, had sought refuge, as all the persecuted did, in the fresh woods of the West. These were Gothic monsters, though perhaps of Grecian ancestry. On the shoulders of a comely youth, uprose the head and branching antlers of a stag; a second, human in all other points, had the grim visage of a wolf; a third, still with the trunk and limbs of a mortal man, showed the beard and horns of a venerable he-goat. There was the likeness of a bear erect, brute in all but his hind legs, which were adorned with pink silk stockings. And here again, almost as wondrous, stood a real bear of the dark forest, lending each of his fore paws to the grasp of a human hand, and as ready for the dance as any in that circle. His inferior nature rose half-way, to meet his companions as they stooped. Other faces wore the similitude of man or woman, but distorted or extravagant, with red noses pendulous before their mouths, which seemed of awful depth, and stretched from ear to ear in an eternal fit of laughter. Here might be seen the Salvage Man, well known in heraldry, hairy as a baboon, and girdled with green leaves. By his side, a nobler figure, but still a counterfeit, appeared an Indian hunter, with feathery crest and wampum belt. Many of this strange company wore fools-caps, and had little bells appended to their garments, tinkling with a silvery sound, responsive to the inaudible music of their gleesome spirits. Some youths and maidens were of soberer garb, yet well maintained their places in the irregular throng, by the expression of wild revelry upon their features. Such were the colonists of Merry Mount, as they stood in the broad smile of sunset, round their venerated May-Pole.

Had a wanderer, bewildered in the melancholy forest, heard their mirth, and stolen a half-affrighted glance, he might have fancied them the crew of Comus, some already transformed to brutes, some midway between man and beast, and the others rioting in the flow of tipsy jollity that foreran the change. But a band of Puritans, who watched the scene, invisible themselves, compared the masques to those devils and ruined souls, with whom their superstition peopled the black wilderness.

Within the ring of monsters, appeared the two airiest forms, that had ever trodden on any more solid footing than a purple and golden cloud. One was a youth, in glistening apparel, with a scarf of the rainbow pattern crosswise on his breast. His right hand held a gilded staff, the ensign of high dignity among the revellers, and his left grasped the slender fingers of a fair maiden, not less gayly decorated than himself. Bright roses glowed in contrast with the dark and glossy curls of each, and were scattered round their

†† The Greek god of revelry and merrymaking, son and cupbearer to the god Dionysus, or Bacchus, to the Romans, usually depicted as a winged youth or as a child-satyr
feet, or had sprung up spontaneously there. Behind this lightsome couple, so close to the
May-Pole that its boughs shaded his jovial face, stood the figure of an English priest,
canonically dressed, yet decked with flowers, in heathen fashion, and wearing a chaplet
of the native vine leaves. By the riot of his rolling eye, and the pagan decorations of his
holy garb, he seemed the wildest monster there, and the very Comus of the crew.

“Votaries of the May-Pole,” cried the flower-decked priest, “merrily, all day long,
have the woods echoed to your mirth. But be this your merriest hour, my hearts! Lo, here
stand the Lord and Lady of the May, whom I, a clerk of Oxford, and high priest of Merry
Mount, am presently to join in holy matrimony. Up with your nimble spirits, ye morrice-
dancers, green-men, and glee-maidens, bears and wolves, and horned gentlemen! Come;
a chorus now, rich with the old mirth of Merry England, and the wilder glee of this fresh
forest; and then a dance, to show the youthful pair what life is made of, and how airily
they should go through it! All ye that love the May-Pole, lend your voices to the nuptial
song of the Lord and Lady of the May!”

This wedlock was more serious than most affairs of Merry Mount, where jest and
delusion, trick and fantasy, kept up a continued carnival. The Lord and Lady of the May,
though their titles must be laid down at sunset, were really and truly to be partners for the
dance of life, beginning the measure that same bright eve. The wreath of roses, that hung
from the lowest green bough of the May-Pole, had been twined for them, and would be
thrown over both their heads, in symbol of their flowery union. When the priest had
spoken, therefore, a riotous uproar burst from the rout of monstrous figures.

“Begin you the stave, reverend Sir,” cried they all; “and never did the woods ring to
such a merry peal, as we of the May-Pole shall send up!”

Immediately a prelude of pipe, cittern, and viol, touched with practiced minstrelsy,
 began to play from a neighboring thicket, in such a mirthful cadence that the boughs of
the May-Pole quivered to the sound. But the May Lord, he of the gilded staff, chancing to
look into his Lady’s eyes, was wonder-struck at the almost pensive glance that met his
own.

“Edith, sweet Lady of the May,” whispered he, reproachfully, “is yon wreath of roses
a garland to hang above our graves, that you look so sad? Oh, Edith, this is our golden
time! Tarnish it not by any pensive shadow of the mind; for it may be, that nothing of
futurity will be brighter than the mere remembrance of what is now passing.”

“That was the very thought that saddened me! How came it in your mind too?” said
Edith, in a still lower tone than he; for it was high treason to be sad at Merry Mount.
“Therefore do I sigh amid this festive music. And besides, dear Edgar, I struggle as with
a dream, and fancy that these shapes of our jovial friends are visionary, and their mirth
unreal, and that we are no true Lord and Lady of the May. What is the mystery in my
heart?”
Just then, as if a spell had loosened them, down came a little shower of withering rose leaves from the May-Pole. Alas, for the young lovers! No sooner had their hearts glowed with real passion, than they were sensible of something vague and unsubstantial in their former pleasures, and felt a dreary presentiment of inevitable change. From the moment that they truly loved, they had subjected themselves to earth’s doom of care, and sorrow, and troubled joy, and had no more a home at Merry Mount. That was Edith’s mystery. Now leave we the priest to marry them, and the masquers to sport round the May-Pole, till the last sunbeam be withdrawn from its summit, and the shadows of the forest mingle gloomily in the dance. Meanwhile, we may discover who these gay people were.

Two hundred years ago, and more, the old world and its inhabitants became mutually weary of each other. Men voyaged by thousands to the West; some to barter glass beads, and such like jewels, for the furs of the Indian hunter; some to conquer virgin empires; and one stern band to pray. But none of these motives had much weight with the colonists of Merry Mount. Their leaders were men who had sported so long with life, that when Thought and Wisdom came, even these unwelcome guests were led astray, by the crowd of vanities which they should have put to flight. Erring Thought and perverted Wisdom were made to put on masques, and play the fool. The men of whom we speak, after losing the heart’s fresh gaiety, imagined a wild philosophy of pleasure, and came hither to act out their latest day-dream. They gathered followers from all that giddy tribe, whose whole life is like the festal days of soberer men. In their train were minstrels, not unknown in London streets; wandering players, whose theatres had been the halls of noblemen; mummers, rope-dancers, and mountebanks, who would long be missed at wakes, church-ales,‡‡ and fairs; in a word, mirth-makers of every sort, such as abounded in that age, but now began to be discountenanced by the rapid growth of Puritanism. Light had their footsteps been on land, and as lightly they came across the sea. Many had been maddened by their previous troubles into a gay despair; others were as madly gay in the flush of youth, like the May Lord and his Lady; but whatever might be the quality of their mirth, old and young were gay at Merry Mount. The young deemed themselves happy. The elder spirits, if they knew that mirth was but the counterfeit of happiness, yet followed the false shadow wilfully, because at least her garments glittered brightest. Sworn triflers of a lifetime, they would not venture among the sober truths of life, not even to be truly blest.

All the hereditary pastimes of Old England were transplanted hither. The King of Christmas was duly crowned, and the Lord of Misrule bore potent sway. On the Eve of St. John, they felled whole acres of the forest to make bonfires, and danced by the blaze all night, crowned with garlands, and throwing flowers into the flame. At harvest time, though their crop was of the smallest, they made an image with the sheaves of Indian corn, and wreathed it with autumnal garlands, and bore it home triumphantly. But what chiefly characterized the colonists of Merry Mount, was their veneration for the May-Pole. It has made their true history a poet’s tale. Spring decked the hallowed emblem with young blossoms and fresh green boughs; Summer brought roses of the deepest blush, and the perfected foliage of the forest; Autumn enriched it with that red and yellow

‡‡ A church or parish festival (as in commemoration of the dedication of a church), at which much ale was used.
gorgeousness, which converts each wild-wood leaf into a painted flower; and Winter
silvered it with sleet, and hung it round with icicles, till it flashed in the cold sunshine,
itself a frozen sunbeam. Thus each alternate season did homage to the May-Pole, and
paid it a tribute of its own richest splendor. Its votaries danced round it, once, at least, in
every month; sometimes they called it their religion, or their altar; but always, it was the
banner-staff of Merry Mount.

Unfortunately, there were men in the new world, of a sterner faith than these May-
Pole worshippers. Not far from Merry Mount was a settlement of Puritans, most dismal
wretches, who said their prayers before daylight, and then wrought in the forest or the
cornfield, till evening made it prayer time again. Their weapons were always at hand, to
shoot down the straggling savage. When they met in conclave, it was never to keep up the
old English mirth, but to hear sermons three hours long, or to proclaim bounties on the
heads of wolves and the scalps of Indians. Their festivals were fast-days, and their chief
pastime the singing of psalms. Woe to the youth or maiden, who did but dream of a
dance! The selectman nodded to the constable; and there sat the light-heeled reprobate in
the stocks; or if he danced, it was round the whipping-post, which might be termed the
Puritan May-Pole.

A party of these grim Puritans, toiling through the difficult woods, each with a horse-
load of iron armor to burthen his footsteps, would sometimes draw near the sunny
precincts of Merry Mount. There were the silken colonists, sporting round their May-
Pole; perhaps teaching a bear to dance, or striving to communicate their mirth to the
grave Indian; or masquerading in the skins of deer and wolves, which they had hunted for
that especial purpose. Often, the whole colony were playing at blindman’s bluff,
magistrates and all with their eyes bandaged, except a single scape-goat, whom the
blinded sinners pursued by the tinkling of the bells at his garments. Once, it is said, they
were seen following a flower-decked corpse, with merriment and festive music, to his
grave. But did the dead man laugh? In their quietest times, they sang ballads and told
tales, for the edification of their pious visitors; or perplexed them with juggling tricks; or
grinned at them through horse-collars; and when sport itself grew wearisome, they made
game of their own stupidity, and began a yawning match. At the very least of these
enormities, the men of iron shook their heads and frowned so darkly, that the revelers
looked up, imagining that a momentary cloud had overcast the sunshine, which was to be
perpetual there. On the other hand, the Puritans affirmed, that, when a psalm was pealing
from their place of worship, the echo, which the forest sent them back, seemed often like
the chorus of a jolly catch, closing with a roar of laughter. Who but the fiend, and his
bond-slaves, the crew of Merry Mount, had thus disturbed them! In due time, a feud
arose, stern and bitter on one side, and as serious on the other as any thing could be,
among such light spirits as had sworn allegiance to the May-Pole. The future complexion
of England was involved in this important quarrel. Should the grisly saints establish their
jurisdiction over the gay sinners, then would their spirits darken all the clime, and make it
a land of clouded visages, of hard toil, of sermon and psalm, forever. But should the
banner-staff of Merry Mount be fortunate, sunshine would break upon the hills, and
flowers would beautify the forest, and late posterity do homage to the May-Pole!
After these authentic passages from history, we return to the nuptials of the Lord and Lady of the May. Alas! we have delayed too long, and must darken our tale too suddenly. As we glance again at the May-Pole, a solitary sunbeam is fading from the summit, and leaves only a faint golden tinge, blended with the hues of the rainbow banner. Even that dim light is now withdrawn, relinquishing the whole domain of Merry Mount to the evening gloom, which has rushed so instantaneously from the black surrounding woods. But some of these black shadows have rushed forth in human shape.

Yes: with the setting sun, the last day of mirth had passed from Merry Mount. The ring of gay masquers was disordered and broken; the stag lowered his antlers in dismay; the wolf grew weaker than a lamb; the bells of the morrice-dancers tinkled with tremulous affright. The Puritans had played a characteristic part in the May-Pole mummeries. Their darksome figures were intermixed with the wild shapes of their foes, and made the scene a picture of the moment, when waking thoughts start up amid the scattered fantasies of a dream. The leader of the hostile party stood in the centre of the circle, while the rout of monsters cowered around him, like evil spirits in the presence of a dread magician. No fantastic foolery could look him in the face. So stern was the energy of his aspect, that the whole man, visage, frame, and soul, seemed wrought of iron, gifted with life and thought, yet all of one substance with his head-piece and breast-plate. It was the Puritan of Puritans; it was Endicott himself!

“Stand off, priest of Baal!” said he, with a grim frown, and laying no reverent hand upon the surplice. “I know thee, Blackstone! Thou art the man, who couldst not abide the rule even of thine own corrupted church, and hast come hither to preach iniquity, and to give example of it in thy life. But now shall it be seen that the Lord hath sanctified this wilderness for his peculiar people. Woe unto them that would defile it! And first for this flower-decked abomination, the altar of thy worship!”

And with his keen sword, Endicott assaulted the hallowed May-Pole. Nor long did it resist his arm. It groaned with a dismal sound; it showered leaves, and rose-buds upon the remorseless enthusiast; and finally, with all its green boughs, and ribbons, and flowers, symbolic of departed pleasures, down fell the banner-staff of Merry Mount. As it sank, tradition says, the evening sky grew darker, and the woods threw forth a more sombre shadow.

“There,” cried Endicott, looking triumphantly on his work, “there lies the only May-Pole in New England! The thought is strong within me, that, by its fall, is shadowed forth the fate of light and idle mirth-makers, amongst us and our posterity. Amen, saith John Endicott!”

“Amen!” echoed his followers.

§§ Did Governor Endicott speak less positively, we should suspect a mistake here. The Rev. Mr. Blackstone, though an eccentric, is not known to have been an immoral man. We rather doubt his identity with the priest of Merry Mount.
But the votaries of the May-Pole gave one groan for their idol. At the sound, the Puritan leader glanced at the crew of Comus, each a figure of broad mirth, yet, at this moment, strangely expressive of sorrow and dismay.

"Valiant captain," quoth Peter Palfrey, the Ancient of the band, "what order shall be taken with the prisoners?"

"I thought not to repent me of cutting down a May-Pole," replied Endicott, "yet now I could find in my heart to plant it again, and give each of these bestial pagans one other dance round their idol. It would have served rarely for a whipping-post!"

"But there are pine trees enow," suggested the lieutenant.

"True, good Ancient," said the leader. "Wherefore, bind the heathen crew, and bestow on them a small matter of stripes apiece, as earnest of our future justice. Set some of the rogues in the stocks to rest themselves, so soon as Providence shall bring us to one of our own well-ordered settlements, where such accommodations may be found. Further penalties, such as branding and cropping of ears, shall be thought of hereafter."

"How many stripes for the priest?" inquired Ancient Palfrey.

"None as yet," answered Endicott, bending his iron frown upon the culprit. "It must be for the Great and General Court to determine, whether stripes and long imprisonment, and other grievous penalty, may atone for his transgressions. Let him look to himself! For such as violate our civil order, it may be permitted us to show mercy. But woe to the wretch that troubleth our religion!"

"And this dancing bear," resumed the officer. "Must he share the stripes of his fellows?"

"Shoot him through the head!" said the energetic Puritan. "I suspect witchcraft in the beast."

"Here be a couple of shining ones," continued Peter Palfrey, pointing his weapon at the Lord and Lady of the May. "They seem to be of high station among these mis-doers. Methinks their dignity will not be fitted with less than a double share of stripes."

Endicott rested on his sword, and closely surveyed the dress and aspect of the hapless pair. There they stood, pale, downcast, and apprehensive. Yet there was an air of mutual support, and of pure affection, seeking aid and giving it, that showed them to be man and wife, with the sanction of a priest upon their love. The youth, in the peril of the moment, had dropped his gilded staff, and thrown his arm about the Lady of the May, who leaned against his breast, too lightly to burthen him, but with weight enough to express that their destinies were linked together, for good or evil. They looked first at each other, and then into the grim captain’s face. There they stood, in the first hour of wedlock, while the idle pleasures, of which their companions were the emblems, had given place to the sternest
cares of life, personified by the dark Puritans. But never had their youthful beauty seemed so pure and high, as when its glow was chastened by adversity.

“Youth,” said Endicott, “ye stand in an evil case, thou and thy maiden wife. Make ready presently; for I am minded that ye shall both have a token to remember your wedding-day!”

“Stern man,” exclaimed the May Lord, “how can I move thee? Were the means at hand, I would resist to the death. Being powerless, I entreat! Do with me as thou wilt; but let Edith go untouched!”

“Not so,” replied the immitigable zealot. “We are not wont to show an idle courtesy to that sex, which requireth the stricter discipline. What sayest thou, maid? Shall thy silken bridegroom suffer thy share of the penalty, besides his own?”

“Be it death,” said Edith, “and lay it all on me!”

Truly, as Endicott had said, the poor lovers stood in a woeful case. Their foes were triumphant, their friends captive and abased, their home desolate, the benighted wilderness around them, and a rigorous destiny, in the shape of the Puritan leader, their only guide. Yet the deepening twilight could not altogether conceal, that the iron man was softened; he smiled, at the fair spectacle of early love; he almost sighed, for the inevitable blight of early hopes.

“The troubles of life have come hastily on this young couple,” observed Endicott. “We will see how they comport themselves under their present trials, ere we burthen them with greater. If, among the spoil, there be any garments of a more decent fashion, let them be put upon this May Lord and his Lady, instead of their glistening vanities. Look to it, some of you.”

“And shall not the youth’s hair be cut?” asked Peter Palfrey, looking with abhorrence at the love-lock and long glossy curls of the young man.

“Crop it forthwith, and that in the true pumpkin-shell fashion,” answered the captain. “Then bring them along with us, but more gently than their fellows. There be qualities in the youth, which may make him valiant to fight, and sober to toil, and pious to pray; and in the maiden, that may fit her to become a mother in our Israel, bringing up babes in better nurture than her own hath been. Nor think ye, young ones, that they are the happiest, even in our lifetime of a moment, who misspend it in dancing round a May-Pole!”

And Endicott, the severest Puritan of all who laid the rock-foundation of New England, lifted the wreath of roses from the ruin of the May-Pole, and threw it, with his own gauntleted hand, over the heads of the Lord and Lady of the May. It was a deed of prophecy. As the moral gloom of the world overpowers all systematic gaiety, even so was their home of wild mirth made desolate amid the sad forest. They returned to it no more.
But, as their flowery garland was wreathed of the brightest roses that had grown there, so, in the tie that united them, were intertwined all the purest and best of their early joys. They went heavenward, supporting each other along the difficult path which it was their lot to tread, and never wasted one regretful thought on the vanities of Merry Mount.
Mayflower Compact

While we declared our national independence in 1776 and drafted our new, and abiding, Constitution just a decade later, the founding of the United States of America should perhaps not be taken as the beginning point of democracy in America. Before the Founding Fathers there were the Pilgrim Fathers. That great analyst of American democracy Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–59) argued in Democracy in America that the nation’s point of departure was really to be found in the ideas and practices of the “pious adventurers” who came to the wilderness so that they might “pray to God in freedom” and, in their own words, “build a city upon a hill” as a beacon to the rest of the world. According to Tocqueville, “Puritanism was not only a religious doctrine; it also blended at several points with the most absolute democratic and republican theories.” Evidence of the mixture of high religious purpose with political notions that led to the flourishing of independent township government (especially in New England) can be seen in the Mayflower Compact. Signed aboard ship on November 11, 1620, it became the first governing document of the colonists who landed at Plymouth Rock.

How do the Pilgrims understand their community? Is “covenant” or “compact” just a synonym for “social contract” and government based on consent? Or does the language of covenant indicate something distinctive about the foundations or purposes of their political union? Tocqueville claimed that the American point of departure was “a product of two perfectly distinct elements that elsewhere have often made war with each other, but which, in America, they have succeeded in incorporating somehow into one another and combining marvelously . . . the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom.” Are these two spirits still present—still compatible, still mutually supportive—in America today? Does it matter whether they are still present and still harmonious?

In the name of God, Amen. We whose names are underwritten, the loyal subjects of our dread Sovereign Lord King James, by the Grace of God, of Great Britain, France and Ireland King, Defender of the Faith, etc.

Having undertaken, for the Glory of God and advancement of the Christian Faith and Honour of our King and Country, a Voyage to plant the First Colony in the Northern Parts of Virginia, do by these presents solemnly and mutually in the presence of God and one of another, Covenant and Combine our selves together into a Civil Body Politic, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions and Offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the Colony, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.

In witness whereof we have hereunder subscribed our names at Cape Cod, the 11th of November, in the year of the reign of our Sovereign Lord King James, of England, France, and Ireland the eighteenth, and of Scotland the fifty-fourth. Anno Domini 1620.
To the Hebrew Congregation
in Newport, Rhode Island

GEORGE WASHINGTON

Developing its unique blend of religion and politics, the American Republic pioneered a novel approach to the problems of religious zealotry and religious conflict that plagued Europe. The United States has no established national church and the Constitution proscribes any religious test for holding national office. But this “separation” of church and state, far from being indifferent to the religiosity of the people, was intended to support liberty of conscience and freedom of worship, privileges until then rare among the nations of the world—and today still precarious in many regimes. President George Washington (1732–99) offered an early, generous expression of the principle of religious freedom even before the adoption of the Bill of Rights (1791) in this Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island (1790). Washington wrote many similar letters to other denominations in response to their letters of congratulation upon his election as the nation’s first president. The array of these letters illustrates the nation’s vibrant and peaceful religious pluralism.

Nonetheless, many questions remain. Does vigorous religious pluralism enhance or diminish national identity and civic attachment? Are there limits to religious toleration? Are there religious sects or beliefs that put in doubt the beautiful image of each sitting “in safety under his own vine and figtree”? Is liberty of conscience, coupled with disestablishment, a sufficient solution to the problem of fanaticism in politics? Where religious and civic duties conflict, which should take precedence? Is the idea behind religious pluralism also indifferent to the distinction between religion and irreligion—that is, to atheism?

Gentlemen

While I receive, with much satisfaction, your Address replete with expressions of affection and esteem; I rejoice in the opportunity of assuring you, that I shall always retain a grateful remembrance of the cordial welcome I experienced in my visit to Newport, from all classes of Citizens.

The reflection on the days of difficulty and danger which are past is rendered the more sweet, from a consciousness that they are succeeded by days of uncommon prosperity and security. If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good Government, to become a great and a happy people.

The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people,
that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

It would be inconsistent with the frankness of my character not to avow that I am pleased with your favorable opinion of my Administration, and fervent wishes for my felicity. May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.

August 18, 1790
Discussion Guide for
“The May-Pole of Merry Mount”

I. About the Author
Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–64), novelist and short story writer, was born into an old, established New England family in Salem, Massachusetts. His great-great-grandfather, John Hathorne, was one of the judges who presided over the Salem Witch Trials; it is said that young Hawthorne added the “w” to his birth surname, “Hathorne,” to distance himself from this infamous ancestor. Few American authors have written more searchingly and profoundly about the American character. Enduring moral and religious questions, as they emerged in the life of the Puritans and their New England descendants, are the focus of many of Hawthorne’s writings, including his masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter*. His marvelously crafted stories also take us deeply into the American soul, with its dark motives, conflicting aspirations, and moral struggles. “The May-Pole of Merry Mount,” one such story, appeared in his first published collection of stories, *Twice-Told Tales* (1837). Said by the author to be a “sort of allegory,” it depicts an early version of the culture wars, between a party of otherworldly piety or “gloom” (the Puritans) and a party of pleasure or “jollity” (the Merry-Mounters). The cultural struggles between the two outlooks on life appear to be deeply embedded in the American grain.

II. Summary
The story is set in Massachusetts around 1630, at the time of the first English colonies in the New World. It depicts an incident in the feud between the Puritans at Salem, under their governor, John Endicott, and a rival settlement called Merry Mount, founded by Thomas Morton. These two settlements represent different stances toward the world. Hawthorne says that “jollity and gloom were contending for an empire,” and that “the future complexion of [New] England was involved in this important quarrel” (146, 150). The story opens with the people of Merry Mount celebrating round their revered May-Pole. Their wild festivities culminate with the marriage of a youth and a maiden, Edgar and Edith, the lord and lady of the May-Pole. After introducing us to this young couple, Hawthorne, in the middle section of the story, interrupts the story of the wedding to describe the origins of the hedonistic philosophy of Merry Mount, as well as the main features of the Puritans. The third and final section of the story depicts a Puritan raid upon the Merry Mount gathering, just after the marriage had taken place. Endicott and his followers chop down the May-Pole and have its votaries whipped and placed in the stocks. They arrest the high priest of Merry Mount and kill the dancing bear. Most interesting, though, is what happens to the newlywed couple. Endicott, a man of iron, is
unaccountably softened by their obvious love and care for one another, and he spares them the punishments that the others receive. Instead, he orders that they be dressed in more modest clothing, Edgar has his hair cut in the “true pumpkin-shell fashion,” and Endicott takes them into the Puritan fold. In the final paragraph, Endicott, the severest Puritan of them all, salvages a wreath of roses taken from the May-Pole itself and places it over the heads of Edith and Edgar.

III. Thinking about the Text

A. The Merry-Mounters

1. Describe the scene of the festival around the May-Pole, including their leader, who is likened to Comus (the Greek god of revelry and merrymaking, son and cupbearer to the god Dionysus, or Bacchus, to the Romans, usually depicted as a winged youth or as a child-satyr) (146–48). How is the leader like Comus? What do the festivities tell you about the people of Merry Mount?

2. What is the May-Pole? What does it signify? What does it mean that the Merry-Mounters venerate it?

3. How do the Merry-Mounters live day by day? Why do they live as they do? Why have they embraced “a wild philosophy of pleasure” (149)? Can you defend their view of life?

4. What is the meaning of the presence of wild animals—and of human beings costumed as half-human/half-animal—at their festival? What is the implicit view of the place of humankind in the natural world?

5. Is this a sustainable community? Why or why not? What does it produce?

6. Is Hawthorne’s picture of Merry Mount satirical or serious?
boundaries and distinctions, which in the end perhaps do not really mean anything anyhow, is, I think, a kind of false joy covering over what is underlying a deeper despair.

**Yuval Levin:** The story tells us, “Oh, people of the Golden Age, the chief of your husbandry, was to raise flowers!” What does this mean? Flowers as opposed to food?

**Amy Kass:** Flowers can only go so far. But can the community sustain over the years, without a settlement? Without settled ways? With this kind of monthly, if not daily, revelry?

**Leon Kass:** To be interested in the flower and not in the seed and not in the fruit is another way of saying that one really just wants the bloom of things and nothing fruitful. The fruitfulness of flowering is not on their minds. They want the beauty of the present moment. The problem, from the point of view of the community, is not only that they do not plant and toil, but that they give no thought whatsoever to the future.

*For more discussion on this question,*

*watch the video online.*

**B. The Puritans**

1. What are the Puritans like? What animates them?
2. What do they revere? What is their implicit view of the place of humankind in the natural world?
3. Why do the Puritans attack Merry Mount? Can you defend what they think and do?
4. Why the practice of public shaming (the stocks) of wrongdoers? What is the relationship between shame and societal norms? What is the role of shame in a community? Could a community last without shame?
5. Is this a sustainable community? Why or why not? What does it produce?
6. Is Hawthorne’s picture of the Puritans satirical or serious? What do we know of the historical Puritans in America? Do they fit Hawthorne’s descriptions?

**IN CONVERSATION**

**Leon Kass:** Historically, the Puritans were a Protestant English sect. They believed that the Reformation in England had not gone far enough, that the Church of England was still too much like the Roman Catholic Church in its hierarchies and in its pomp and circumstance. While we now use the term “puritan” to mean anti-pleasure and straight-laced, if one wants to be fair to them,
one would say that they aspire to a kind of purity and holiness in all of the affairs of daily life. Everything they did was for the glory of God. And in the Mayflower Compact, which they signed coming to America, bringing glory to God is indicated as their goal in covenancing with one another—it is not to come and exercise their unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

If you want to put the best construction on the Puritans, you say: “They believe that this is a God-given land on which they are to erect a holy community; and the Merry-Mounters are Pagans—worse than Pagans, they are spirits of the devil who are defiling the land and should be removed.”

Yuval Levin: Are those the Puritans we meet here? Or are those the Puritans as they would like to understand themselves?

Leon Kass: Or is the description in the story the way the Merry-Mounters see the Puritans? “Unfortunately we’re not the only people here. There are these killjoys, there is this party of gloom. And all they want to do is pray in the morning, work all day, and pray in the evening.”

Yuval Levin: Is it unfair to describe the Puritans as “pray in the morning, pray in the evening, and work all day”? Wouldn’t they have taken that as a compliment?

Leon Kass: I think they would have taken that as a compliment. It is not directly said in the story, but the Puritans are really animated by a kind of piety. They have come here to pray and they have come here to work.

Amy Kass: But they bring with them a kind of piety that is so severe that it seems almost too formidable.

Tocqueville, who is writing at the same time that Hawthorne is, admired the Puritans and thought that we inherited much of our character from the Puritans. But they are the Puritans that you are describing; they’re not Hawthorne’s Puritans.

C. The Young Couple: Edith and Edgar

1. What is the premonition that Edith and Edgar have just before they are to be married? What is “Edith’s mystery” (149)?
2. What is their reaction—to each other, and to Endicott—when threatened with punishment?
3. Are they typical Merry-Mounters, or do they represent something different? If so, what is it?
IN CONVERSATION

Yuval Levin: Everyone who observes this marriage—from Hawthorne, to the bride and groom, to the Puritans—seems to observe it with a kind of sorrow, with a sense that the joy that is here cannot possibly last, and they seem to take that to be the most powerful lesson of what they're observing.

Diana Schaub: It isn’t simply the Puritans that destroy the community, but it is also the love between Edith and Edgar. Hawthorne writes that, “From the moment that they truly loved, they had subjected themselves to earth’s doom of care, and sorrow, and troubled joy, and had no more a home at Merry Mount.”

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

4. Do you think that their current joy in one another will fade with time?
5. What is it about them that moves and softens Endicott, the Puritan of Puritans? What is the meaning of the fact that he throws over their heads a wreath taken from the May-Pole? What is meant when this is called “a deed of prophecy” (153)?

IN CONVERSATION

Diana Schaub: The Puritan impulse is to rely on the stocks, which circle the head and is a mechanism of shame. But at the end, it is Endicott himself who throws the wreath over the couple, together. So the wreath is now something that unites the two of them. To the extent that shame still exists it will be a kind of internalized shame, rather than externalized shame—which is a kind of violation of privacy.

Leon Kass: I like this, but I think that the Puritan emphasis on shame deserves at least a cheer and a half, if not two. Yes, they are severe. Nobody would really like to live under their rule. But the question is: can you sustain private, robust family life if the external culture is utterly shameless? If you do not have some kind of communal norms that lead people to be ashamed of behaving in certain kinds of Merry-Mountish ways?

We can turn this conversation to today and ask if there is some connection between the precarious state of marriage and family in the United States—especially, by the way, in nonreligious communities—and the disappearance of public shame all together?

It is too easy, I think, to dismiss as puritanical and oppressive the teaching that
suggests that how you comport yourself in public, how you hold your body, how you dress, how you speak, affects public life and even affects this little domestic nursery of humanity. We as a society are inclined today to think that guilt is bad and shame is worse, but no moral community can do without either.

**Diana Schaub:** I see Hawthorne, though, as very much a critic of the way in which the Puritans handled shame. There is something very violative about the stocks because it prevents the natural response of hiding your shame.

In other words, it not only shames you, but it forces you to present that shamed face publicly by not allowing you to hide yourself. For Hawthorne, this violates something about a kind of public/private distinction, and the problem with the Puritans is they do not admit that distinction between public and private. Hawthorne is not against shame or certain uses of shame, but shame has to be used in the right way. The Puritans seem to have erred in that, and not just by excess or by going too far, but in some really fundamental way.

*For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.*

6. Why, when they leave Merry Mount, do they leave without regret? Are they now going to become Puritans like the rest? Or are they bringing something new to Puritanville? If so, what?

**D. The Story as “a Sort of Allegory”**

1. What does Hawthorne mean when he says that “the facts . . . have wrought themselves . . . into a sort of allegory” (146)? An allegory of what?
2. We are told that the parties of gloom (the Puritans) and jollity (the Merry-Mounters) were contending for an empire (146).
   a. As presented in the story, would you rather live among the Puritans or among the Merry-Mounters?
   b. Does either party win a clear victory over the other? Or can neither side win unless it incorporates something from the other—or from some third alternative (perhaps represented here by the love of Edith and Edgar)? What should the Puritans learn from the Merry-Mounters? And vice versa? What should both groups learn from Edith and Edgar?

**IN CONVERSATION**

**Leon Kass:** Hawthorne indicates that this is a contest between the two parties for who shall have empire in New England. And, by the end of the story, we know the answer: Merry Mount is finished, and the Puritans have won.
Diana Schaub: No, I have not read that, because what Edith and Edgar bear with them into the Puritan community will transform that community.

The wreath that they bring with them and the passion that leads to their union is a transfiguration of the Puritan community so that, in a way, the Puritan community cannot continue either if it is not refreshed from some kernel of truth that Merry Mount represents.

Leon Kass: When Endicott says that he is softened by the sight of this couple, he is softened by how they both need and help one another and especially by their willingness to take the punishment owed to the other—even if it meant death to the self. He is very taken by this. Then he says that there is something in the youth that would make him fit to fight and able to toil and even to be pious. And she—Edith—can become a mother in our Israel and raise children who have been better bred than she. You think that what they are bringing to the community is somewhat more than what Endicott sees in their possibility?

Diana Schaub: Well, it seems that in this moment he sees it. In other words, the Puritans try to live as a community of souls, or a community of spirits. But that also is unsustainable: You cannot live just at the level of the body as the Merry-Mounters do, and you cannot live just at the level of the soul as the Puritans do. So the couple shows that we are compound beings, that the high and the low are not disjunct from one another—and the priest of the Puritans has to glimpse that and make a place for it within this Puritan order.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

IV. Thinking with the Text

From its earliest beginnings, America has held together two ideas and practices that are often thought to be—and sometimes are in fact—in tension with each other: the spirit of liberty and the spirit of religion. In his Democracy in America, Alexis de Tocqueville attributes both of these spirits to the Puritans, whom he takes to provide the point of departure for the American way of life. Every human community reverences or looks up to something. But not every community encourages the exercise of the rights to life, liberty, and the private pursuit of happiness. Conversely, not all pursuits of private happiness are compatible with a sustainable and decent community, especially where there is a lack of reverence that would support private self-restraint and public morals. The story invites us to consider some of the larger questions about the relation, especially in America, among religion, morality, freedom, and human flourishing. It also invites questions about the place of marriage and family among people who are devoted to the pursuit of individual happiness, on the one hand, and to the glory of Heaven, on the other.
A. Religion and Freedom (For these questions, consider the story in conjunction with the Mayflower Compact, on page 155, and the Declaration of Independence, on page 50.)

1. Is there anything distinctly American about the confrontation between the two kinds of communities and views Hawthorne describes? Does the contest continue today? If so, how would you describe its present form?

2. Which provides better support for a society of free, self-governing individuals: a biblical religion like that of the Puritans or nature worship like that of the Merry-Mounters?

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: What Hawthorne shows is that these two possibilities—jollity and gloom—go to the core of our native grain. This problem in the story is not one that we have gotten rid of, either fictionally or historically. Think of Woodstock versus the rise of evangelical religions; or think of the hippies versus the establishment. In the caricature that we get, these tensions abound, and they are still with us. Hawthorne is providing us with a way of living with both of these things, and he does so by embracing the alternative of marriage based on freedom and love within a religious community. But I think that what is really important is to see that we—each of us—have to negotiate those tensions.

Diana Schaub: We realize that the utopianism is present among the Puritans as much it is among the Merry-Mounters. And in that sense, Hawthorne is a critic of this utopian strand within America that just tries to start things over and begin everything anew.

Yuval Levin: Both the Puritans and the Merry-Mounters escape to the forest for reasons that are not as different as they think they are. And in that sense, both groups need the family to be reminded of what it is they think they can change, but cannot.

Leon Kass: They learn that human nature has to be taken as it is and refined and not simply deformed in the name of some ideology or creed, and that life in its concreteness with some of its fundamental passions has to be honored if one is going to have a community that is not going to maim the human beings who live among them.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

B. Marriage and Community

1. Is there something uniquely American about the marriage of Edgar and Edith?
2. What does the story suggest is the proper relationship between marriage/family
and community—especially between marriage/family and a community like ours, which is based not on ancient traditions and families but on shared ideals and principles? What is the relationship between the importance of marriage/family and the American celebration of the individual?

3. If the Merry-Mounters celebrate the body without regard to the soul and the Puritans celebrate the (disembodied) soul without regard to earthly life, is there something in marriage and family that can correct each of these partial and utopian visions?

4. Does a marriage like that of Edgar and Edith still offer a living answer to a living problem in our time? What is that problem, and that answer, in modern America?

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: Edgar and Edith bring love and marriage together by having a marriage that is based on love. While that is not peculiarly American, they bring to the Puritan community this notion that a marriage can be based on love and that there can be joy within marriage.

Leon Kass: Another way to put this would be that it is a marriage based on choice, which is an idea that appeals very much to Americans.

It is also true that the Puritans came to America as families. They did not send the men first to set out and find riches and only then send for the rest of their family, but they came to America as whole, unbroken families. The whole conception of life for the Puritans is not the life of the rugged individual with his rights, seeking his own happiness, but the conception is that family forms the basis of any community.

This is a lesson that liberalism needs. The conceit of the Declaration [of Independence] is that the self-evident truths, which I have always regarded as self-evidently true, rest upon a conception of the human being that is self-evidently false.

That is to say, that we are in the world as isolated individuals rather than as nested in families of origin and families of perpetuation. But we are not radical isolates. And a community that encourages us to think of ourselves only in terms of our rights—and in terms of our own happiness, our own liberty, or our own life—does not have the wherewithal to produce even the necessities of self-defense, never mind the richness of community life or the education of children or the rearing of people of fine character that make for a decent life and not just a mirthful one.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.
C. Love and Happiness

1. Is there a difference between jollity (or mirth) and genuine happiness (or joy)? If so, what is the difference? Is real happiness compatible with sadness, loss, and suffering? Why or why not?
2. What is the difference between true love and mere sexual enjoyment? Does true love require accepting sadness, loss, and suffering? Why or why not?
3. Is true love necessary for rich personal happiness? For a fulfilled life?
3

The Virtues of Civic Life
Self-Command and Self-Respect
Arguably more than other American Founders, Benjamin Franklin (1706–90) gave serious attention to the education and character needed for citizens of the newly founded Republic. Keenly aware of the importance of self-command for both individual flourishing and effective social activity, Franklin understood why the turbulent human soul must first be tamed if we are to become reasonable, free, and responsible social beings and citizens. Many of his writings, from the Dogood Papers (1722) to his Autobiography (from which this selection, written in 1784, is taken), sought to promote these goals. The centerpiece of the Autobiography is his “bold and arduous Project” to reconstitute himself by arriving at moral perfection. By this device, Franklin depicts a middle-class citizen of an individualistic, democratic, and commercial society, which places health, wealth, self-esteem, and public reputation within reach of any American who would imitate Franklin’s cultivation of useful self-command. For Franklin, the principle of American democracy is freedom—freedom from inherited modes and orders, freedom for felicity and engagement in public life—and moral virtue is its critical means.

When you read the list of enumerated virtues, along with their explanations and commentary, ask yourself what a person who embodied these virtues would be like. Would these virtues produce both a good human being and a good citizen? How does Franklin’s conception of the virtues compare to more traditional religious conceptions? What virtues are essential for citizens of a modern, commercial republic? What virtues would you add to, or subtract from, Franklin’s list? Should we each undertake something like Franklin’s project of moral self-improvement?

It was about this time [circa 1728] that I conceiv’d the bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection. I wish’d to live without committing any Fault at any time; I would conquer all that either Natural Inclination, Custom, or Company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found I had undertaken a Task of more Difficulty than I had imagined: While my Care was employ’d in guarding against one Fault, I was often surpriz’d by another. Habit took the Advantage of Inattention. Inclination was sometimes too strong for Reason. I concluded at length, that the mere speculative Conviction that it was our Interest to be compleatly virtuous, was not sufficient to prevent our Slipping, and that the contrary Habits must be broken and good Ones acquired and established, before we can have any Dependance on a steady uniform Rectitude of Conduct. For this purpose I therefore contriv’d the following Method.—

In the various Enumerations of the moral Virtues I had met with in my Reading, I found the Catalogue more or less numerous, as different Writers included more or fewer Ideas under the same Name. Temperance, for Example, was by some confin’d to Eating & Drinking, while by others it was extended to mean the moderating every other
Benjamin Franklin, “Project for Moral Perfection”

Pleasure, Appetite, Inclination or Passion, bodily or mental, even to our Avarice & Ambition. I propos’d to myself, for the sake of Clearness, to use rather more Names with fewer Ideas annex’d to each, than a few Names with more Ideas; and I included under Thirteen Names of Virtues all that at that time occurr’d to me as necessary or desirable, and annex’d to each a short Precept, which fully express’d the Extent I gave to its Meaning.—

These Names of Virtues with their Precepts were

1. **TEMPERANCE.**  
   Eat not to Dulness.  
   Drink not to Elevation.

2. **SILENCE.**  
   Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself. Avoid trifling Conversation.

3. **ORDER.**  
   Let all your Things have their Places. Let each Part of your Business have its Time.

4. **RESOLUTION.**  
   Resolve to perform what you ought. Perform without fail what you resolve.

5. **FRUGALITY.**  
   Make no Expence but to do good to others or yourself: i.e. Waste nothing.

6. **INDUSTRY.**  
   Lose no Time.—Be always employ’d in something useful.—Cut off all unnecessary Actions.—

7. **SINCERITY.**  
   Use no hurtful Deceit.  
   Think innocently and justly; and, if you speak, speak accordingly.

8. **JUSTICE.**  
   Wrong none, by doing Injuries or omitting the Benefits that are your Duty.

9. **MODERATION.**  
   Avoid Extreams. Forbear resenting Injuries so much as you think they deserve.

10. **CLEANLINESS.**  
    Tolerate no Uncleanness in Body, Cloaths or Habitation.—

11. **TRANQUILITY.**  
    Be not disturbed at Trifles, or at Accidents common or unavoidable.

12. **CHASTITY.**  
    Rarely use Venery*** but for Health or Offspring; Never to Dulness, Weakness, or the Injury of your own or another’s Peace or Reputation.—

13. **HUMILITY.**  
    Imitate Jesus and Socrates.—

My Intention being to acquire the *Habitude* of all these Virtues, I judg’d it would be well not to distract my Attention by attempting the whole at once, but to fix it on one of them at a time, and when I should be Master of that, then to proceed to another, and so on till I should have gone thro’ the thirteen. And as the previous Acquisition of some might

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*** *Indulgence in or pursuit of sexual activity.*
facilitate the Acquisition of certain others, I arrang’d them with that View as they stand above. Temperance first, as it tends to procure that Coolness & Clearness of Head, which is so necessary where constant Vigilance was to be kept up, and Guard maintained, against the unremitting Attraction of ancient Habits, and the Force of perpetual Temptations. This being acquir’d & establish’d, Silence would be more easy, and my Desire being to gain Knowledge at the same time that I improv’d in Virtue, and considering that in Conversation it was obtain’d rather by the Use of the Ears than of the Tongue, & therefore wishing to break a Habit I was getting into of Prattling, Punning & Joking, which only made me acceptable to trifling Company, I gave Silence the second Place. This, and the next, Order, I expected would allow me more Time for attending to my Project and my Studies; Resolution, once become habitual, would keep me firm in my Endeavours to obtain all the subsequent Virtues; Frugality & Industry, by freeing me from my remaining Debt, & producing Affluence & Independance, would make more easy the Practice of Sincerity and Justice, &c. &c. Conceiving then that agreeable to the Advice of Pythagoras in his Golden Verses, daily Examination would be necessary, I contriv’d the following Method for conducting that Examination.

Form of the Pages

| Temperance. |  
| --- | --- |
| Eat not to Dulness. |  
| Drink not to Elevation. |  
| S | M | T | W | T | F | S |
| T |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| S |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| O |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| R |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| F |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| I |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| S |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| J |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| M |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Cl |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| T |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Ch |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| H |  |  |  |  |  |  |

I made a little Book in which I allotted a Page for each of the Virtues. I rul’d each Page with red Ink so as to have seven Columns, one for each Day of the Week, marking each Column with a Letter for the Day. I cross’d these Columns with thirteen red Lines, marking the Beginning of each Line with the first Letter of one of the Virtues, on which Line & in its proper Column I might mark by a little black Spot every Fault I found upon Examination, to have been committed respecting that Virtue upon that Day.

I determined to give a Week’s strict Attention to each of the Virtues successively. Thus in the first Week my great Guard was to avoid every the least Offence against
Temperance, leaving the other Virtues to their ordinary Chance, only marking every Evening the Faults of the Day. Thus if in the first Week I could keep my first Line marked T clear of Spots, I suppos’d the Habit of that Virtue so much strengthen’d and its opposite weaken’d, that I might venture extending my Attention to include the next, and for the following Week keep both Lines clear of Spots. Proceeding thus to the last, I could go thro’ a Course compleat in Thirteen Weeks, and four Courses in a Year.—And like him who having a Garden to weed, does not attempt to eradicate all the bad Herbs at once, which would exceed his Reach and his Strength, but works on one of the Beds at a time, & having accomplish’d the first proceeds to a second; so I should have, (I hoped) the encouraging Pleasure of seeing on my Pages the Progress I made in Virtue, by clearing successively my Lines of their Spots, till in the End by a Number of Courses, I should be happy in viewing a clean Book after a thirteen Weeks daily Examination. . . .

The Precept of Order requiring that every Part of my Business should have its allotted Time, one Page in my little Book contain’d the following Scheme of Employment for the Twenty-four Hours of a natural Day,
I enter’d upon the Execution of this Plan for Self Examination, and continu’d it with occasional Intermissions for some time. I was surpriz’d to find myself so much fuller of Faults than I had imagined, but I had the Satisfaction of seeing them diminish. To avoid the Trouble of renewing now & then my little Book, which by scraping out the Marks on the Paper of old Faults to make room for new Ones in a new Course, became full of Holes; I transferr’d my Tables & Precepts to the Ivory Leaves of a Memorandum Book, on which the Lines were drawn with red Ink that made a durable Stain, and on those Lines I mark’d my Faults with a black Lead Pencil, which Marks I could easily wipe out with a wet Sponge. After a while I went thro’ one Course only in a Year, and afterwards only one in several Years; till at length I omitted them entirely, being employ’d in Voyages & Business abroad with a Multiplicity of Affairs, that interfered. But I always carried my little Book with me. My Scheme of ORDER, gave me the most Trouble, and I found, that tho’ it might be practicable where a Man’s Business was such as to leave him the Disposition of his Time, that of a Journey-man Printer for instance, it was not possible to be exactly observ’d by a Master, who must mix with the World, and often receive People of Business at their own Hours.—Order too, with regard to Places for Things, Papers, &c. I found extremly difficult to acquire. I had not been early accustomed to it, & having an exceeding good Memory, I was not so sensible of the Inconvenience attending Want of Method. This Article therefore cost me so much painful Attention & my Faults in it vex’d me so much, and I made so little Progress in Amendment, & had such frequent Relapses, that I was almost ready to give up the Attempt, and content my self with a faulty Character in that respect. Like the Man who in buying an Ax of a Smith my neighbour, desired to have the whole of its Surface as bright as the Edge; the Smith consented to grind it bright for him if he would turn the Wheel. He turn’d while the Smith press’d the broad Face of the Ax hard & heavily on the Stone, which made the Turning of it very fatiguing. The Man came every now & then from the Wheel to see how the Work went on; and at length would take his Ax as it was without farther Grinding. No, says the Smith, Turn on, turn on; we shall have it bright by and by; as yet ’tis only speckled. Yes, says the Man; but—I think I like a speckled Ax best.—And I believe this may have been the Case with many who having for want of some such Means as I employ’d found the Difficulty of obtaining good, & breaking bad Habits, in other Points of Vice & Virtue, have given up the Struggle, & concluded that a speckled Ax was best. For something that pretended to be Reason was every now and then suggesting to me, that such extream Nicety as I exacted of my self might be a kind of Foppery in Morals, which if it were known would make me ridiculous; that a perfect Character might be attended with the Inconvenience of being envied and hated; and that a benevolent Man should allow a few Faults in himself, to keep his Friends in Countenance. In Truth I found myself incorrigible with respect to Order; and now I am grown old, and my Memory bad, I feel very sensibly the want of it. But on the whole, tho’ I never arrived at the Perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining, but fell far short of it, yet I was by the Endeavour a better and happier Man than I otherwise should have been, if I had not attempted it; As those who aim at perfect Writing by imitating the engraved Copies, tho’ they never reach the wish’d for Excellence of those Copies, their Hand is mended by the Endeavour, and is tolerable while it continues fair & legible.—
And it may be well my Posterity should be informed, that to this little Artifice, with the Blessing of God, their Ancestor ow’d the constant Felicity of his Life down to his 79th Year in which this is written. What Reverses may attend the Remainder is in the Hand of Providence: But if they arrive the Reflection on past Happiness enjoy’d ought to help his bearing them with more Resignation. To Temperance he ascribes his long-continu’d Health, & what is still left to him of a good Constitution. To Industry and Frugality the early Easiness of his Circumstances, & Acquisition of his Fortune, with all that Knowledge which enabled him to be an useful Citizen, and obtain’d for him some Degree of Reputation among the Learned. To Sincerity & Justice the Confidence of his Country, and the honourable Employs it conferr’d upon him. And to the joint Influence of the whole Mass of the Virtues, even in the imperfect State he was able to acquire them, all that Evenness of Temper, & that Cheerfulness in Conversation which makes his Company still sought for, & agreeable even to his younger Acquaintance. I hope therefore that some of my Descendants may follow the Example & reap the Benefit.—

My List of Virtues contain’d at first but twelve: But a Quaker Friend having kindly inform’d me that I was generally thought proud; that my Pride show’d itself frequently in Conversation; that I was not content with being in the right when discussing any Point, but was overbearing & rather insolent; of which he convinc’d me by mentioning several Instances;—I determined endeavouring to cure myself if I could of this Vice or Folly among the rest, and I added Humility to my List, giving an extensive Meaning to the Word.—I cannot boast of much Success in acquiring the Reality of this Virtue; but I had a good deal with regard to the Appearance of it.—I made it a Rule to forbear all direct Contradiction to the Sentiments of others, and all positive Assertion of my own. I even forbid myself agreeable to the old Laws of our Junto, the Use of every Word or Expression in the Language that import’d a fix’d Opinion; such as certainly, undoubtedly, &c. and I adopted instead of them, I conceive, I apprehend, or I imagine a thing to be so or so, or it so appears to me at present.—When another asserted something that I thought an Error, I deny’d my self the Pleasure of contradicting him abruptly, and of showing immediately some Absurdity in his Proposition; and in answering I began by observing that in certain Cases or Circumstances his Opinion would be right, but that in the present case there appear’d or seem’d to me some Difference, &c. I soon found the Advantage of this change in my Manners. The Conversations I engag’d in went on more pleasantly. The modest way in which I propos’d my Opinions, procur’d them a reader Reception and less Contradiction; I had less Mortification when I was found to be in the wrong, and I more easily prevail’d with others to give up their Mistakes & join with me when I happen’d to be in the right. And this mode, which I at first put on, with some violence to natural Inclination, became at length so easy & so habitual to me, that perhaps for these Fifty Years past no one has ever heard a dogmatical Expression escape me. And to this Habit (after my Character of Integrity) I think it principally owing, that I had early so much Weight with my Fellow Citizens, when I proposed new Institutions, or Alterations in the old; and so much Influence in public Councils when I became a Member. For I was but a bad Speaker, never eloquent, subject to much Hesitation in my choice of Words, hardly correct in Language, and yet I generally carried my Points.—
In reality there is perhaps no one of our natural Passions so hard to subdue as *Pride*. Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself. You will see it perhaps often in this History. For even if I could conceive that I had compleatly overcome it, I should probably be proud of my Humility.—
Discussion Guide for
“Project for Moral Perfection”

I. About the Author
II. Summary
III. Thinking about the Text
IV. Thinking with the Text

I. About the Author

As the youngest son of the youngest son for five generations back, Benjamin Franklin (1706–90) was by custom and tradition destined to be a nobody. Yet thanks to his own resourcefulness, he more than escaped his destiny. His life spanned the eighteenth century, and he managed to see and to participate firsthand in much that it had to offer.

Reared in Boston, Franklin struck out on his own at age seventeen to escape traditional and familial authority, arriving in Philadelphia alone and without any visible means of support. By age twenty-four, he had established his own printing business. Thereafter, in fairly short order, he entered public life and established his indispensability, first to his city, then to his country, and then to the world. He achieved worldwide fame for his writings and statesmanship, his scientific discoveries and inventions, and his philanthropy—or, as he preferred to call it, his “usefulness” as a citizen.

We are indebted to Franklin for many things, including the invention of bifocals, street lamps, the one-arm desk chair, the fireplace damper, and the “Franklin” stove; the founding of the first public library, the first fire insurance company, the University of Pennsylvania, and the American Philosophical Society; and his vast service to our new nation, as delegate, counselor, author, and diplomat.

By all measures, Benjamin Franklin was no ordinary man—not in his own time, not in any time. Yet when he sat down, during the last twenty years of his life, to write his autobiography (a work written in four different spurts), he crafted an account of himself and his life which seems intended to serve as a model for every American, then and now: He addressed his audience as “Dear Son,” that is, as one extended family; he omits mention of nearly all of his great accomplishments; he speaks in an engaging and light-hearted manner that hides his own superiority. His “bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection” (found in Part II of the Autobiography) is clearly written as a model that others would do well to imitate. It is the only project that the great Projector turned on himself, and he attributes his own happiness and worldly success to its virtues and methods. With characteristic understatement, he expresses the hope that “some of my descendants may follow the example and reap the benefits.”
Writing the *Autobiography* in his seventy-ninth year, Franklin looks back—almost “once upon a time”—to when, at age twenty-two, he undertook “the bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection.” He wanted to live without committing any fault. He wanted to conquer all that natural inclination, custom and tradition, or the company of others might lead him to wrongly do. He wanted, in short, to reform himself, by himself, to possess full self-command. Alas, he discovered that this was no easy task. Bad habits and wayward inclinations continued to lead him astray. He therefore decided to undertake a more methodical approach.

He prepared a list of thirteen virtues that he considered either necessary or desirable. To each named virtue, he affixed a short precept that, he says, “fully express’d the Extent I gave to its Meaning” (171). Eager to attain the habit of each of these virtues, he set up a regimen whereby he would concentrate on one virtue at a time, devoting a week to the practice of each, before going on to the next. There being thirteen virtues, he managed to perform four thirteen-week programs a year, a practice he continued for many years until his busy life rendered it inconvenient. The order of the virtues, dictated in part by the fact that the prior acquisition of some of the virtues would make easier the acquisition of the next, is as follows: (1) temperance, (2) silence, (3) order, (4) resolution, (5) frugality, (6) industry, (7) sincerity, (8) justice, (9) moderation, (10) cleanliness, (11) tranquility, (12) chastity, and (13) humility. To aid in his practice, he prepared a little book in which he recorded his daily successes or failures with each of the virtues. He also devised a daily schedule, which helped him give each part of his business its allotted and proper time.

Summing up his progress and success, Franklin reports that he never did arrive at moral perfection and, indeed, “fell far short of it” (174). Nevertheless, he claims that he was a better and happier man than if he had never attempted the project. Moreover, he relates specific benefits that he has enjoyed as a result, both of some particular virtues and of the entire package: felicity, health, prosperity, knowledge, reputation, the confidence of his country and the offices conferred upon him, and the even temper and cheerful conversation that made everyone seek his company. He here invites his readers to imitate him and to reap the same benefits.

Franklin’s project at first glance seems designed to achieve a self-defined self-perfection, entirely by his own efforts: He is to become a self-made, self-commanding, and self-sufficient person. At the same time, however, he calls attention to how his acquisition of self-command made possible his many opportunities for public service and civic achievement. And he also touches both directly and indirectly on certain traditional religious teachings, with which he is explicitly and tacitly in conversation.

A. “The Bold and Arduous Project for Arriving at Moral Perfection”
1. What is a “Project”? What does it mean to have a project? What does it mean to turn oneself into a project?

2. What is “moral Perfection”? Is this a reasonable goal for a human being? Is it possible for anyone to attain moral perfection? How does Franklin’s aspiration relate to Jesus’s teaching “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48)? In pursuing this project, is Franklin fulfilling or departing from this injunction?

3. What is bold about this project? What assumptions about human nature, human (original) sinfulness, and human perfectibility are implied?

4. What is arduous about this project? Why is it so hard? What is implied in Franklin’s remark that removing his faults was like weeding a garden (173)? What does the very difficulty of such a project say about our nature as human beings?

IN CONVERSATION

In this conversation, Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass discuss Franklin’s project with Diana Schaub, coeditor of What So Proudly We Hail, and Wilfred McClay, the SunTrust Bank Chair of Excellence in Humanities at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Amy Kass: To say that the project is arduous would suggest that it really is toilsome. Later on in the description Franklin uses the image of a garden and weeding, that this project for moral perfection is like weeding a garden. This conception suggests that the project is not something that is being done for its own sake, but is being done for the sake of something else. But even more interesting is that the project is bold. Why is it bold? It’s bold because the very title, “The Project for Moral Perfection,” has a Christian resonance to it, and I suspect that he is identifying and clearly separating himself from that Christian tradition. Saint Matthew reminds us to “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” but Franklin’s assumption here is utterly different. He seems to suggest that human beings are not by nature sinful creatures or willfully evil creatures, but that human beings are just wayward because they have bad habits.

Diana Schaub: In a certain sense, though, for a Christian this project might be a little bit easier, because one would have the assistance of divine grace and prayer. One reason why this is so arduous is because it does rely entirely on Franklin’s own efforts.

Leon Kass: Right, this is a project of self-command by one’s own self-exertions. He has a table for daily examination in which he gives himself bad, black marks for when he slips up on each of the virtues. He does not rely on anything beyond himself and his own self-criticisms.

Diana Schaub: While he does leave himself without certain resources that are available to those who believe in the Christian revelation, in another sense, it is
also easier for him because what he finds is not sin, but “errata”—something a bit more superficial. And as a printer himself, he knows that “errata” can be corrected.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

5. Do you think you could ever attain a state of moral perfection? Why or why not? Is it still worth seeking even if you can never grasp it fully?

B. The Thirteen Virtues and the Method for Attaining Them

1. What is a virtue? How does a morality that emphasizes virtue differ from one that emphasizes rules (or commandments) about right and wrong acts?
2. Consider each virtue in turn, with its explanatory precepts (171). Does each make sense? Do you find the precepts adequate? (For example, Franklin’s precept for Sincerity includes, “Use no hurtful deceit.” Is this a good—or good enough—teaching for sincere speech?) Are there any virtues missing?
3. According to Franklin, what good are these virtues? Is virtue its own reward? Or does it lead to other, more important goods and benefits?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: I think the key idea for Franklin is that these are virtues that allow one to become a free, responsible individual who can provide for himself, can get along with other people, can contribute both to his private and familial happiness, as well as to the public good. Through temperance, Franklin acquires that kind of coolness and clearness of mind that is required for doing just about anything you want to do in life. Silence, as he says, enables him to learn from other people. Then order: anything that you want to do is certainly helped along by certain orderliness in your habits. Resolution: resolve to do what you ought, and then perform what you resolve. There are lots of people that have good intentions, but if they lack resolution they cannot do anything.

And then you have the virtues that have to do with wealth and industry: frugality, so that you do not waste what you have, and industry so that you can provide for yourself and be responsible. Then sincerity and justice. If you have economic independence, you do not have to look around enviously at what other people have; it is a lot easier to have innocent thoughts and speak accordingly, and to do your duty to your neighbor. And finally, he lists moderation. Avoid extremes. And very importantly, do not resent those injuries done to you as much as you think they deserve to be resented. That is a guide against wounded pride and anger, the presence of which destroys communal relations. The result is an admirable,
responsible citizen who is not on the public dole, who gets along with other people, is a good family man, a good provider, a good member of civic organizations. He is a good all-around citizen. Though there might be some things missing, if more people were like Franklin, the world would be a much better place.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

4. What do you think of Franklin’s method for acquiring the virtues, including cataloguing them in his little book? If you were to try to improve your own character, would you adopt Franklin’s strategy? Why or why not?

5. Is Franklin’s “Scheme of Employment for the Twenty-four Hours of a Natural Day” a useful (or even necessary) means for making the project effective (173)? What are the benefits of such a scheme? In what areas does it fall short? How would you—could you?—accomplish the project without it?

C. Motives, Purposes, Results

1. Why did young Franklin undertake this project?
2. What are the project’s goals and purposes: for Franklin, the hero of the story?
   For us, the readers of the story?
3. What were the results for Franklin? What did he achieve from it?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: Even though he does not attain moral perfection, and in fact he fails in many respects, Franklin still credits this project with the fact that he became a much happier and better human being than he would otherwise have been. And he recommends this project to his descendants, that they should emulate him and reap the benefits.

Diana Schaub: The virtues he actually acquires are an unstated list of virtues, like tolerance, or accommodation to others. So for instance, with order, he says that it proved very, very difficult for him to bring order to his life, that he isn’t a very orderly person. But then he also makes the point that the reason he could never stick to that order he had listed for the day was because other people have their own plans for the day, so that he sometimes had to depart from his order in order to conduct his business with them in a way that accommodated them. So, in fact, it seems that there is a kind of second set of virtues here embedded in the first that is a result of the failure of some of the stated virtues.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.
5. How might his own self-command relate to his success in the world? To his service to his country?

D. Franklin’s Humor and Irony

1. Franklin’s account of his project, though serious in intent, is sprinkled throughout (as is the entire Autobiography) with humor and irony. (Look carefully, for example, at some of the precepts, at the anecdote about the speckled axe, and at his final comments on pride and humility.) What is irony? What are other examples of humor or irony in the story? Why do you think he uses both humor and irony?
2. What is the relation between the serious and the ironic or humorous elements in Franklin’s account?
3. How might that mixture serve Franklin’s overall purposes?

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: Franklin uses humor and irony, in part, because he thinks that to be in command of yourself is perfectly compatible with accepting yourself. He says the virtue he has the most difficulty with is order. But then he lets himself off the hook—“a speckled axe is best”—so it seems that he is self-accepting at the same time as he is trying to achieve a certain kind of self-command.

Leon Kass: To have self-command is not easy for a human being. But Franklin’s is a kind of self-command that is compatible with self-satisfaction, and with the realization of one’s goals and having true self-esteem. It is not a matter of self-flagellation or self-denial.

I think that explains, in part, his light touch here. One should be serious about his character—but not too serious. Having a sense of humor about yourself is one of the ways to get on in this world with other people. It makes civil life possible.

Wilfred McClay: The American model for the great man is the uncommon, common man. Abraham Lincoln was perhaps the greatest of all, and Harry Truman fit this mold in a way.

Franklin seems to be an early proponent of this view. I think he is partly, with his discussion of order, trying to charm us. He is like that person that says, “Well, you shouldn’t drink. But I occasionally have a nip myself.” It both affirms the precept, but affirms the falling away from time to time.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.
IV. Thinking with the Text

We have already noted that the Franklin who is the protagonist of the *Autobiography* differs from the Franklin who writes it: protagonist Franklin lacks much of the superiority of author Franklin. This device is, we suggest, part of the author’s rhetorical strategy for enabling the reader to identify with—and to wish to emulate—the “hero” of the book.

If this is correct, then Franklin is doing something more than merely telling us his life story. He is trying to educate future generations of Americans toward becoming better, happier, and more useful citizens of the United States. He is trying to prepare them to become, like him, a man capable of both personal and political self-government—in a word, to become free. (In Middle English, the word “frank” means “to be free”; hence to become a “Franklin” is, literally, to become a free man.) Accordingly, when we think with the text—and not just about the text—we should think about the implication of Franklin’s teachings (both in content and in manner) for America and for the American character and its education.

A. Human Being and Citizen

1. What do you think a person who attained all of the thirteen virtues would be like?
2. Would such a person make a good neighbor?
3. Would such a person make a good citizen?
4. Is it possible to be a good citizen in our self-governing nation without first governing oneself? Can one be a “free human being” without self-command?
5. Is Franklin right in implying that it is possible to harmonize self-fulfillment (or concern with one’s own personal happiness) and good citizenship? Or does being a good citizen (civic virtue) require self-denial?

IN CONVERSATION

**Amy Kass:** It seems to me that Franklin thinks that if your own house is in order, which is his first priority, then you are capable, if you are interested, in doing things for others.

Humanly speaking, quite apart from Franklin, if you are so preoccupied, so weighed down by your own debts and your own vices and your own inclinations and desires, you never notice the other people that are around you. And Franklin gives you a very handy recipe for getting your house in order.

**Leon Kass:** This point could be embellished this way: human beings are naturally sociable. The question is, in what manner are you going to be sociable? Are you going to be sociable in a way in which you are looking upon other people as instruments of your own gain and advancement? Or are you going to be free from
the kinds of necessities that make you think only in selfish terms—so that you understand that it is in your own interest also to be sociable, philanthropic, generous, and benevolent? I think these are the virtues that are controlling the obstacles to being a free man in a free, self-governing community.

*For more discussion on this question,*

[watch the video online.]

B. The Virtues of Civic Life

1. Has Franklin provided a necessary and sufficient moral framework for educating free, self-governing citizens in a modern commercial society? What virtues would you add, delete, or replace, for citizens of twenty-first-century America? What about courage and self-sacrifice or generosity or reverence? What about compassion and public spiritedness? Is self-command sufficient to induce the willingness to serve one’s neighbors or one’s community and country?

2. How do the Franklinian virtues compare to more traditional (especially Judeo-Christian) conceptions of virtue and morality? Are his virtues compatible with or supportive of the religious virtues? Or do they undermine them?

**IN CONVERSATION**

**Wilfred McClay:** Virtue is clearly not its own reward in Franklin’s scheme. When you come to the end of our selection, he points to the felicity of his first seventy-nine years as the justification for the project and for the pursuit of virtue. And that is part of the appeal of the project—a self-interest-rightly-understood approach to attaining virtue. But there may be virtues like sacrifice, or extreme forms of courage, that simply cannot be accounted for in that way. Is anything lost by Franklin’s way of tallying things up?

**Amy Kass:** Yes and no. If we remember, Franklin has two virtues for moderation: One is temperance, and one is moderation. And that really is no accident. What he, I think, was most afraid of was fanaticism—fanaticism of any form. And that might be a reason that courage is not included in this.

**Diana Schaub:** What he says about moderation seems to be working against those who are in the grips of manly pride or manly honor, people who take offense readily and are quick to anger. Franklin really wants to get that under control in this new order. Moderation is a virtue that is perhaps more associated with women than with men, and he gives a special pride of place to this virtue.

**Leon Kass:** It is true that Franklin is trying to shift away from fanatical religious
teachings which divide people and produce civil disorder and worse. But, on the other hand, he writes his own prayer to address a powerful goodness. He has some kind of deistic view. But I wonder if he has not left out something that is terribly important both for private and public life.

Amy Kass: I think one of the questions about religion has to do with the way in which he talks about moderation. Forbearance becomes very important. And you could say that that is feminizing moderation and that it is instead of courage. But this moderation is certainly compatible with a certain religious attitude of turning the other cheek. Many of his assumptions, though, are radically different from the Christian conception; to Franklin, human beings are not sinners by nature. But I do not think he would suggest that hope or faith or charity are virtues that one ought not to cultivate.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

3. In *What So Proudly We Hail*, this reading appears in the chapter on the Virtues of Civic Life, in the section on the virtue of self-command and self-respect. Is self-command really necessary or desirable for American citizens today? Why or why not?
4. Is Franklin’s list of virtues suitable—and possible—for every American, regardless of race, class, or gender?

C. Teaching Good Character

1. What is the best way to acquire good habits and to develop virtuous character? Should Franklin’s methods be imitated today?
2. Does humor—and the ability to laugh at oneself—have a role to play in moral education? In civic life? What is it, and why?
Law-Abidingness and Justice:
Toward Public Order
A Jury of Her Peers

SUSAN GLASPELL

This story by Susan Glaspell (1876–1948), playwright, actress, and writer, raises questions not about the justice of the law but about its proper enforcement, not about the obligation to obey it but about how to judge those who allegedly have violated it. The story (1917), inspired by an actual case in Iowa a few years earlier, is set in the rural Midwest. Law enforcement officials and a key witness, joined by the wives of the sheriff and the witness, search the domestic scene of the crime, seeking clues to why the woman of the house might have murdered her husband.

To what extent do or should a suspect’s circumstances and motives excuse the commission of a crime? What are the limits of sympathy and understanding when it comes to enforcing the law? Is it really true that to understand is to forgive? When, if ever, may one be excused for taking the law into one’s own hands? When, if ever, is it permissible to withhold evidence? What are the obligations of sworn jurors—or any other citizen—to the enforcement of the law? The men and the women in the story have decidedly different outlooks, sympathies, and insights. With which group do you most sympathize and why? Were you Mrs. Hale or Mrs. Peters, would you have done as they did? Would you wish their reasons to govern the juries of your peers? Who is a “peer,” fit to judge?

When Martha Hale opened the storm-door and got a cut of the north wind, she ran back for her big woolen scarf. As she hurriedly wound that round her head her eye made a scandalized sweep of her kitchen. It was no ordinary thing that called her away—it was probably farther from ordinary than anything that had ever happened in Dickson County. But what her eye took in was that her kitchen was in no shape for leaving: her bread all ready for mixing, half the flour sifted and half unsifted.

She hated to see things half done; but she had been at that when the team from town stopped to get Mr. Hale, and then the sheriff came running in to say his wife wished Mrs. Hale would come too—adding, with a grin, that he guessed she was getting scarey and wanted another woman along. So she had dropped everything right where it was.

“Martha!” now came her husband’s impatient voice. “Don’t keep folks waiting out here in the cold.”

She again opened the storm-door, and this time joined the three men and the one woman waiting for her in the big two-seated buggy.

After she had the robes tucked around her she took another look at the woman who sat beside her on the back seat. She had met Mrs. Peters the year before at the county fair, and the thing she remembered about her was that she didn’t seem like a sheriff’s wife. She was small and thin and didn’t have a strong voice. Mrs. Gorman, sheriff’s wife before Gorman went out and Peters came in, had a voice that somehow seemed to be
backing up the law with every word. But if Mrs. Peters didn’t look like a sheriff’s wife, Peters made it up in looking like a sheriff. He was to a dot the kind of man who could get himself elected sheriff—a heavy man with a big voice, who was particularly genial with the law-abiding, as if to make it plain that he knew the difference between criminals and non-criminals. And right there it came into Mrs. Hale’s mind, with a stab, that this man who was so pleasant and lively with all of them was going to the Wrights’ now as a sheriff.

“The country’s not very pleasant this time of year,” Mrs. Peters at last ventured, as if she felt they ought to be talking as well as the men.

Mrs. Hale scarcely finished her reply, for they had gone up a little hill and could see the Wright place now, and seeing it did not make her feel like talking. It looked very lonesome this cold March morning. It had always been a lonesome-looking place. It was down in a hollow, and the poplar trees around it were lonesome-looking trees. The men were looking at it and talking about what had happened. The county attorney was bending to one side of the buggy, and kept looking steadily at the place as they drew up to it.

“I’m glad you came with me,” Mrs. Peters said nervously, as the two women were about to follow the men in through the kitchen door.

Even after she had her foot on the door-step, her hand on the knob, Martha Hale had a moment of feeling she could not cross that threshold. And the reason it seemed she couldn’t cross it now was simply because she hadn’t crossed it before. Time and time again it had been in her mind, “I ought to go over and see Minnie Foster”—she still thought of her as Minnie Foster, though for twenty years she had been Mrs. Wright. And then there was always something to do and Minnie Foster would go from her mind. But now she could come.

The men went over to the stove. The women stood close together by the door. Young Henderson, the county attorney, turned around and said, “Come up to the fire, ladies.”

Mrs. Peters took a step forward, then stopped. “I’m not—cold,” she said.

And so the two women stood by the door, at first not even so much as looking around the kitchen.

The men talked for a minute about what a good thing it was the sheriff had sent his deputy out that morning to make a fire for them, and then Sheriff Peters stepped back from the stove, unbuttoned his outer coat, and leaned his hands on the kitchen table in a way that seemed to mark the beginning of official business. “Now, Mr. Hale,” he said in a sort of semi-official voice, “before we move things about, you tell Mr. Henderson just what it was you saw when you came here yesterday morning.”

The county attorney was looking around the kitchen.
“By the way,” he said, “has anything been moved?” He turned to the sheriff. “Are things just as you left them yesterday?”

Peters looked from cupboard to sink; from that to a small worn rocker a little to one side of the kitchen table.

“It’s just the same.”

“Somebody should have been left here yesterday,” said the county attorney.

“Oh—yesterday,” returned the sheriff, with a little gesture as of yesterday having been more than he could bear to think of. “When I had to send Frank to Morris Center for that man who went crazy—let me tell you. I had my hands full yesterday. I knew you could get back from Omaha by to-day, George, and as long as I went over everything here myself—”

“Well, Mr. Hale,” said the county attorney, in a way of letting what was past and gone go, “tell just what happened when you came here yesterday morning.”

Mrs. Hale, still leaning against the door, had that sinking feeling of the mother whose child is about to speak a piece. Lewis often wandered along and got things mixed up in a story. She hoped he would tell this straight and plain, and not say unnecessary things that would just make things harder for Minnie Foster. He didn’t begin at once, and she noticed that he looked queer—as if standing in that kitchen and having to tell what he had seen there yesterday made him almost sick.

“Yes, Mr. Hale?” the county attorney reminded.

“Harry and I had started to town with a load of potatoes,” Mrs. Hale’s husband began.

Harry was Mrs. Hale’s oldest boy. He wasn’t with them now, for the very good reason that those potatoes never got to town yesterday and he was taking them this morning, so he hadn’t been home when the sheriff stopped to say he wanted Mr. Hale to come over to the Wright place and tell the county attorney his story there, where he could point it all out. With all Mrs. Hale’s other emotions came the fear now that maybe Harry wasn’t dressed warm enough—they hadn’t any of them realized how that north wind did bite.

“We come along this road,” Hale was going on, with a motion of his hand to the road over which they had just come, “and as we got in sight of the house I says to Harry, ‘I’m goin’ to see if I can’t get John Wright to take a telephone.’ You see,” he explained to Henderson, “unless I can get somebody to go in with me they won’t come out this branch road except for a price I can’t pay. I’d spoke to Wright about it once before; but he put me off, saying folks talked too much anyway, and all he asked was peace and quiet—guess you know about how much he talked himself. But I thought maybe if I went to the house and talked about it before his wife, and said all the women-folks liked the
telephones, and that in this lonesome stretch of road it would be a good thing—well, I
said to Harry that that was what I was going to say—though I said at the same time that I
didn’t know as what his wife wanted made much difference to John—”

Now, there he was!—saying things he didn’t need to say. Mrs. Hale tried to catch her
husband’s eye, but fortunately the county attorney interrupted with:

“Let’s talk about that a little later, Mr. Hale. I do want to talk about that, but I’m
anxious now to get along to just what happened when you got here.”

When he began this time, it was very deliberately and carefully:

“I didn’t see or hear anything. I knocked at the door. And still it was all quiet inside. I
knew they must be up—it was past eight o’clock. So I knocked again, louder, and I
thought I heard somebody say, ‘Come in.’ I wasn’t sure—I’m not sure yet. But I opened
the door—this door,” jerking a hand toward the door by which the two women stood.
“And there, in that rocker”—pointing to it—“sat Mrs. Wright.”

Everyone in the kitchen looked at the rocker. It came into Mrs. Hale’s mind that that
rocker didn’t look in the least like Minnie Foster—the Minnie Foster of twenty years
before. It was a dingy red, with wooden rungs up the back, and the middle rung was
gone, and the chair sagged to one side.

“How did she—look?” the county attorney was inquiring.

“Well,” said Hale, “she looked—queer.”

“How do you mean—queer?”

As he asked it he took out a note-book and pencil. Mrs. Hale did not like the sight of
that pencil. She kept her eye fixed on her husband, as if to keep him from saying
unnecessary things that would go into that note-book and make trouble.

Hale did speak guardedly, as if the pencil had affected him too.

“Well, as if she didn’t know what she was going to do next. And kind of—done up.”

“How did she seem to feel about your coming?”

“Why, I don’t think she minded—one way or other. She didn’t pay much attention. I
said, ‘Ho’ do, Mrs. Wright? It’s cold, ain’t it?’ And she said. ‘Is it?’”—and went on
pleatin’ at her apron.

“Well, I was surprised. She didn’t ask me to come up to the stove, or to sit down, but
just set there, not even lookin’ at me. And so I said: ‘I want to see John.’
“And then she—laughed. I guess you would call it a laugh.

“I thought of Harry and the team outside, so I said, a little sharp, ‘Can I see John?’ ‘No,’ says she—kind of dull like. ‘Ain’t he home?’ says I. Then she looked at me. ‘Yes,’ says she, ‘he’s home.’ ‘Then why can’t I see him?’ I asked her, out of patience with her now. ‘ Cause he’s dead’ says she, just as quiet and dull—and fell to pleatin’ her apron. ‘Dead?’ says I, like you do when you can’t take in what you’ve heard.

“She just nodded her head, not getting a bit excited, but rockin’ back and forth.

“‘Why—where is he?’ says I, not knowing what to say.

“She just pointed upstairs—like this”—pointing to the room above.

“I got up, with the idea of going up there myself. By this time I—didn’t know what to do. I walked from there to here; then I says: ‘Why, what did he die of?’

“‘He died of a rope around his neck,’ says she; and just went on pleatin’ at her apron.”

Hale stopped speaking, and stood staring at the rocker, as if he were still seeing the woman who had sat there the morning before. Nobody spoke; it was as if every one were seeing the woman who had sat there the morning before.

“And what did you do then?” the county attorney at last broke the silence.

“I went out and called Harry. I thought I might—need help. I got Harry in, and we went upstairs.” His voice fell almost to a whisper. “There he was—lying over the—”

“I think I’d rather have you go into that upstairs,” the county attorney interrupted, “where you can point it all out. Just go on now with the rest of the story.”

“Well, my first thought was to get that rope off. It looked—”

He stopped, his face twitching.

“But Harry, he went up to him, and he said, ‘No, he’s dead all right, and we’d better not touch anything.’ So we went downstairs.

“She was still sitting that same way. ‘Has anybody been notified?’ I asked. ‘No,’ says she, unconcerned.

“‘Who did this, Mrs. Wright?’ said Harry. He said it businesslike, and she stopped pleatin’ at her apron. ‘I don’t know,’ she says. ‘You don’t know?’ says Harry. ‘Weren’t you sleepin’ in the bed with him?’ ‘Yes,’ says she, ‘but I was on the inside.’ “Somebody
slipped a rope round his neck and strangled him, and you didn’t wake up?’ says Harry. ‘I
didn’t wake up,’ she said after him.

“We may have looked as if we didn’t see how that could be, for after a minute she
said, ‘I sleep sound.’

“Harry was going to ask her more questions, but I said maybe that weren’t our
business; maybe we ought to let her tell her story first to the coroner or the sheriff. So
Harry went fast as he could over to High Road—the Rivers’ place, where there’s a
telephone.”

“And what did she do when she knew you had gone for the coroner?” The attorney
get his pencil in his hand all ready for writing.

“She moved from that chair to this one over here”—Hale pointed to a small chair in
the corner—“and just sat there with her hands held together and looking down. I got a
feeling that I ought to make some conversation, so I said I had come in to see if John
wanted to put in a telephone; and at that she started to laugh, and then she stopped and
looked at me—scared.”

At the sound of a moving pencil the man who was telling the story looked up.

“I dunno—maybe it wasn’t scared,” he hastened; “I wouldn’t like to say it was. Soon
Harry got back, and then Dr. Lloyd came, and you, Mr. Peters, and so I guess that’s all I
know that you don’t.”

He said that last with relief, and moved a little, as if relaxing. Everyone moved a little.
The county attorney walked toward the stair door.

“I guess we’ll go upstairs first—then out to the barn and around there.”

He paused and looked around the kitchen.

“You’re convinced there was nothing important here?” he asked the sheriff. “Nothing
that would—point to any motive?”

The sheriff too looked all around, as if to re-convince himself.

“Nothing here but kitchen things,” he said, with a little laugh for the insignificance of
kitchen things.

The county attorney was looking at the cupboard—a peculiar, ungainly structure, half
closet and half cupboard, the upper part of it being built in the wall, and the lower part
just the old-fashioned kitchen cupboard. As if its queerness attracted him, he got a chair
and opened the upper part and looked in. After a moment he drew his hand away sticky.
“Here’s a nice mess,” he said resentfully.

The two women had drawn nearer, and now the sheriff’s wife spoke.

“Oh—her fruit,” she said, looking to Mrs. Hale for sympathetic understanding.

She turned back to the county attorney and explained: “She worried about that when it turned so cold last night. She said the fire would go out and her jars might burst.”

Mrs. Peters’ husband broke into a laugh.

“Well, can you beat the woman! Held for murder, and worrying about her preserves!”

The young attorney set his lips.

“I guess before we’re through with her she may have something more serious than preserves to worry about.”

“Oh, well,” said Mrs. Hale’s husband, with good-natured superiority, “women are used to worrying over trifles.”

The two women moved a little closer together. Neither of them spoke. The county attorney seemed suddenly to remember his manners—and think of his future.

“And yet,” said he, with the gallantry of a young politician, “for all their worries, what would we do without the ladies?”

The women did not speak, did not unbend. He went to the sink and began washing his hands. He turned to wipe them on the roller towel—whirled it for a cleaner place.

“Dirty towels! Not much of a housekeeper, would you say, ladies?”

He kicked his foot against some dirty pans under the sink.

“There’s a great deal of work to be done on a farm,” said Mrs. Hale stiffly.

“To be sure. And yet”—with a little bow to her—“I know there are some Dickson County farm-houses that do not have such roller towels.” He gave it a pull to expose its full length again.

“Those towels get dirty awful quick. Men’s hands aren’t always as clean as they might be.”

“Ah, loyal to your sex, I see,” he laughed. He stopped and gave her a keen look. “But you and Mrs. Wright were neighbors. I suppose you were friends, too.”
Martha Hale shook her head.

“I’ve seen little enough of her of late years. I’ve not been in this house—it’s more than a year.”

“And why was that? You didn’t like her?”

“I liked her well enough,” she replied with spirit. “Farmers’ wives have their hands full, Mr. Henderson. And then—” She looked around the kitchen.

“Yes?” he encouraged.

“It never seemed a very cheerful place,” said she, more to herself than to him.

“No,” he agreed; “I don’t think anyone would call it cheerful. I shouldn’t say she had the home-making instinct.”

“Well, I don’t know as Wright had, either,” she muttered.

“You mean they didn’t get on very well?” he was quick to ask.

“No; I don’t mean anything,” she answered, with decision. As she turned a little away from him, she added: “But I don’t think a place would be any the cheerfuller for John Wright’s bein’ in it.”

“I’d like to talk to you about that a little later, Mrs. Hale,” he said. “I’m anxious to get the lay of things upstairs now.”

He moved toward the stair door, followed by the two men.

“I suppose anything Mrs. Peters does’ll be all right?” the sheriff inquired. “She was to take in some clothes for her, you know—and a few little things. We left in such a hurry yesterday.”

The county attorney looked at the two women whom they were leaving alone there among the kitchen things.

“Yes—Mrs. Peters,” he said, his glance resting on the woman who was not Mrs. Peters, the big farmer woman who stood behind the sheriff’s wife. “Of course Mrs. Peters is one of us,” he said, in a manner of entrusting responsibility. “And keep your eye out, Mrs. Peters, for anything that might be of use. No telling; you women might come upon a clue to the motive—and that’s the thing we need.”

Mr. Hale rubbed his face after the fashion of a showman getting ready for a pleasantry.
“But would the women know a clue if they did come upon it?” he said; and, having delivered himself of this, he followed the others through the stair door.

The women stood motionless and silent, listening to the footsteps, first upon the stairs, then in the room above them.

Then, as if releasing herself from something strange, Mrs. Hale began to arrange the dirty pans under the sink, which the county attorney’s disdainful push of the foot had deranged.

“I’d hate to have men comin’ into my kitchen,” she said testily—“snoopin’ round and criticizin’.”

“Of course it’s no more than their duty,” said the sheriff’s wife, in her manner of timid acquiescence.

“Duty’s all right,” replied Mrs. Hale bluffly; “but I guess that deputy sheriff that come out to make the fire might have got a little of this on.” She gave the roller towel a pull. “Wish I’d thought of that sooner! Seems mean to talk about her for not having things slicked up, when she had to come away in such a hurry.”

She looked around the kitchen. Certainly it was not “slicked up.” Her eye was held by a bucket of sugar on a low shelf. The cover was off the wooden bucket, and beside it was a paper bag—half full.

Mrs. Hale moved toward it.

“She was putting this in there,” she said to herself—slowly.

She thought of the flour in her kitchen at home—half sifted, half not sifted. She had been interrupted, and had left things half done. What had interrupted Minnie Foster? Why had that work been left half done? She made a move as if to finish it,—unfinished things always bothered her,—and then she glanced around and saw that Mrs. Peters was watching her—and she didn’t want Mrs. Peters to get that feeling she had got of work begun and then—for some reason—not finished.

“It’s a shame about her fruit,” she said, and walked toward the cupboard that the county attorney had opened, and got on the chair, murmuring: “I wonder if it’s all gone.”

It was a sorry enough looking sight, but “Here’s one that’s all right,” she said at last. She held it toward the light. “This is cherries, too.” She looked again. “I declare I believe that’s the only one.”

With a sigh, she got down from the chair, went to the sink, and wiped off the bottle.
“She’ll feel awful bad, after all her hard work in the hot weather. I remember the afternoon I put up my cherries last summer.”

She set the bottle on the table, and, with another sigh, started to sit down in the rocker. But she did not sit down. Something kept her from sitting down in that chair. She straightened—stepped back, and, half turned away, stood looking at it; seeing the woman who had sat there “pleatin’ at her apron.”

The thin voice of the sheriff’s wife broke in upon her: “I must be getting those things from the front room closet.” She opened the door into the other room, started in, stepped back. “You coming with me, Mrs. Hale?” she asked nervously. “You—you could help me get them.”

They were soon back—the stark coldness of that shut-up room was not a thing to linger in.

“My!” said Mrs. Peters, dropping the things on the table and hurrying to the stove.

Mrs. Hale stood examining the clothes the woman who was being detained in town had said she wanted.

“Wright was close!” she exclaimed, holding up a shabby black shirt that bore the marks of much making over. “I think maybe that’s why she kept so much to herself. I s’pose she felt she couldn’t do her part; and then, you don’t enjoy things when you feel shabby. She used to wear pretty clothes and be lively—when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls, singing in the choir. But that—oh, that was twenty years ago.”

With a carefulness in which there was something tender, she folded the shabby clothes and piled them at one corner of the table. She looked up at Mrs. Peters, and there was something in the other woman’s look that irritated her.

“She don’t care,” she said to herself. “Much difference it makes to her whether Minnie Foster had pretty clothes when she was a girl.”

Then she looked again, and she wasn’t so sure; in fact, she hadn’t at any time been perfectly sure about Mrs. Peters. She had that shrinking manner, and yet her eyes looked as if they could see a long way into things.

“This all you was to take in?” asked Mrs. Hale.

“No,” said the sheriff’s wife; “she said she wanted an apron. Funny thing to want,” she ventured in her nervous little way, “for there’s not much to get you dirty in jail, goodness knows. But I suppose just to make her feel more natural. If you’re used to wearing an apron—. She said they were in the bottom drawer of this cupboard. Yes—here they are. And then her little shawl that always hung on the stair door.”
She took the small gray shawl from behind the door leading upstairs, and stood a minute looking at it.

Suddenly Mrs. Hale took a quick step toward the other woman.

“Mrs. Peters!”

“Yes, Mrs. Hale?”

“Do you think she—did it?”

A frightened look blurred the other thing in Mrs. Peters’ eyes.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said, in a voice that seemed to shrink away from the subject.

“Well, I don’t think she did,” affirmed Mrs. Hale stoutly. “Asking for an apron, and her little shawl. Worryin’ about her fruit.”

“Mr. Peters says—.” Footsteps were heard in the room above; she stopped, looked up, then went on in a lowered voice: “Mr. Peters says—it looks bad for her. Mr. Henderson is awful sarcastic in a speech, and he’s going to make fun of her saying she didn’t—wake up.”

For a moment Mrs. Hale had no answer. Then, “Well, I guess John Wright didn’t wake up—when they was slippin’ that rope under his neck,” she muttered.

“No, it’s strange,” breathed Mrs. Peters. “They think it was such a—funny way to kill a man.”

She began to laugh; at sound of the laugh, abruptly stopped.

“That’s just what Mr. Hale said,” said Mrs. Hale, in a resolutely natural voice. “There was a gun in the house. He says that’s what he can’t understand.”

“Mr. Henderson said, coming out, that what was needed for the case was a motive. Something to show anger—or sudden feeling.”

“Well, I don’t see any signs of anger around here,” said Mrs. Hale. “I don’t—”

She stopped. It was as if her mind tripped on something. Her eye was caught by a dish-towel in the middle of the kitchen table. Slowly she moved toward the table. One half of it was wiped clean, the other half messy. Her eyes made a slow, almost unwilling turn to the bucket of sugar and the half empty bag beside it. Things begun—and not finished.

After a moment she stepped back, and said, in that manner of releasing herself:
“Wonder how they’re finding things upstairs? I hope she had it a little more red up there. You know,”—she paused, and feeling gathered,—“it seems kind of sneaking: locking her up in town and coming out here to get her own house to turn against her!”

“But, Mrs. Hale,” said the sheriff’s wife, “the law is the law.”

“I s’pose ’tis,” answered Mrs. Hale shortly.

She turned to the stove, saying something about that fire not being much to brag of. She worked with it a minute, and when she straightened up she said aggressively:

“The law is the law—and a bad stove is a bad stove. How’d you like to cook on this?”—pointing with the poker to the broken lining. She opened the oven door and started to express her opinion of the oven; but she was swept into her own thoughts, thinking of what it would mean, year after year, to have that stove to wrestle with. The thought of Minnie Foster trying to bake in that oven—and the thought of her never going over to see Minnie Foster—.

She was startled by hearing Mrs. Peters say: “A person gets discouraged—and loses heart.”

The sheriff’s wife had looked from the stove to the sink—to the pail of water which had been carried in from outside. The two women stood there silent, above them the footsteps of the men who were looking for evidence against the woman who had worked in that kitchen. That look of seeing into things, of seeing through a thing to something else, was in the eyes of the sheriff’s wife now. When Mrs. Hale next spoke to her, it was gently:

“Better loosen up your things, Mrs. Peters. We’ll not feel them when we go out.”

Mrs. Peters went to the back of the room to hang up the fur tippet she was wearing. A moment later she exclaimed, “Why, she was piecing a quilt,” and held up a large sewing basket piled high with quilt pieces.

Mrs. Hale spread some of the blocks on the table.

“It’s log-cabin pattern,” she said, putting several of them together, “Pretty, isn’t it?”

They were so engaged with the quilt that they did not hear the footsteps on the stairs. Just as the stair door opened Mrs. Hale was saying:

“Do you suppose she was going to quilt it or just knot it?”

The sheriff threw up his hands.

“They wonder whether she was going to quilt it or just knot it!”
There was a laugh for the ways of women, a warming of hands over the stove, and then the county attorney said briskly: “Well, let’s go right out to the barn and get that cleared up.”

“I don’t see as there’s anything so strange,” Mrs. Hale said resentfully, after the outside door had closed on the three men—“our taking up our time with little things while we’re waiting for them to get the evidence. I don’t see as it’s anything to laugh about.”

“Of course they’ve got awful important things on their minds,” said the sheriff’s wife apologetically.

They returned to an inspection of the block for the quilt. Mrs. Hale was looking at the fine, even sewing, and preoccupied with thoughts of the woman who had done that sewing, when she heard the sheriff’s wife say, in a queer tone:

“Why, look at this one.”

She turned to take the block held out to her.

“The sewing,” said Mrs. Peters, in a troubled way. “All the rest of them have been so nice and even—but—this one. Why, it looks as if she didn’t know what she was about!”

Their eyes met—something flashed to life, passed between them; then, as if with an effort, they seemed to pull away from each other. A moment Mrs. Hale sat there, her hands folded over that sewing which was so unlike all the rest of the sewing. Then she had pulled a knot and drawn the threads.

“Oh, what are you doing, Mrs. Hale?” asked the sheriff’s wife, startled.

“Oh, just pulling out a stitch or two that’s not sewed very good,” said Mrs. Hale mildly.

“I don’t think we ought to touch things,” Mrs. Peters said, a little helplessly.

“I’ll just finish up this end,” answered Mrs. Hale, still in that mild, matter-of-fact fashion.

She threaded a needle and started to replace bad sewing with good. For a little while she sewed in silence. Then, in that thin, timid voice, she heard:

“Mrs. Hale!”

“Yes, Mrs. Peters?”

“What do you suppose she was so—nervous about?”
“Oh, I don’t know,” said Mrs. Hale, as if dismissing a thing not important enough to spend much time on. “I don’t know as she was—nervous. I sew awful queer sometimes when I’m just tired.”

She cut a thread, and out of the corner of her eye looked up at Mrs. Peters. The small, lean face of the sheriff’s wife seemed to have tightened up. Her eyes had that look of peering into something. But next moment she moved, and said in her thin, indecisive way:

“Well, I must get those clothes wrapped. They may be through sooner than we think. I wonder where I could find a piece of paper—and string.”

“In that cupboard, maybe,” suggested Mrs. Hale, after a glance around.

One piece of the crazy sewing remained unripped. Mrs. Peters’ back turned, Martha Hale now scrutinized that piece, compared it with the dainty, accurate sewing of the other blocks. The difference was startling. Holding this block made her feel queer, as if the distracted thoughts of the woman who had perhaps turned to it to try and quiet herself were communicating themselves to her.

Mrs. Peters’ voice roused her.

“Here’s a bird-cage,” she said. “Did she have a bird, Mrs. Hale?”

“Why, I don’t know whether she did or not.” She turned to look at the cage Mrs. Peters was holding up. “I’ve not been here in so long.” She sighed. “There was a man round last year selling canaries cheap—but I don’t know as she took one. Maybe she did. She used to sing real pretty herself.”

Mrs. Peters looked around the kitchen.

“Seems kind of funny to think of a bird here.” She half laughed—an attempt to put up a barrier. “But she must have had one—or why would she have a cage? I wonder what happened to it.”

“I suppose maybe the cat got it,” suggested Mrs. Hale, resuming her sewing.

“No; she didn’t have a cat. She’s got that feeling some people have about cats—being afraid of them. When they brought her to our house yesterday, my cat got in the room, and she was real upset and asked me to take it out.”

“My sister Bessie was like that,” laughed Mrs. Hale.

The sheriff’s wife did not reply. The silence made Mrs. Hale turn round. Mrs. Peters was examining the bird-cage.
“Look at this door,” she said slowly. “It’s broke. One hinge has been pulled apart.”

Mrs. Hale came nearer.

“Looks as if someone must have been—rough with it.”

Again their eyes met—startled, questioning, apprehensive. For a moment neither spoke nor stirred. Then Mrs. Hale, turning away, said brusquely:

“If they’re going to find any evidence, I wish they’d be about it. I don’t like this place.”

“But I’m awful glad you came with me, Mrs. Hale.” Mrs. Peters put the bird-cage on the table and sat down. “It would be lonesome for me—sitting here alone.”

“Yes, it would, wouldn’t it?” agreed Mrs. Hale, a certain determined naturalness in her voice. She had picked up the sewing, but now it dropped in her lap, and she murmured in a different voice: “But I tell you what I do wish, Mrs. Peters. I wish I had come over sometimes when she was here. I wish—I had.”

“But of course you were awful busy, Mrs. Hale. Your house—and your children.”

“I could’ve come,” retorted Mrs. Hale shortly. “I stayed away because it weren’t cheerful—and that’s why I ought to have come. I”—she looked around—“I’ve never liked this place. Maybe because it’s down in a hollow and you don’t see the road. I don’t know what it is, but it’s a lonesome place, and always was. I wish I had come over to see Minnie Foster sometimes. I can see now—” She did not put it into words.

“Well, you mustn’t reproach yourself,” counseled Mrs. Peters. “Somehow, we just don’t see how it is with other folks till—something comes up.”

“Not having children makes less work,” mused Mrs. Hale, after a silence, “but it makes a quiet house—and Wright out to work all day—and no company when he did come in. Did you know John Wright, Mrs. Peters?”

“Not to know him. I’ve seen him in town. They say he was a good man.”

“Yes—good,” conceded John Wright’s neighbor grimly. “He didn’t drink, and kept his word as well as most, I guess, and paid his debts. But he was a hard man, Mrs. Peters. Just to pass the time of day with him—.” She stopped, shivered a little. “Like a raw wind that gets to the bone.” Her eye fell upon the cage on the table before her, and she added, almost bitterly: “I should think she would’ve wanted a bird!”

Suddenly she leaned forward, looking intently at the cage. “But what do you s’pose went wrong with it?”
“I don’t know,” returned Mrs. Peters; “unless it got sick and died.”

But after she said it she reached over and swung the broken door. Both women watched it as if somehow held by it.

“You didn’t know—her?” Mrs. Hale asked, a gentler note in her voice.

“Not till they brought her yesterday,” said the sheriff’s wife.

“She—come to think of it, she was kind of like a bird herself. Real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and—fluttery. How—she—did—change.”

That held her for a long time. Finally, as if struck with a happy thought and relieved to get back to everyday things, she exclaimed:

“Tell you what, Mrs. Peters, why don’t you take the quilt in with you? It might take up her mind.”

“Why, I think that’s a real nice idea, Mrs. Hale,” agreed the sheriff’s wife, as if she too were glad to come into the atmosphere of a simple kindness. “There couldn’t possibly be any objection to that, could there? Now, just what will I take? I wonder if her patches are in here—and her things?”

They turned to the sewing basket.

“Here’s some red,” said Mrs. Hale, bringing out a roll of cloth. Underneath that was a box. “Here, maybe her scissors are in here—and her things.” She held it up. “What a pretty box! I’ll warrant that was something she had a long time ago—when she was a girl.”

She held it in her hand a moment; then, with a little sigh, opened it.

Instantly her hand went to her nose.

“Why—!”

Mrs. Peters drew nearer—then turned away.

“There’s something wrapped up in this piece of silk,” faltered Mrs. Hale.

“This isn’t her scissors,” said Mrs. Peters, in a shrinking voice.

Her hand not steady, Mrs. Hale raised the piece of silk. “Oh, Mrs. Peters!” she cried. “It’s—”

Mrs. Peters bent closer. “It’s the bird,” she whispered.
“But, Mrs. Peters!” cried Mrs. Hale. “Look at it! Its neck — look at its neck! It’s all — other side too.”

She held the box away from her.

The sheriff’s wife again bent closer.

“Somebody wrung its neck,” said she, in a voice that was slow and deep.

And then again the eyes of the two women met — this time clung together in a look of dawning comprehension, of growing horror. Mrs. Peters looked from the dead bird to the broken door of the cage. Again their eyes met. And just then there was a sound at the outside door. Mrs. Hale slipped the box under the quilt pieces in the basket, and sank into the chair before it. Mrs. Peters stood holding to the table. The county attorney and the sheriff came in from outside.

“Well, ladies,” said the county attorney, as one turning from serious things to little pleasantries, “have you decided whether she was going to quilt it or knot it?”

“We think,” began the sheriff’s wife in a flurried voice, “that she was going to—knot it.”

He was too preoccupied to notice the change that came in her voice on that last.

“Well, that’s very interesting, I’m sure,” he said tolerantly. He caught sight of the bird-cage. “Has the bird flown?”

“We think the cat got it,” said Mrs. Hale in a voice curiously even.

He was walking up and down, as if thinking something out.

“Is there a cat?” he asked absently.

Mrs. Hale shot a look up at the sheriff’s wife.

“Well, not now,” said Mrs. Peters. “They’re superstitious, you know; they leave.”

She sank into her chair.

The county attorney did not heed her. “No sign at all of anyone having come in from the outside,” he said to Peters, in the manner of continuing an interrupted conversation. “Their own rope. Now let’s go upstairs again and go over it, piece by piece. It would have to have been someone who knew just the—”

The stair door closed behind them and their voices were lost.
The two women sat motionless, not looking at each other, but as if peering into something and at the same time holding back. When they spoke now it was as if they were afraid of what they were saying, but as if they could not help saying it.

“She liked the bird,” said Martha Hale, low and slowly. “She was going to bury it in that pretty box.”

“When I was a girl,” said Mrs. Peters, under her breath, “my kitten—there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes—before I could get there—” She covered her face an instant. “If they hadn’t held me back I would have”—she caught herself, looked upstairs where footsteps were heard, and finished weakly—“hurt him.”

Then they sat without speaking or moving.

“I wonder how it would seem,” Mrs. Hale at last began, as if feeling her way over strange ground—“never to have had any children around?” Her eyes made a slow sweep of the kitchen, as if seeing what that kitchen had meant through all the years. “No, Wright wouldn’t like the bird,” she said after that—“a thing that sang. She used to sing. He killed that too.” Her voice tightened.

Mrs. Peters moved uneasily.

“Of course we don’t know who killed the bird.”

“I knew John Wright,” was Mrs. Hale’s answer.

“It was an awful thing was done in this house that night, Mrs. Hale,” said the sheriff’s wife. “Killing a man while he slept—slipping a thing round his neck that choked the life out of him.”

Mrs. Hale’s hand went out to the bird-cage.

“His neck. Choked the life out of him.”

“We don’t know who killed him,” whispered Mrs. Peters wildly. “We don’t know.”

Mrs. Hale had not moved. “If there had been years and years of—nothing, then a bird to sing to you, it would be awful—still—after the bird was still.”

It was as if something within her not herself had spoken, and it found in Mrs. Peters something she did not know as herself.

“I know what stillness is,” she said, in a queer, monotonous voice. “When we homesteaded in Dakota, and my first baby died—after he was two years old—and me with no other then—”
Mrs. Hale stirred.

“How soon do you suppose they’ll be through looking for the evidence?”

“I know what stillness is,” repeated Mrs. Peters, in just that same way. Then she too pulled back. “The law has got to punish crime, Mrs. Hale,” she said in her tight little way.

“I wish you’d seen Minnie Foster,” was the answer, “when she wore a white dress with blue ribbons, and stood up there in the choir and sang.”

The picture of that girl, the fact that she had lived neighbor to that girl for twenty years, and had let her die for lack of life, was suddenly more than she could bear.

“Oh, I wish I’d come over here once in a while!” she cried. “That was a crime! That was a crime! Who’s going to punish that?”

“We mustn’t take on,” said Mrs. Peters, with a frightened look toward the stairs.

“I might ‘a’ known she needed help! I tell you, it’s queer, Mrs. Peters. We live close together, and we live far apart. We all go through the same things—it’s all just a different kind of the same thing! If it weren’t—why do you and I understand? Why do we know—what we know this minute?”

She dashed her hand across her eyes. Then, seeing the jar of fruit on the table, she reached for it and choked out:

“If I was you I wouldn’t tell her her fruit was gone! Tell her it ain’t. Tell her it’s all right—all of it. Here—take this in to prove it to her! She—she may never know whether it was broke or not.”

She turned away.

Mrs. Peters reached out for the bottle of fruit as if she were glad to take it—as if touching a familiar thing, having something to do, could keep her from something else. She got up, looked about for something to wrap the fruit in, took a petticoat from the pile of clothes she had brought from the front room, and nervously started winding that round the bottle.

“My!” she began, in a high, false voice, “it’s a good thing the men couldn’t hear us! Getting all stirred up over a little thing like a—dead canary.” She hurried over that. “As if that could have anything to do with—with—My, wouldn’t they laugh?”

Footsteps were heard on the stairs.

“Maybe they would,” muttered Mrs. Hale—“maybe they wouldn’t.”
“No, Peters,” said the county attorney incisively; “it’s all perfectly clear, except the reason for doing it. But you know juries when it comes to women. If there was some definite thing—something to show. Something to make a story about. A thing that would connect up with this clumsy way of doing it.”

In a covert way Mrs. Hale looked at Mrs. Peters. Mrs. Peters was looking at her. Quickly they looked away from each other. The outer door opened and Mr. Hale came in.

“I’ve got the team round now,” he said. “Pretty cold out there.”

“I’m going to stay here awhile by myself,” the county attorney suddenly announced. “You can send Frank out for me, can’t you?” he asked the sheriff. “I want to go over everything. I’m not satisfied we can’t do better.”

Again, for one brief moment, the two women’s eyes found one another.

The sheriff came up to the table.

“Did you want to see what Mrs. Peters was going to take in?”

The county attorney picked up the apron. He laughed.

“Oh, I guess they’re not very dangerous things the ladies have picked out.”

Mrs. Hale’s hand was on the sewing basket in which the box was concealed. She felt that she ought to take her hand off the basket. She did not seem able to. He picked up one of the quilt blocks which she had piled on to cover the box. Her eyes felt like fire. She had a feeling that if he took up the basket she would snatch it from him.

But he did not take it up. With another little laugh, he turned away, saying:

“No; Mrs. Peters doesn’t need supervising. For that matter, a sheriff’s wife is married to the law. Ever think of it that way, Mrs. Peters?”

Mrs. Peters was standing beside the table. Mrs. Hale shot a look up at her; but she could not see her face. Mrs. Peters had turned away. When she spoke, her voice was muffled.

“Not—just that way,” she said.

“Married to the law!” chuckled Mrs. Peters’ husband. He moved toward the door into the front room, and said to the county attorney:

“I just want you to come in here a minute, George. We ought to take a look at these windows.”
“Oh—windows,” said the county attorney scoffingly.

“We’ll be right out, Mr. Hale,” said the sheriff to the farmer, who was still waiting by the door.

Hale went to look after the horses. The sheriff followed the county attorney into the other room. Again—for one final moment—the two women were alone in that kitchen.

Martha Hale sprang up, her hands tight together, looking at that other woman, with whom it rested. At first she could not see her eyes, for the sheriff’s wife had not turned back since she turned away at that suggestion of being married to the law. But now Mrs. Hale made her turn back. Her eyes made her turn back. Slowly, unwillingly, Mrs. Peters turned her head until her eyes met the eyes of the other woman. There was a moment when they held each other in a steady, burning look in which there was no evasion or flinching. Then Martha Hale’s eyes pointed the way to the basket in which was hidden the thing that would make certain the conviction of the other woman—that woman who was not there and yet who had been there with them all through that hour.

For a moment Mrs. Peters did not move. And then she did it. With a rush forward, she threw back the quilt pieces, got the box, tried to put it in her handbag. It was too big. Desperately she opened it, started to take the bird out. But there she broke—she could not touch the bird. She stood there helpless, foolish.

There was the sound of a knob turning in the inner door. Martha Hale snatched the box from the sheriff’s wife, and got it in the pocket of her big coat just as the sheriff and the county attorney came back into the kitchen.

“Well, Henry,” said the county attorney facetiously, “at least we found out that she was not going to quilt it. She was going to—what is it you call it, ladies?”

Mrs. Hale’s hand was against the pocket of her coat.

“We call it—knot it, Mr. Henderson.”
The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

According to its Preamble, the United States Constitution has as one of its aims to “establish justice.” Understanding law as the path to justice, “We the people of the United States” bound ourselves to a fundamental law that would organize our polity and guide the statutory laws. Half a century later, on January 27, 1838, an aspiring young politician named Abraham Lincoln gave a speech on “the perpetuation of our political institutions,” in which he worried that Americans were increasingly inclined to take the law into their own hands. In the grip of strong passions, they were substituting vigilante justice for the justice of law.†††

After tracing the dangerous effects of this slide into lawlessness and mob rule, Lincoln proposes a solution: “Let every American, every lover of liberty, every well wisher to his posterity, swear by the blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least particular, the laws of the country; and never to tolerate their violation by others. . . . Let reverence for the laws . . . become the political religion of the nation.” Well aware of the dilemma posed by unjust laws, Lincoln nonetheless insists on law-abidingness: “bad laws, if they exist, should be repealed as soon as possible, still while they continue in force, for the sake of example, they should be religiously observed.” Such “reverence for the constitution and laws,” Lincoln argues, is one of the new pillars of the temple of liberty, indispensable for preserving our political institutions and retaining the attachment of the citizens, now that the founding generation had gone to rest.

What is “reverence for the laws”? Does it differ from fear of punishment? Is reverence always part of law-abidingness, or does it add something new—and if so, what? Is reverence (or political religion) necessary to the preservation of our political institutions? Is it sufficient for binding citizens to the Republic? If not, what else is needed? Is Lincoln right that disobedience always undermines respect for law? In a democracy (where laws are arrived at by majority rule), must we obey bad laws in order not to undercut good laws or law itself? Would the case for disobedience be stronger under other, nondemocratic forms of government? What is the relation between “political religion” (reverence for the laws) and religion as most citizens know it (reverence for God)? What happens if the two conflict?

As a subject for the remarks of the evening, the perpetuation of our political institutions, is selected.

In the great journal of things happening under the sun, we, the American People, find our account running, under date of the nineteenth century of the Christian era. We find ourselves in the peaceful possession, of the fairest portion of the earth, as regards extent

††† Lincoln referred to recent lynchings of gamblers and murderers (suspected gamblers and murderers, that is), but was reticent about the incident uppermost in the minds of his listeners: the shooting of the abolitionist Elijah P. Lovejoy at Alton, Illinois, on November 7, 1837.
of territory, fertility of soil, and salubrity of climate. We find ourselves under the
government of a system of political institutions, conducing more essentially to the ends of
civil and religious liberty, than any of which the history of former times tells us. We,
when mounting the stage of existence, found ourselves the legal inheritors of these
fundamental blessings. We toiled not in the acquirement or establishment of them—they
are a legacy bequeathed us, by a once hardy, brave, and patriotic, but now lamented and
departed race of ancestors. Their’s was the task (and nobly they performed it) to possess
themselves, and through themselves, us, of this goodly land; and to uprear upon its hills
and its valleys, a political edifice of liberty and equal rights; ’tis ours only, to transmit
these, the former, unprofaned by the foot of an invader; the latter, undecayed by the lapse
of time, and untorn by usurpation—to the latest generation that fate shall permit the
world to know. This task of gratitude to our fathers, justice to ourselves, duty to posterity,
and love for our species in general, all imperatively require us faithfully to perform.

How, then, shall we perform it? At what point shall we expect the approach of
danger? By what means shall we fortify against it? Shall we expect some transatlantic
military giant, to step the Ocean, and crush us at a blow? Never! All the armies of
Europe, Asia and Africa combined, with all the treasure of the earth (our own excepted)
in their military chest; with a Buonaparte for a commander, could not by force, take a
drink from the Ohio, or make a track on the Blue Ridge, in a trial of a thousand years.

At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer, if it ever reach
us, it must spring up amongst us. It cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot,
we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live
through all time, or die by suicide.

I hope I am over wary; but if I am not, there is, even now, something of ill-omen
amongst us. I mean the increasing disregard for law which pervades the country; the
growing disposition to substitute the wild and furious passions, in lieu of the sober
judgement of Courts; and the worse than savage mobs, for the executive ministers of
justice. This disposition is awfully fearful in any community; and that it now exists in
ours, though grating to our feelings to admit, it would be a violation of truth, and an insult
to our intelligence, to deny. Accounts of outrages committed by mobs, form the every-
day news of the times. They have pervaded the country, from New England to
Louisiana;—they are neither peculiar to the eternal snows of the former, nor the burning
suns of the latter;—they are not the creature of climate—neither are they confined to the
slaveholding, or the non-slaveholding States. Alike, they spring up among the pleasure
hunting masters of Southern slaves, and the order loving citizens of the land of steady
habits. Whatever, then, their cause may be, it is common to the whole country.

It would be tedious, as well as useless, to recount the horrors of all of them. Those
happening in the State of Mississippi, and at St. Louis, are, perhaps, the most dangerous
in example, and revolting to humanity. In the Mississippi case, they first commenced by
hanging the regular gamblers: a set of men, certainly not following for a livelihood, a
very useful, or very honest occupation; but one which, so far from being forbidden by the
laws, was actually licensed by an act of the Legislature, passed but a single year before.
Next, negroes, suspected of conspiring to raise an insurrection, were caught up and hanged in all parts of the State: then, white men, supposed to be leagued with the negroes; and finally, strangers, from neighboring States, going thither on business, were, in many instances, subjected to the same fate. Thus went on this process of hanging, from gamblers to negroes, from negroes to white citizens, and from these to strangers; till, dead men were seen literally dangling from the boughs of trees upon every road side; and in numbers almost sufficient, to rival the native Spanish moss of the country, as a drapery of the forest.

Turn, then, to that horror-striking scene at St. Louis. A single victim was only sacrificed there. His story is very short; and is, perhaps, the most highly tragic, of anything of its length, that has ever been witnessed in real life. A mulatto man, by the name of McIntosh, was seized in the street, dragged to the suburbs of the city, chained to a tree, and actually burned to death; and all within a single hour from the time he had been a freeman, attending to his own business, and at peace with the world.

Such are the effects of mob law; and such are the scenes, becoming more and more frequent in this land so lately famed for love of law and order; and the stories of which, have even now grown too familiar, to attract anything more, than an idle remark.

But you are, perhaps, ready to ask, “What has this to do with the perpetuation of our political institutions?” I answer, it has much to do with it. Its direct consequences are, comparatively speaking, but a small evil; and much of its danger consists, in the proneness of our minds, to regard its direct, as its only consequences. Abstractly considered, the hanging of the gamblers at Vicksburg, was of but little consequence. They constitute a portion of population, that is worse than useless in any community; and their death, if no pernicious example be set by it, is never matter of reasonable regret with any one. If they were annually swept, from the stage of existence, by the plague or small pox, honest men would, perhaps, be much profited, by the operation. Similar too, is the correct reasoning, in regard to the burning of the negro at St. Louis. He had forfeited his life, by the perpetration of an outrageous murder, upon one of the most worthy and respectable citizens of the city; and had he not died as he did, he must have died by the sentence of the law, in a very short time afterwards. As to him alone, it was as well the way it was, as it could otherwise have been. But the example in either case, was fearful. When men take it in their heads to day, to hang gamblers, or burn murderers, they should recollect, that, in the confusion usually attending such transactions, they will be as likely to hang or burn some one, who is neither a gambler nor a murderer as one who is; and that, acting upon the example they set, the mob of to-morrow, may, and probably will, hang or burn some of them, by the very same mistake. And not only so; the innocent, those who have ever set their faces against violations of law in every shape, alike with the guilty, fall victims to the ravages of mob law; and thus it goes on, step by step, till all the walls erected for the defense of the persons and property of individuals, are trodden down, and disregarded. But all this even, is not the full extent of the evil. By such examples, by instances of the perpetrators of such acts going unpunished, the lawless in spirit, are encouraged to become lawless in practice; and having been used to no restraint, but dread of punishment, they thus become, absolutely unrestrained. Having ever
regarded Government as their deadliest bane, they make a jubilee of the suspension of its operations; and pray for nothing so much, as its total annihilation. While, on the other hand, good men, men who love tranquility, who desire to abide by the laws, and enjoy their benefits, who would gladly spill their blood in the defense of their country; seeing their property destroyed; their families insulted, and their lives endangered; their persons injured; and seeing nothing in prospect that forebodes a change for the better; become tired of, and disgusted with, a Government that offers them no protection; and are not much averse to a change in which they imagine they have nothing to lose. Thus, then, by the operation of this mobocratic spirit, which all must admit, is now abroad in the land, the strongest bulwark of any Government, and particularly of those constituted like ours, may effectually be broken down and destroyed— I mean the attachment of the People. Whenever this effect shall be produced among us; whenever the vicious portion of population shall be permitted to gather in bands of hundreds and thousands, and burn churches, ravage and rob provision stores, throw printing presses into rivers, shoot editors, and hang and burn obnoxious persons at pleasure, and with impunity; depend on it, this Government cannot last. By such things, the feelings of the best citizens will become more or less alienated from it; and thus it will be left without friends, or with too few, and those few too weak, to make their friendship effectual. At such a time and under such circumstances, men of sufficient talent and ambition will not be wanting to seize the opportunity, strike the blow, and overturn that fair fabric, which for the last half century, has been the fondest hope, of the lovers of freedom, throughout the world.

I know the American People are much attached to their Government;— I know they would suffer much for its sake;— I know they would endure evils long and patiently, before they would ever think of exchanging it for another. Yet, notwithstanding all this, if the laws be continually despised and disregarded, if their rights to be secure in their persons and property, are held by no better tenure than the caprice of a mob, the alienation of their affections from the Government is the natural consequence; and to that, sooner or later, it must come.

Here then, is one point at which danger may be expected.

The question recurs “how shall we fortify against it?” The answer is simple. Let every American, every lover of liberty, every well wisher to his posterity, swear by the blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least particular, the laws of the country; and never to tolerate their violation by others. As the patriots of seventy-six did to the support of the Declaration of Independence, so to the support of the Constitution and Laws, let every American pledge his life, his property, and his sacred honor;— let every man remember that to violate the law, is to trample on the blood of his father, and to tear the character of his own, and his children’s liberty. Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap— let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges;— let it be written in Primmers, spelling books, and in Almanacs;— let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.
While ever a state of feeling, such as this, shall universally, or even, very generally prevail throughout the nation, vain will be every effort, and fruitless every attempt, to subvert our national freedom.

When I so pressingly urge a strict observance of all the laws, let me not be understood as saying there are no bad laws, nor that grievances may not arise, for the redress of which, no legal provisions have been made. I mean to say no such thing. But I do mean to say, that, although bad laws, if they exist, should be repealed as soon as possible, still while they continue in force, for the sake of example, they should be religiously observed. So also in unprovided cases. If such arise, let proper legal provisions be made for them with the least possible delay; but, till then, let them if not too intolerable, be borne with.

There is no grievance that is a fit object of redress by mob law. In any case that arises, as for instance, the promulgation of abolitionism, one of two positions is necessarily true; that is, the thing is right within itself, and therefore deserves the protection of all law and all good citizens; or, it is wrong, and therefore proper to be prohibited by legal enactments; and in neither case, is the interposition of mob law, either necessary, justifiable, or excusable.

But, it may be asked, why suppose danger to our political institutions? Have we not preserved them for more than fifty years? And why may we not for fifty times as long? We hope there is no sufficient reason. We hope all dangers may be overcome; but to conclude that no danger may ever arise, would itself be extremely dangerous. There are now, and will hereafter be, many causes, dangerous in their tendency, which have not existed heretofore; and which are not too insignificant to merit attention. That our government should have been maintained in its original form from its establishment until now, is not much to be wondered at. It had many props to support it through that period, which now are decayed, and crumbled away. Through that period, it was felt by all, to be an undecided experiment; now, it is understood to be a successful one. Then, all that sought celebrity and fame, and distinction, expected to find them in the success of that experiment. Their all was staked upon it:—their destiny was inseparably linked with it. Their ambition aspired to display before an admiring world, a practical demonstration of the truth of a proposition, which had hitherto been considered, at best no better, than problematical; namely, the capability of a people to govern themselves. If they succeeded, they were to be immortalized; their names were to be transferred to counties and cities, and rivers and mountains; and to be revered and sung, and toasted through all time. If they failed, they were to be called knaves and fools, and fanatics for a fleeting hour; then to sink and be forgotten. They succeeded. The experiment is successful; and thousands have won their deathless names in making it so. But the game is caught; and I believe it is true, that with the catching, end the pleasures of the chase. This field of glory is harvested, and the crop is already appropriated. But new reapers will arise, and they, too, will seek a field. It is to deny, what the history of the world tells us is true, to suppose that men of ambition and talents will not continue to spring up amongst us. And, when they do, they will as naturally seek the gratification of their ruling passion, as others have
so done before them. The question then, is, can that gratification be found in supporting and maintaining an edifice that has been erected by others? Most certainly it cannot. Many great and good men sufficiently qualified for any task they should undertake, may ever be found, whose ambition would inspire to nothing beyond a seat in Congress, a gubernatorial or a presidential chair; but such belong not to the family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle. What! think you these places would satisfy an Alexander, a Caesar, or a Napoleon? Never! Towering genius disdains a beaten path. It seeks regions hitherto unexplored. It sees no distinction in adding story to story, upon the monuments of fame, erected to the memory of others. It denies that it is glory enough to serve under any chief. It scorns to tread in the footsteps of any predecessor, however illustrious. It thirsts and burns for distinction; and, if possible, it will have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves, or enslaving freemen. Is it unreasonable then to expect, that some man possessed of the loftiest genius, coupled with ambition sufficient to push it to its utmost stretch, will at some time, spring up among us? And when such a one does, it will require the people to be united with each other, attached to the government and laws, and generally intelligent, to successfully frustrate his designs.

Distinction will be his paramount object; and although he would as willingly, perhaps more so, acquire it by doing good as harm; yet, that opportunity being past, and nothing left to be done in the way of building up, he would set boldly to the task of pulling down.

Here then, is a probable case, highly dangerous, and such a one as could not have well existed heretofore.

Another reason which once was; but which, to the same extent, is now no more, has done much in maintaining our institutions thus far. I mean the powerful influence which the interesting scenes of the revolution had upon the passions of the people as distinguished from their judgment. By this influence, the jealousy, envy, and avarice, incident to our nature, and so common to a state of peace, prosperity, and conscious strength, were, for the time, in a great measure smothered and rendered inactive; while the deep rooted principles of hate, and the powerful motive of revenge, instead of being turned against each other, were directed exclusively against the British nation. And thus, from the force of circumstances, the basest principles of our nature, were either made to lie dormant, or to become the active agents in the advancement of the noblest cause—that of establishing and maintaining civil and religious liberty.

But this state of feeling must fade, is fading, has faded, with the circumstances that produced it.

I do not mean to say, that the scenes of the revolution are now or ever will be entirely forgotten; but that like every thing else, they must fade upon the memory of the world, and grow more and more dim by the lapse of time. In history, we hope, they will be read of, and recounted, so long as the bible shall be read;—but even granting that they will, their influence cannot be what it heretofore has been. Even then, they cannot be so universally known, nor so vividly felt, as they were by the generation just gone to rest. At the close of that struggle, nearly every adult male had been a participator in some of its
The consequence was, that of those scenes, in the form of a husband, a father, a son or a brother, a living history was to be found in every family—a history bearing the indubitable testimonies of its own authenticity, in the limbs mangled, in the scars of wounds received, in the midst of the very scenes related—a history, too, that could be read and understood alike by all, the wise and the ignorant, the learned and the unlearned. But those histories are gone. They can be read no more forever. They were a fortress of strength; but, what invading foeman could never do, the silent artillery of time has done; the leveling of its walls. They are gone. They were a forest of giant oaks; but the all resistless hurricane has swept over them, and left only, here and there, a lonely trunk, despoiled of its verdure, shorn of its foliage; unshading and unshaded, to murmur in a few more gentle breezes, and to combat with its mutilated limbs, a few more ruder storms, then to sink, and be no more.

They were the pillars of the temple of liberty; and now, that they have crumbled away, that temple must fall, unless we, their descendants, supply their places with other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason. Passion has helped us; but can do so no more. It will in future be our enemy. Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defence. Let those materials be moulded into general intelligence, sound morality and, in particular, a reverence for the constitution and laws; and, that we improved to the last; that we remained free to the last; that we revered his name to the last; that, during his long sleep, we permitted no hostile foot to pass over or desecrate his resting place; shall be that which to learn the last trump shall awaken our Washington.

Upon these let the proud fabric of freedom rest, as the rock of its basis; and as truly as has been said of the only greater institution, “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”
Susan Glaspell (1876–1948) was a Pulitzer Prize–winning playwright and novelist; a writer of short stories; and, for a short while, a journalist. She was born in Davenport, Iowa, attended Drake University in Des Moines, and worked for several years as a reporter at the Des Moines Daily News and other local newspapers, but she discovered early on that her interest was in writing fiction. Her first novel, The Glory of the Conquered (1909), became a national bestseller and drew a rave review in the New York Times. Subsequent novels in the early teens did almost as well.

In 1915, she was introduced to and fell in love with George Cram Cook, a wealthy, young rebel from Davenport. He came from a well-to-do background, but he was a philosophical radical, a leftist, and a sometime professor of philosophy at the University of Iowa and at Stanford University. Glaspell and Cook eventually moved to the East Coast, where they married and fell in with a set of avant-garde intellectuals. In 1915, they founded the Provincetown Players, a theater company located on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, which would have an important role in the history of the American theater. The company helped to launch the career of Eugene O’Neill, among others who went onto greater renown.

Glaspell also wrote plays for the Provincetown Players and became one of its most important actresses. Her 1931 play Alison’s House, based loosely on the life of Emily Dickinson, won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. In her later years, in the 1940s, she returned to her Midwestern roots, living in Chicago and back in Davenport, but toward the end of that decade, she returned to Provincetown, where she died in 1948.

Although she was widely regarded during her lifetime, Glaspell is little read or performed today, with one major exception: “A Jury of Her Peers” (1917). It was adapted from her one-act play, “Trifles,” written and produced in Provincetown a year earlier. Set in the rural Midwest, it was inspired by an actual murder that took place in Iowa in 1900, which Glaspell had covered for the Des Moines Daily News.

The short story was an immediate hit. It was anthologized in that year and in many, many years throughout her lifetime. It was rediscovered in the 1970s by the feminist movement and has become a staple of women’s studies courses in colleges and universities in recent decades. In 1980, it was made into a movie and nominated for an
Academy Award for Best Dramatic Live-Action Short.

II. Summary

Although the issues it raises are complex, the gist of the story is simple: Law enforcement officials and a key witness, joined by the wives of the sheriff and the witness, search the domestic scene of a crime, seeking clues to why the woman of the house might have murdered her husband. A farmer, John Wright, had been found—by a visiting neighbor, Mr. Hale—strangled to death by a rope in his bed. His wife, Minnie (née Minnie Foster), has been arrested, jailed, and accused of the murder. The story takes place the next day, when Sheriff Peters and the county attorney (Mr. Henderson), accompanied by Mr. Hale, visit the Wright house, seeking evidence that might convict the accused. Martha Hale, Mr. Hale’s wife, is summoned by Sheriff Peters to accompany his own wife as she gathers some things from the house to bring to Mrs. Wright in jail. The two women, formerly unfamiliar to each other, spend their time downstairs, looking through “kitchen things” and the like—dismissed by the men as mere “trifles”—while the “real” investigators search the bedroom upstairs and the outside barn. The men come up empty. The women do not. More penetrating in their vision, they piece together the sort of married life Mrs. Wright had lived. And, following up on a series of clues—including unfinished work in the kitchen; some crooked stitching on the quilt she had been sewing; a broken door hinge on an empty bird cage; and, finally, the corpse of a strangled canary—they also reconstruct Minnie Wright’s motive. In silent collusion, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters choose not to disclose the clues that reveal the motive, thereby constituting themselves as a jury and tacitly acquitting Minnie of any wrongdoing.

III. Thinking about the Text

To better appreciate what Susan Glaspell is doing in her tale, it is helpful to know about the true story that inspired it. On December 2, 1900, John Hossack, a well-regarded farmer, was murdered with an axe while sleeping in bed with his wife, Margaret Hossack. Convicted of the murder, Mrs. Hossack was sentenced to life in prison. But on appeal a year later, she was released for lack of sufficient evidence. The mystery of John Hossack’s death was never solved. Transforming the real case into fiction, Glaspell takes the liberty of supplying the missing evidence and motive, as a result of which the characters, the crime, the search for the evidence, and the judgment rendered appear in a very different light.

More important, the fictional story—with its provocative title—raises large questions about law and justice and about judgment and punishment, questions very much alive today. It also raises questions about the role of gender in relation to law and justice: when the Iowa crime was committed, and even when the story was published, women in Iowa were not yet allowed to vote or serve on juries. For this reason, some people treat Glaspell’s story largely as a political protest on behalf of women’s rights. But in the story itself, the gender issues are much richer and subtler.
A. The Characters and the Setting

1. From what they say and do, what do we know about each of the characters: Mr. Hale, Sheriff Peters, County Attorney Henderson, Mrs. Hale, Mrs. Peters, Mrs. Wright, and Mr. Wright?
2. Look at the places in the story where Mrs. Hale refers to Mrs. Wright by her maiden name, Minnie Foster. Why might she do so? What effect does it have on her? On the reader?
3. Describe the Wright house, both physically and as a place to live. What is life like in this house? In this time and place? In this community?

IN CONVERSATION

In this conversation, Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass discuss Glaspell’s story with Diana Schaub, coeditor of What So Proudly We Hail, and Christopher DeMuth, distinguished senior fellow at the Hudson Institute.

Diana Schaub: The date of the story is 1917. This is before the suffrage amendment and before the change in jury service, so it is a sort of brief for women’s broader inclusion into public life.

Amy Kass: What came to mind immediately was that very haunting picture at the end of Tocqueville’s Democracy in America of the pioneer woman whose life is very difficult and very harsh. She tries to bring to the frontier all of the little things of civilization, but she is basically drained of her life. And one of the things you see very vividly if you really try to get inside these characters here is what it must have been like to be a woman on the frontier, or in the plains when the weather was terrible and canning took all summer and laundry was a very big deal, without washing machines.

Leon Kass: I thought you were going to say of the pioneer woman in Tocqueville that she endured all of this because of her children. And what you see in this story is the crucial difference between the house with children and the house without them. Sacrifice in the house of Minnie Foster is not for the sake of the future; it is the frontier without that for which the frontier has been settled.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

B. The Crime

1. What (and who) is responsible for the death of Mr. Wright?
2. Why was he killed?
IN CONVERSATION

**Christopher DeMuth:** John Wright is not simply a man who has the hard life of a farmer and providing for a home. He clearly is a terrible husband. He is cold, and he has no sympathy for his wife. We are not supposed to think that that is simply the perspective of Mrs. Hale, but rather it is the truth of the matter that John Wright did in a sense kill Minnie Foster. She used to be a singer, she used to be a happy person, and she was clearly on the brink of a nervous breakdown at the time her canary was strangled. She had this one little piece of happiness in her life, and something happened and he wrung the canary’s neck. He killed the canary.

**Amy Kass:** The reader is urged to rethink the meaning of victim in this story. Mr. Wright is the one who has been killed, but the real trial seems to be of John Wright in particular, and of men in general, while Mrs. Wright comes to be seen as the victim. And that has something to do with the condescending ways in which the men speak about what the women do—and not only what the women do, but also their stupidity. “They wouldn’t even recognize evidence if they saw it.”

**Diana Schaub:** It is, in a way, the entire male sex that is put on trial because the behavior of the men in the story is a somewhat tamped-down version of what John Wright has done to his wife.

**Amy Kass:** You cannot help but feel some kind of sympathy for what the women are doing as you read along with this. There is one thing that is said about Mr. Wright in addition to the fact that he is reputed to be a good man in town, that he does not drink, that he pays his debts, and he does not beat his wife. Mrs. Hale says that Mr. Wright is “like a raw wind that gets to the bone.”

For more discussion on this question, [watch the video online](#).

3. Mrs. Hale, in response to Mrs. Peters’s assertion that “the law has got to punish crime,” answers, “I wish you’d seen Minnie Foster when she wore a white dress with blue ribbons, and stood up there in the choir and sang”; she then adds, “Oh, I wish I’d come over here once in a while! . . . That was a crime! Who’s going to punish that?” (205). Is Mrs. Hale guilty of a crime? Why does she think she is? Does she deserve punishment?

**C. Men and Women, and the Search for Evidence**

1. The men and the women in the story have decidedly different outlooks, sympathies, and insights, and perhaps even different views of justice. Carefully describe those differences. With which group do you most
sympathize, and why? (Before answering the question, try to make a positive case for each group.)

2. Why are the women better able than the men to discover the motive for the murder?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: I think the gender differences are very important to the story. It’s an arduous life, a farming life, and there is a division of labor of different spheres: the women tend the inside; they tend the kitchen and the hearth; they provide for the daily things of daily life. And the job of the men is to make a living arduously and, at least through the law, to protect and keep the peace.

The differences are connected with different views of the world: the women have a much more interior view of things, whereas the men look at the surface. The men look for the evidence; the women see through the evidence to its meaning. The men seem coldly rational, while the women attend life through feeling.

Maybe those are products of the culture of the time, and maybe they have something to do with differences in men and women. The story shows the inadequacy of a merely male-oriented, external, rational understanding of the events of life. The men are supposed to be making it possible for domestic life to flourish. But they cannot read the truth of domestic life in the way that makes them understand this particular assault on domestic life. It is only the women who understand what it is that is to be defended that enables them to see the truth of what has happened.

Amy Kass: But it is not simply on the basis of their feeling. They see evidence that the men would never even look at. And our attention is drawn over and over again to their discernment and their seeing.

Diana Schaub: Isn’t that connected with their empathy? It seems to me at every point it is the women’s empathy that enables them to see the things the men do not see. Their superior cognition is really related to some form of emotional intelligence.

Leon Kass: The men are obtuse. They do not see very well. But, if you simply set it up in this stark way and you dismiss the perspective of the men, you lose the opportunity to really think of this as a puzzle. Which sort of orientation is closest to doing the work of justice and judging and enforcing the law?

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.
3. Why do the women withhold the evidence that would have supplied the motive? Are they knowingly rendering a verdict of “not guilty”? Or are they forgiving her for the murder?

4. Do you approve of their decision? What would you have done in their place? Does your answer depend on your sex (or the sex of the accused)? On the historical time in which the crime took place? Or something else? If the person killed were a brother of yours, would your answer be different?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: Mainly, I do not approve of their decision. As a citizen, I deplore it. Whatever your feelings of sympathy might be for the accused, the law requires that, at least with respect to the investigation, we disclose what happened, and if one wants to plead for mercy on the basis of sympathy, one can do it at the trial or at sentencing or at some other time.

But there is a curious thing: I said mainly no and, as a citizen, I continue to say no. But, the story is about a jury of her peers, namely Mrs. Wright’s peers. The reader is put in a position of constituting him or herself as part of a jury of the peers of these two women who withheld evidence. I find myself sympathetic to them. In other words, as one reads the story, you are able to see the whole crime through their eyes, and you can say, “The law is the law”—but there is such a thing as either equity or justice. And it is not just female solidarity. They have understood something. They have found a notion of justice in which Minnie Foster Wright is not guilty. And we are, as a jury of their peers, so sympathetic to them that our initial presumption that they have done wrong is at least qualified. So I am bothered. I mostly think they did wrong, but why is it that I am so sympathetic to what they have done?

Amy Kass: Because you are both a human being and a citizen.

Leon Kass: But it is not that I am a sappy human being who has been softened up by decades of feminism; it is that they have enabled me to understand the entire crime. And they do this because they understand the inner meaning of the house, they understand that this is in some ways just. In a certain way, Mr. Wright got what he deserved. That is what you mean by justice, and there is a sense of justice which is not simply law-abidingness.

Diana Schaub: So there is a larger justice that they have achieved here, is that right? I guess I’m not prepared to agree with that. There is a murder that goes unpunished because they committed obstruction of justice. There has also been a loss of marital trust, particularly by bringing Mrs. Peters into this. She is married to the law, and now she is going to be engaged in this cover-up for the next few months. I do not see that they have done Minnie Foster any favor, and it seems to
me the women have proved their own unsuitability for ever serving on a jury or ever being granted the vote. Juries are really at the heart of our justice system. This is an issue central for a self-governing people.

**Amy Kass:** I agree with both of you. There is a subversion of legal justice. But the justice that we are talking about is different from legal justice, I suspect. I think there is a certain sense in which Mr. Wright gets exactly what he deserves.

**Diana Schaub:** But that cannot be the full story. These women only see the woman’s side. I take it he has a story too.

**Christopher DeMuth:** So what if there were a bunch of men putting together his side of the story?

**Diana Schaub:** Right. Maybe his hard soul was deformed at some earlier point in his own life. But that is a kind of omniscience that human beings do not have.

*For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.*

### D. Law, Judgment, and Justice

1. Was justice done? To Mr. Wright? To Minnie Foster Wright? To the law?
2. Who is fit to sit in judgment of Mrs. Wright?
3. What is the meaning of the story’s title? Does it raise a question, or does it rather provide an answer about who is someone’s peer, fit to judge?

### IV. Thinking with the Text

The story raises questions less about the justice of the law and more about its proper enforcement, less about the obligation to obey it and more about how—and who is—to judge those who may have violated it. It is commonly thought that we are legally entitled to a trial by a jury of our peers (or “equals”). But the United States Constitution, in its Sixth Amendment, simply guarantees the right to “a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury of the State and district where the crime shall have been committed” (emphasis added). And the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution adds only that no State shall “deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law” (emphasis added). The notion of a “jury of one’s peers” has its origins in the Common Law; it can be traced back to the Magna Carta (1215), chapter 39 of which states that “No freeman shall be taken or imprisoned or outlawed or exiled or in any way destroyed . . . except by lawful judgment of his peers or by the law of the land” (emphasis added). (“Peers” in this context meant members of the same class. Notice, too, that “judgment of his peers” is not the same as our (right to) trial by jury. Judgment by one’s peers is not required if the person has clearly violated the law of the land.) In the United States in
recent decades, there has been much controversy about jury selection and jury composition, and there have been famous cases of what is called “jury nullification,” where juries choose to ignore the weight of the evidence and reach a verdict in favor of a defendant for whom they have greater sympathy. With this background, consider the following questions.

A. Civic Obligation and Law Enforcement (For these questions, consider the story in conjunction with Abraham Lincoln, “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions,” on page 208.)

1. What are the obligations of sworn jurors—or any other citizen—to the enforcement of the law? What is the relationship between the “letter” of the law and its “spirit”? Can—or should—the law’s “letter” be applied fully in every case? If not, how—and who—determines this?
2. When, if ever, may one be excused for taking the law into one’s own hands?
3. When, if ever, is it permissible to withhold evidence? Would you want jurors in a trial for a crime committed against you to behave as Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters did? Would you wish their reasons to govern the juries of your peers?
4. In “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions,” Abraham Lincoln traces the dangerous effects of Americans’ slide into lawlessness and urges Americans to “reverence” all laws, even bad ones: “Bad laws, if they exist, should be repealed as soon as possible, still while they are in force, for the sake of example, they should be religiously observed” (212). How would Lincoln’s argument apply to the case of Minnie Foster? Do you agree? Defend your answer.

B. Understanding, Empathy, and Judgment

1. To what extent do or should a suspect’s circumstances and motives excuse the commission of a crime? Of a crime as heinous as murder?

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: I think that the investigation, like all criminal investigations, should really be fact-driven. And the evidence should be turned in. But other things can be taken into consideration during all the other aspects of the trial—the prosecution, the jury’s hearing, the judgment, etc.

Leon Kass: I, too, am inclined to say that the place for these considerations really is in the domain of sentencing. And I think one should probably be more rigorous in the prosecution of murders than, for example, certain petty crimes. Wouldn’t you think that if you had a man on trial for robbing food from a grocery store that, as part of the consideration of guilt or innocence, it would matter and be appropriate to ask whether or not he did this to feed a house full of children who
Diana Schaub: I would say this extra consideration only comes in at the sentencing, or that it comes in at the phase of the prosecution—that is, when the prosecution decides what charges it’s going to bring, if it is even going to bring any. But at the phase of the jury trial, the jury is charged with a determination of the facts, and it seems to me that all of this talk of empathy is really disintegrative of our system. It is very hard in an age of compassion to speak against empathy, but I would like to make the case against empathy. A special quality of judges and jurors is impartiality: Lady Justice is always depicted as blindfolded. Why is she blindfolded? Because she does not see persons. If she sees persons, she might empathize with some rather than others, and that leads to a skewing of justice. While God’s justice is omniscient—He takes the blindfold off—none of these human beings are capable of that.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

2. What is the relevance, and what are the limits, of empathy and understanding when it comes to enforcing the law? Is it really true that to understand is to forgive?

3. Someone has said: “Empathy has no place in judging guilt or innocence, though it may properly enter in sentencing and determining punishment.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

4. One commentator suggests that, in the story, the men—concentrating on the external deed and the visible evidence—are practitioners of human justice, whereas the women—seeing more deeply into minds and hearts, and effectively practicing mercy and forgiveness—are practitioners of something more like divine justice (and mercy). Assuming that this description has some merit, do you think that it is good for human justice—“the law is the law”—and for the political community to be modified by the intrusion of elements of God’s justice? What might this imply for jury selection, or, even for the selection of judges?

C. Who Should Judge?

1. Who is our “peer,” fit to judge us?

2. Do men and women—or people of different races, religions, and classes—have different standards of what is just or how to judge? If so, what should the law do about this? Is one or the other standard to be preferred? Which one, and why?

3. Should the principle for jury selection be impartiality in judgment (the Sixth Amendment’s guarantee) or equality of discernible traits (choosing “peers” of the same sex, race, class as the accused)?

4. Is impartiality of juries impossible, and is its pursuit a fiction?
5. Are you capable of an impartial weighing of the evidence and rendering of judgment? How would you have ruled if you were on Minnie Foster Wright’s jury (assuming the women did not withhold the evidence they found)? Would that decision be truly impartial? Do you think most people are like you? If not, why not?

IN CONVERSATION

Diana Schaub: This story is a denial of the aspiration of impartiality, and it substitutes another standard, a jury of one’s peers. And even though people use this phrase a lot, it is not in the Constitution. It seems to me that a jury of one’s peers is proper to a regime characterized by inequality, or a class-based regime like England, where it originated. But in America, where the premise is equality, then we should not think so much about a jury of one’s peers as constituted of folks just like you—your gender, your race, your little neighborhood—but instead in terms of the impartiality that every citizen ought to aspire to.

Leon Kass: We do have, according to the Constitution, not just an impartial jury, but an impartial jury of the state and district where the crime shall have been committed. So, perhaps the question is this: what is the Constitution aiming at when it specifies that the jury must come from the same state and district? Is that a sort of shorthand for people who are like you, who know the circumstances of your life? If so, does that point us toward people who might be sufficiently sympathetic to the life in which the crimes have been committed so that they could judge most richly and not simply abstractly according to the letter of the law?

I take it that the requirement of a common district is not so much to produce a sympathetic jury as to produce a jury that would be free of negative prejudices. It is to weed out people who could not possibly understand the world in which the crime takes place—not that you would thereby gain neighbors who would be more inclined to be friendly, for presumably both the victim and the accused are from the same community and therefore of equal standing before the law.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.
Courage and Self-Sacrifice: Toward Country and Its Ideals
The two previous selections, one more recent, one older, offer historical presentations of courage and the readiness to risk one’s life for one’s country. But courage is a virtue difficult to cultivate, especially among self-interested citizens oriented toward the pursuit of their own happiness. At the extreme, why shouldn’t I prefer the preservation of myself to the preservation of my nation? If there is both a natural and cultural tendency to cowardice, how is courage to be cultivated? Although courage usually grows only through repeated acts in the face of fear and danger, inspiring speeches can rally groups of men on the eve of battle. The next two selections—the first excerpted from The Killer Angels by Michael Shaara (1928–88), an account of the Battle of Gettysburg during the Civil War, and the second from World War II—exemplify two such inspiriting speeches, in some ways similar, in some ways very different.

Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, before the war a professor of rhetoric at Bowdoin College, is faced with the unexpected burden of guarding 120 mutinous soldiers, eager to return home after two years in the Union army. Summoned to march toward battle and lacking men to guard these prisoners, Chamberlain appeals to them to join his regiment, succeeding beyond his wildest expectations. What are the various aspects of Chamberlain’s appeal? How and why do his words—and his deeds—succeed with these previously recalcitrant men? Imagine yourself among the mutineers: would you have been moved to join the fight, and why?

He dreamed of Maine and ice black water; he awoke to a murderous sun. A voice calling:

“Colonel, darlin’.” He squinted: the whiskery face of Buster Kilrain.

“Colonel, darlin’, I hate to be a-wakin’ ye, but there’s a message here ye ought to be seein’.”

Chamberlain had slept on the ground; he rolled to a sitting position. Light boiled in through the tent flap. Chamberlain closed his eyes.

“And how are ye feelin’ this mornin’, Colonel, me lad?”

Chamberlain ran his tongue around his mouth. He said briefly, dryly, “Ak.”

“We’re about to be havin’ guests, sir, or I wouldn’t be wakin’ ye.”

Chamberlain looked up through bleary eyes. He had walked eighty miles in four days through the hottest weather he had ever known and he had gone down with sunstroke. He felt eerie fragility, like a piece of thin glass in a high hot wind. He saw a wooden canteen,
held in the big hand of Kilrain, cold drops of water on varnished sides. He drank. The world focused.

“. . . one hundred and twenty men,” Kilrain said.

Chamberlain peered at him.

“They should be arriving any moment,” Kilrain said. He was squatting easily, comfortably, in the opening of the tent, the light flaming behind him.

“Who?” Chamberlain said.

“They are sending us some mutineers,” Kilrain said with fatherly patience. “One hundred and twenty men from the old Second Maine, which has been disbanded.”

“Mutineers?”

“Ay. What happened was that the enlistment of the old Second ran out and they were all sent home except one hundred and twenty, which had foolishly signed three-year papers, and so they all had one year to go, only they all thought they was signing to fight with the Second, and Second only, and so they mutinied. One hundred and twenty. Are you all right, Colonel?”

Chamberlain nodded vaguely.

“Well, these poor fellers did not want to fight no more, naturally, being Maine men of a certain intelligence, and refused, only nobody will send them home, and nobody knew what to do with them, until they thought of us, being as we are the other Maine regiment here in the army. There’s a message here signed by Meade himself. That’s the new General we got now, sir, if you can keep track as they go by. The message says they’ll be sent here this morning and they are to fight, and if they don’t fight you can feel free to shoot them.”

“Shoot?”

“Ay.”

“Let me see.” Chamberlain read painfully. His head felt very strange indeed, but he was coming awake into the morning as from a long way away and he could begin to hear the bugles out across the fields. Late to get moving today. Thank God. Somebody gave us an extra hour. Bless him. He read: . . . you are therefore authorized to shoot any man who refuses to do his duty. Shoot?

He said, “These are all Maine men?”
“Yes, sir. Fine big fellers. I’ve seen them. Loggin’ men. You may remember there was a bit of a brawl some months back, during the mud march? These fellers were famous for their fists.”

Chamberlain said, “One hundred and twenty.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Somebody’s crazy.”

“Yes, sir.”

“How many men do we now have in this Regiment?”

“Ah, somewhat less than two hundred and fifty, sir, as of yesterday. Countin’ the officers.”

“How do I take care of a hundred and twenty mutinous men?”

“Yes, sir,” Kilrain sympathized. “Well, you’ll have to talk to them, sir.”

Chamberlain sat for a long moment silently trying to function. He was thirty-four years old, and on this day one year ago he had been a professor of rhetoric at Bowdoin College. He had no idea what to do. But it was time to go out into the sun. He crawled forward through the tent flap and stood up, blinking, swaying, one hand against the bole of a tree. He was a tall man, somewhat picturesque. He wore stolen blue cavalry trousers and a three-foot sword, and the clothes he wore he had not taken off for a week. He had a grave, boyish dignity, that clean-eyed, scrubbed-brain, naïve look of the happy professor.

Kilrain, a white-haired man with the build of an ape, looked up at him with fatherly joy. “If ye’ll ride the horse today, Colonel, which the Lord hath provided, instead of walkin’ in the dust with the others fools, ye’ll be all right—if ye wear the hat. It’s the walkin’, do you see, that does the great harm.”


“Ah, but, Colonel, darlin’, I’ve been in the infantry since before you was born. It’s them first few thousand miles. After that, a man gets a limber to his feet.”

“Hey, Lawrence. How you doin’?”

Younger brother, Tom Chamberlain, bright-faced, high-voiced, a new lieutenant, worshipful. The heat had not seemed to touch him. Chamberlain nodded. Tom said critically, “You lookin’ kinda peaked. Why don’t you ride the horse?”
Chamberlain gloomed. But the day was not as bright as it had seemed through the opening of the tent. He looked upward with relief toward a darkening sky. The troops were moving in the fields, but there had been no order to march.

The wagons were not yet loaded. He thought: God bless the delay. His mind was beginning to function. All down the road and all through the trees the troops were moving, cooking, the thousands of troops and thousands of wagons of the Fifth Corps, Army of the Potomac, of which Chamberlain’s Twentieth Maine was a minor fragment. But far down the road there was motion. Kilrain said,

“There they come.”

Chamberlain squinted. Then he saw troops on the road, a long way off.

The line of men came slowly up the road. There were guards with fixed bayonets. Chamberlain could see the men shuffling, strange pathetic spectacle, dusty, dirty, ragged men, heads down, faces down: it reminded him of a historybook picture of impressed seamen in the last war with England. But these men would have to march all day, in the heat. Chamberlain thought: not possible.

Tom was meditating. “Gosh, Lawrence. There’s almost as many men there as we got in the whole regiment. How we going to guard them?”

Chamberlain said nothing. He was thinking: How do you force a man to fight—for freedom? The idiocy of it jarred him. Think on it later. Must do something now.

There was an officer, a captain, at the head of the column. The Captain turned them in off the road and herded them into an open space in the field near the Regimental flag. The men of the Regiment, busy with coffee, stood up to watch. The Captain had a loud voice and used obscene words. He assembled the men in two long ragged lines and called them to attention, but they ignored him. One slumped to the ground, more exhaustion than mutiny. A guard came forward and yelled and probed with a bayonet, but abruptly several more men sat down and then they all did, and the Captain began yelling, but the guards stood grinning confusedly, foolishly, having gone as far as they would go, unwilling to push further unless the men here showed some threat, and the men seemed beyond threat, merely enormously weary. Chamberlain took it all in as he moved toward the Captain. He put his hands behind his back and came forward slowly, studiously. The Captain pulled off dirty gloves and shook his head with contempt, glowering up at Chamberlain.

“Looking for the commanding officer, Twentieth Maine.”

“You’ve found him,” Chamberlain said.

“That’s him all right.” Tom’s voice, behind him, very proud. Chamberlain suppressed a smile.
“You Chamberlain?” The Captain stared at him grimly, insolently, showing what he thought of Maine men.

Chamberlain did not answer for a long moment, looking into the man’s eyes until the eyes suddenly blinked and dropped, and then Chamberlain said softly, “Colonel Chamberlain to you.”

The Captain stood still for a moment, then slowly came to attention, slowly saluted. Chamberlain did not return it. He looked past the Captain at the men, most of whom had their heads down. But there were eyes on him. He looked back and forth down the line, looking for a familiar face. That would help. But there was no one he knew.

“Captain Brewer, sir. Ah. One-eighteen Pennsylvania.” The Captain tugged in his coat front, produced a sheaf of papers. “If you’re the commanding officer, sir, then I present you with these here prisoners.” He handed the papers. Chamberlain took them, glanced down, handed them back to Tom. The Captain said, “You’re welcome to ’em, God knows. Had to use the bayonet to get ’em moving. You got to sign for ’em, Colonel.”

Chamberlain said over his shoulder, “Sign it, Tom.” To the Captain he said, “You’re relieved, Captain.”

The Captain nodded, pulling on the dirty gloves. “You’re authorized to use whatever force necessary, Colonel.” He said that loudly, for effect. “If you have to shoot ’em, why, you go right ahead. Won’t nobody say nothin’.”

“You’re relieved, Captain,” Chamberlain said. He walked past the Captain, closer to the men, who did not move, who did not seem to notice him. One of the guards stiffened as Chamberlain approached, looked past him to his captain. Chamberlain said, “You men can leave now. We don’t need any guards.”

He stood in front of the men, ignoring the guards. They began to move off. Chamberlain stood for a moment looking down. Some of the faces turned up. There was hunger and exhaustion and occasional hatred. Chamberlain said, “My name is Chamberlain. I’m Colonel, Twentieth Maine.”

Some of them did not even raise their heads. He waited another moment. Then he said, “When did you eat last?”

More heads came up. There was no answer. Then a man in the front row said huskily, in a whiskey voice, “We’re hungry, Colonel.”

Another man said, “They been tryin’ to break us by not feedin’ us.” Chamberlain looked: a scarred man, hatless, hair plastered thinly on the scalp like strands of black seaweed. The man said, “We ain’t broke yet.”
Chamberlain nodded. A hard case. But we’ll begin with food. He said, “They just told us you were coming a little while ago. I’ve told the cook to butcher a steer. Hope you like it near to raw; not much time to cook.” Eyes opened wide. He could begin to see the hunger on the faces, like the yellow shine of sickness. He said, “We’ve got a ways to go today and you’ll be coming with us, so you better eat hearty. We’re all set for you back in the trees.” He saw Glazier Estabrook standing huge-armed and peaceful in the shade of a nearby tree. “Glazier,” Chamberlain said, “you show these men where to go. You fellas eat up and then I’ll come over and hear what you have to say.”

No man moved. Chamberlain turned away. He did not know what he would do if they did not choose to move. He heard a voice: “Colonel?”

He turned. The scarred man was standing. “Colonel, we got grievances. The men elected me to talk for ’em.”

“Right.” Chamberlain nodded. “You come on with me and talk. The rest of you fellas go eat.” He beckoned to the scarred man and waved to Glazier Estabrook. He turned again, not waiting for the men to move off, not sure they would go, began to walk purposefully toward the blessed dark, wondering again how big a guard detail it would take, thinking he might wind up with more men out of action than in, and also: what are you going to say? Good big boys they are. Seen their share of action.

“Gosh, Lawrence,” Tom Chamberlain said.

“Smile,” Chamberlain said cheerily, “and don’t call me Lawrence. Are they moving?” He stopped and glanced pleasantly backward, saw with delight that the men were up and moving toward the trees, toward food. He grinned, plucked a book from his jacket, handed it to Tom.

“Here. This is Casey’s *Manual of Infantry Tactics*. You study it, maybe someday you’ll make a soldier.” He smiled at the scarred man, extended a hand. “What’s your name?”

The man stopped, looked at him for a long cold second. The hand seemed to come up against gravity, against his will. Automatic courtesy: Chamberlain was relying on it.

“I’m not usually that informal,” Chamberlain said with the same light, calm, pleasant manner that he had developed when talking to particularly rebellious students who had come in with a grievance and who hadn’t yet learned that the soft answer turneth away wrath. *Some* wrath. “But I suppose somebody ought to welcome you to the Regiment.”

The man said, “I don’t feel too kindly, Colonel.”

Chamberlain nodded. He went on inside the tent, the scarred man following, and sat down on a camp stool, letting the man stand. He invited the man to have coffee, which the man declined, and then listened silently to the man’s story.
The scarred man spoke calmly and coldly, looking straight into Chamberlain’s eyes. A good stubborn man. There was a bit of the lawyer about him: he used chunky phrases about law and justice. But he had heavy hands with thick muscular fingers and black fingernails and there was a look of power to him, a coiled tight set to the way he stood, balanced, ugly, slightly contemptuous, but watchful, trying to gauge Chamberlain’s strength.

Chamberlain said, “I see.”

“I been in eleven different engagements, Colonel. How many you been in?”

“Not that many,” Chamberlain said.

“I done my share. We all have. Most of us—” he gestured out the tent flap into the morning glare—“there’s some of them no damn good but most of them been all the way there and back. Damn good men. Shouldn’t ought to use them this way. Looky here.” He pulled up a pants leg. Chamberlain saw a purple gash, white scar tissue. The man let the pants leg fall. Chamberlain said nothing. The man looked at his face, seemed suddenly embarrassed, realized he had gone too far. For the first time he was uncertain. But he repeated, “I done my share.”

Chamberlain nodded. The man was relaxing slowly. It was warm in the tent; he opened his shirt. Chamberlain said, “What’s your name?”


“Where you from?”

“Bangor.”

“Don’t know any Bucklins. Farmer?”

“Fishermen.”

Former Sergeant Kilrain put his head in the tent. “Colonel, there’s a courier comin’.”

Chamberlain nodded. Bucklin said, “I’m tired, Colonel. You know what I mean? I’m tired. I’ve had all of this army and all of these officers, this damned Hooker and this goddamned idiot Meade, all of them, the whole bloody lousy rotten mess of sick-brained pot-bellied scabheads that ain’t fit to lead a johnny detail, ain’t fit to pour pee outen a boot with instructions on the heel. I’m tired. We are good men and we had our own good flag and these goddamned idiots use us like we was cows or dogs or even worse. We ain’t gonna win this war. We can’t win no how because of these lame-brained bastards from West Point, these goddamned gentlemen, these officers. Only one officer knew what he was doin: McClellan, and look what happened to him. I just as soon go home and let them damn Johnnies go home and the hell with it.”
He let it go, out of breath. He had obviously been waiting to say that to some officer for a long time. Chamberlain said, “I get your point.”

Kilrain announced, “Courier, sir.”

Chamberlain rose, excused himself, stepped out into the sunlight. A bright-cheeked lieutenant, just dismounted, saluted him briskly.

“Colonel Chamberlain, sir, Colonel Vincent wishes to inform you that the corps is moving out at once and that you are instructed to take the advance. The Twentieth Maine has been assigned to the first position in line. You will send out flankers and advance guards.”

“My compliments to the Colonel.” Chamberlain saluted, turned to Kilrain and Ellis Spear, who had come up. “You heard him, boys. Get the Regiment up. Sound the General, strike the tents.” Back inside the tent, he said cheerfully to Bucklin, “We’re moving out. You better hurry up your eating. Tell your men I’ll be over in a minute. I’ll think on what you said.”

Bucklin slipped by him, went away. Chamberlain thought: we’re first in line.

“Kilrain.”

The former sergeant was back.

“Sir.”

“Where we headed?”

“West, sir. Pennsylvania somewhere. That’s all I know.”

“Listen, Buster. You’re a private now and I’m not supposed to keep you at headquarters in that rank. If you want to go on back to the ranks, you just say so, because I feel obligated—well, you don’t have to be here, but listen, I need you.”

“Then I’ll be stayin’, Colonel, laddie.” Kilrain grinned.

“But you know I can’t promote you. Not after that episode with the bottle. Did you have to pick an officer?”

Kilrain grinned. “I was not aware of rank, sir, at the time. And he was the target which happened to present itself.”

“Buster, you haven’t got a bottle about?”

“Is the Colonel in need of a drink, sir?”
“I meant . . . forget it. All right, Buster, move ’em out.”

Kilrain saluted, grinning, and withdrew. The only professional in the regiment. The drinking would kill him. Well. He would die happy. Now. What do I say to them?

Tom came in, saluted.

“The men from the Second Maine are being fed, sir.”

“Don’t call me sir.”

“Well, Lawrence, Great God A-Mighty—”

“You just be careful of the name business in front of the men. Listen, we don’t want anybody to think there’s favoritism.”

Tom put on the wounded look, face of the ruptured deer. “General Meade has his son as his adjutant.”

“That’s different. Generals can do anything. Nothing quite so much like God on earth as a general on a battlefield.” The tent was coming down about his head; he stepped outside to avoid the collapse. The General and God was a nice parallel. They have your future in their hands and they have all power and know all. He grinned, thinking of Meade surrounded by his angelic staff: Dan Butterfield, wild Dan Sickles. But what do I say?

“Lawrence, what you goin’ to do?”

Chamberlain shook his head. The regiment was up and moving.

“God, you can’t shoot them. You do that, you’ll never go back to Maine when the war’s over.”

“I know that.” Chamberlain meditated. “Wonder if they do?”

He heard a flare of bugles, looked down the road toward Union Mills. The next regiment, the Eighty-Third Pennsylvania, was up and forming. He saw wagons and ambulances moving out into the road. He could feel again the yellow heat. Must remember to cover up. More susceptible to sunstroke now. Can’t afford a foggy head. He began to walk slowly toward the grove of trees.

Kilrain says tell the truth.

Which is?

Fight. Or we’ll shoot you.
Not true. I won’t shoot anybody.

He walked slowly out into the sunlight. He thought: but the truth is much more than that. Truth is too personal. Don’t know if I can express it. He paused in the heat. Strange thing. You would die for it without further question, but you had a hard time talking about it. He shook his head. I’ll wave no more flags for home. No tears for Mother. Nobody ever died for apple pie.

He walked slowly toward the dark grove. He had a complicated brain and there were things going on back there from time to time that he only dimly understood, so he relied on his instincts, but he was learning all the time. The faith itself was simple: he believed in the dignity of man. His ancestors were Huguenots, refugees of a chained and bloody Europe. He had learned their stories in the cradle. He had grown up believing in America and the individual and it was a stronger faith than his faith in God. This was the land where no man had to bow. In this place at last a man could stand up free of the past, free of tradition and blood ties and the curse of royalty and become what he wished to become. This was the first place on earth where the man mattered more than the state. True freedom had begun here and it would spread eventually over all the earth. But it had begun here. The fact of slavery upon this incredibly beautiful new clean earth was appalling, but more even than that was the horror of old Europe, the curse of nobility, which the South was transplanting to new soil. They were forming a new aristocracy, a new breed of glittering men, and Chamberlain had come to crush it. But he was fighting for the dignity of man and in that way he was fighting for himself. If men were equal in America, all these former Poles and English and Czechs and blacks, then they were equal everywhere, and there was really no such thing as a foreigner; there were only free men and slaves. And so it was not even patriotism but a new faith. The Frenchman may fight for France, but the American fights for mankind, for freedom; for the people, not the land.

Yet the words had been used too often and the fragments that came to Chamberlain now were weak. A man who has been shot at is a new realist, and what do you say to a realist when the war is a war of ideals? He thought finally. Well, I owe them the truth at least. Might’s well begin with that.

The Regiment had begun to form. Chamberlain thought: At least it’ll be a short speech. He walked slowly toward the prisoners.

Glazier Estabrook was standing guard, leaning patiently on his rifle. He was a thick little man of about forty. Except for Kilrain he was the oldest man in the Regiment, the strongest man Chamberlain had ever seen. He waved happily as Chamberlain came up but went on leaning on the rifle. He pointed at one of the prisoners.

“Hey, Colonel, you know who this is? This here is Dan Burns from Orono. I know his daddy. Daddy’s a preacher. You really ought to hear him. Best damn cusser I ever heard. Knows more fine swear words than any man in Maine, I bet. Hee.”
Chamberlain smiled. But the Burns boy was looking at him with no expression. Chamberlain said, “You fellas gather round.”

He stood in the shade, waited while they closed in silently, watchfully around him. In the background the tents were coming down, the wagons were hitching, but some of the men of the Regiment had come out to watch and listen. Some of the men here were still chewing. But they were quiet, attentive.

Chamberlain waited a moment longer. Now it was quiet in the grove and the clink of the wagons was sharp in the distance. Chamberlain said, “I’ve been talking with Bucklin. He’s told me your problem.”

Some of the men grumbled. Chamberlain heard no words clearly. He went on speaking softly so that they would have to quiet to hear him.

“I don’t know what I can do about it. I’ll do what I can. I’ll look into it as soon as possible. But there’s nothing I can do today. We’re moving out in a few minutes and we’ll be marching all day and we may be in a big fight before nightfall. But as soon as I can, I’ll do what I can.”

They were silent, watching him. Chamberlain began to relax. He had made many speeches and he had a gift for it. He did not know what it was, but when he spoke most men stopped to listen. Fanny said it was something in his voice. He hoped it was there now.

“I’ve been ordered to take you men with me. I’ve been told that if you don’t come I can shoot you. Well, you know I won’t do that. Not Maine men. I won’t shoot any man who doesn’t want this fight. Maybe someone else will, but I won’t. So that’s that.”

He paused again. There was nothing on their faces to lead him.

“Here’s the situation. I’ve been ordered to take you along, and that’s what I’m going to do. Under guard if necessary. But you can have your rifles if you want them. The whole Reb army is up the road a ways waiting for us and this is no time for an argument like this. I tell you this: we sure can use you. We’re down below half strength and we need you, no doubt of that. But whether you fight or not is up to you. Whether you come along, well, you’re coming.”

Tom had come up with Chamberlain’s horse. Over the heads of the prisoners Chamberlain could see the Regiment falling into line out in the flaming road. He took a deep breath.

“Well, I don’t want to preach to you. You know who we are and what we’re doing here. But if you’re going to fight alongside us there’s a few things I want you to know.”

He bowed his head, not looking at eyes. He folded his hands together.
“This Regiment was formed last fall, back in Maine. There were a thousand of us then. There’s not three hundred of us now.” He glanced up briefly. “But what is left is choice.”

He was embarrassed. He spoke very slowly, staring at the ground.

“Some of us volunteered to fight for Union. Some came in mainly because we were bored at home and this looked like it might be fun. Some came because we were ashamed not to. Many of us came . . . because it was the right thing to do. All of us have seen men die. Most of us never saw a black man back home. We think on that, too. But freedom . . . is not just a word.”

He looked up in to the sky, over silent faces.

“This is a different kind of army. If you look at history you’ll see men fight for pay, or women, or some other kind of loot. They fight for land, or because a king makes them, or just because they like killing. But we’re here for something new. I don’t . . . this hasn’t happened much in the history of the world. We’re an army going out to set other men free.”

He bent down, scratched the black dirt into his fingers. He was beginning to warm to it; the words were beginning to flow. No one in front of him was moving. He said, “This is free ground. All the way from here to the Pacific Ocean. No man has to bow. No man born to royalty. Here we judge you by what you do, not by what your father was. Here you can be something. Here’s a place to build a home. It isn’t the land—there’s always more land. It’s the idea that we all have value, you and me, we’re worth something more than the dirt. I never saw dirt I’d die for, but I’m not asking you to come join us and fight for dirt. What we’re all fighting for, in the end, is each other.”

Once he started talking he broke right through the embarrassment and there was suddenly no longer a barrier there. The words came out of him in a clear river, and he felt himself silent and suspended in the grove listening to himself speak, carried outside himself and looking back down on the silent faces and himself speaking, and he felt the power in him, the power of his cause. For an instant he could see black castles in the air; he could create centuries of screaming, eons of torture. Then he was back in sunlit Pennsylvania. The bugles were blowing and he was done.

He had nothing else to say. No one moved. He felt the embarrassment return. He was suddenly enormously tired. The faces were staring up at him like white stones. Some heads were down. He said, “Didn’t mean to preach. Sorry. But I thought . . . you should know who we are.” He had forgotten how tiring it was just to speak. “Well, this is still the army, but you’re as free as I can make you. Go ahead and talk for a while. If you want your rifles for this fight you’ll have them back and nothing else will be said. If you won’t join us you’ll come along under guard. When this is over I’ll do what I can to see that you get fair treatment. Now we have to move out.” He stopped, looked at them. The faces
showed nothing. He said slowly, “I think if we lose this fight the war will be over. So if you choose to come with us I’ll be personally grateful. Well. We have to move out.”

He turned, left silence behind him. Tom came up with the horse—a palegray lightfooted animal. Tom’s face was shiny red.

“My Lawrence, you sure talk pretty.”

Chamberlain grunted. He was really tired. Rest a moment. He paused with his hands on the saddle horn. There was a new vague doubt stirring in his brain. Something troubled him; he did not know why.

“You ride today, Lawrence. You look weary.”

Chamberlain nodded. Ellis Spear was up. He was Chamberlain’s ranking officer, an ex-teacher from Wiscasset who was impressed with Chamberlain’s professorship. A shy man, formal, but very competent. He gestured toward the prisoners.

“Colonel, what do you suggest we do with them?”

“Give them a moment. Some of them may be willing to fight. Tom, you go back and see what they say. We’ll have to march them under guard. Don’t know what else to do. I’m not going to shoot them. We can’t leave them here.”

The Regiment had formed out in the road, the color bearers in front. Chamberlain mounted, put on the wide-brimmed hat with the emblem of the infantry, began walking his horse slowly across the field toward the road. The uneasiness still troubled him. He had missed something, he did not know what. Well, he was an instinctive man; the mind would tell him sooner or later. Perhaps it was only that when you try to put it into words you cannot express it truly, it never sounds as you dream it. But then . . . you were asking them to die.

Ellis Speer was saying, “How far are we from Pennsylvania, Colonel, you have any idea?”

“Better than twenty miles.” Chamberlain squinted upward. “Going to be another hot day.”

He moved to the head of the column. The troops were moving slowly, patiently, setting themselves for the long march. After a moment Tom came riding up. His face was delighted. Chamberlain said, “How many are going to join us?”

Tom grinned hugely. “Would you believe it? All but six.”

“How many?”
“I counted, by actual count, one hundred and fourteen.”

“Well.” Chamberlain rubbed his nose, astounded.

Tom said, still grinning, “Brother, you did real good.”

“They’re all marching together?”

“Right. Glazier’s got the six hardheads in tow.”

“Well, get all the names and start assigning them to different companies. I don’t want them bunched up, spread them out. See about their arms.”

“Yes, sir, Colonel, sir.”

Chamberlain reached the head of the column. The road ahead was long and straight, rising toward a ridge of trees. He turned in his saddle, looked back, saw the entire Fifth Corps forming behind him. He thought: 120 new men. Hardly noticeable in such a mass. And yet . . . he felt a moment of huge joy. He called for road guards and skirmishers and the Twentieth Maine began to move toward Gettysburg.
Discussion Guide for Chamberlain from *The Killer Angels*

I. About the Author

“I. About the Author

“Chamberlain” is a chapter from *The Killer Angels*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historical novel about the Battle of Gettysburg by Michael Shaara (1928–88). Previously a prolific writer of science fiction and sports stories, Shaara was inspired to write the novel after discovering letters written by his great-grandfather, who had been injured at Gettysburg as a member of the Fourth Georgia Infantry, and after personally visiting the battlefield. Shaara’s narrative is organized into four days—June 30, 1863, the day on which Union and Confederate armies move into Gettysburg; and July 1, 2, and 3, the days of the bloodiest battle of the Civil War—and each day’s events are told from the perspective of one of the commanders of the competing armies. Shaara’s chapter “Chamberlain” focuses on Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain (1828–1914), commanding officer of the Twentieth Maine, and his efforts (on June 30) to encourage mutineers to re-join the battle. As Shaara will recount in a later chapter, Chamberlain, his regiment out of ammunition, would lead a bayonet charge against the enemy, enabling the Union army to hold Little Round Top and ultimately to win the battle. Not reported by Shaara are the various honors Chamberlain received: For his leadership at Gettysburg and elsewhere, he was, during the war itself, sequentially promoted, eventually achieving the rank of brigadier general. For his heroism at Little Round Top, he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. And, at the very end of the war, he was given the honor of receiving, at Appomattox, the surrender of the Confederate infantry. After the Civil War, Chamberlain was elected to four terms as governor of Maine, following which he returned to his alma mater, Bowdoin College, as its president. He died of the unhealed wounds he incurred during his war years.

II. Summary

Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, commanding officer of the Twentieth Maine, is abruptly awakened early in the morning by his aide, Buster Kilrain, who tells him that he is about to receive as prisoners 120 battle-weary veterans from the old Second Maine, recently disbanded, who refuse to fight. The advance message indicates that the men are to do their duty, and, if they don’t, Chamberlain is authorized to shoot them.
Chamberlain faces a dilemma: he lacks the manpower to guard and care for the mutineers, but he knows that, since the mutineers are, like himself, Maine men, shooting them would make it impossible for him to go home. The mutineers arrive shuffling, dusty, dirty, ragged, heads and faces down, clearly weary, hungry, and exhausted. They look, as they have been treated, like men in bondage. Chamberlain is immediately aware of the irony of his situation: “How do you force a man to fight—for freedom?” How, then, to persuade them to do so?

Chamberlain first invites the hungry men to eat. As they do so, he listens to their spokesman, Joseph Bucklin, who presents their grievances: They had signed up to fight with the Second Maine and only the Second Maine; they are war-weary and had already done their share (eleven engagements worth); they have been treated like cows and dogs or worse; and (last but not least), because of the “lame-brained officers from West Point,” they are convinced that the Union cannot win the war. They are therefore more than ready to give up the fighting and go home. As Chamberlain listens, a courier arrives to announce that the Twentieth Maine must ready itself to move out immediately—toward Gettysburg. Now urgently needing a solution for his dilemma, Chamberlain goes directly to speak to the mutineers.

Proceeding slowly, quietly, deliberately, and personally, he addresses the mutineers as the free men he knows them to be, enabling them to think anew about why they—and other civilian volunteers in the Union army—had come to fight, and making it clear to them that whether they fight again is up to them. All but six “reenlist” with his regiment. In the end, we subsequently learn, only three held out.

The historical Chamberlain was, as noted above, a hero at Gettysburg. But in Shaara’s rendering of him, he seems more like a mild-mannered professor than a steely warrior and appears to be more sympathetic toward the mutineers than a man in his position is likely to have been. Yet his speech to the mutineers is wonderfully successful, far more than he had reason to hope. Thinking carefully about the text may help us understand why.

A. Shaara’s Chamberlain

1. Consider Shaara’s description of Chamberlain’s looks: “He had a grave, boyish dignity, that clean-eyed, scrubbed-brain, naïve look of the happy professor” (228). What does this mean? Imagine yourself as a war-weary veteran before an officer with such a look. Would you be inclined to take him seriously?
2. Does Chamberlain behave like a professor? Is he more a man of thought or a man of action?
IN CONVERSATION

In this conversation, Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass discuss Shaara’s story with Eliot A. Cohen, Robert E. Osgood Professor of Strategic Studies at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at the Johns Hopkins University.

Leon Kass: There’s a description of him that makes him seem somewhat boyish looking: A man of “boyish dignity . . . clean-eyed, scrubbed brain, naïve look of the happy professor.” But he’s also tall. He’s rather picturesque. He is thoughtful, but he is also presented as a man of action. There are complicated things going on in his brain, but he’s not, as many professors are, indecisive. He knows what he has to do. And he has a gift for speaking. When he speaks, everybody stops to listen. There’s something in his voice that makes people pay attention. This is not just professorial talk. He is a man with authority.

Amy Kass: But Shaara goes out of his way to tell us that Chamberlain was a professor of rhetoric, just a year before he gives this speech.

Eliot Cohen: Chamberlain is the professor that we professors would all like to be: the philosopher and the man of action.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

3. Shaara tells us that Chamberlain “had a gift for [making speeches] . . . when he spoke most men stopped to listen. Fanny [his wife] said that it was something in his voice” (236). What does this mean? Can you recognize it in what he says to the mutineers and how he says it?

4. Look carefully at the scene between Chamberlain and the captain who delivers the prisoners (230). How would you characterize the differences between the two men? What do we learn about Chamberlain from that encounter? From his refusal even to consider shooting the mutineers?

5. Look carefully at the scene between Chamberlain and Bucklin (231-32). What do we learn about Chamberlain from that encounter?

6. Later, as Chamberlain walks to speak to the mutineers, Shaara remarks: “He had a complicated brain and there were things going on back there from time to time that he only dimly understood, so he relied on his instincts, but he was learning all the time” (235). What does this mean? How is it displayed in the Chamberlain you watch and hear?

7. Just before Chamberlain addresses the men, Shaara describes Chamberlain’s “faith” and his reasons for fighting (235). What does this tell you about the man? Why can he not rely on these ideas in speaking to the men?

B. The Mutineers
1. What are the condition, mood, and attitude of the mutineers as they march into Chamberlain’s camp?

2. What are the basic grievances of the mutineers? Should we sympathize with them?

3. Why do you think Bucklin has such anger at “these goddamned gentlemen, these officers”?

4. Imagine yourself as one of the mutineers. What would it take to overcome your refusal to fight? What would it take for you to overcome your antipathy to “these officers”?

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: Bucklin, who is speaking on behalf of the 120 men, speaks in the first person. He says, “First of all, I’m tired. I’ve been wounded. I’ve been in eleven engagements. We’ve seen it all.” These men are sickened by the way they have been treated; they’ve been treated like cows or dogs or even slaves, which is why they were in need of liberation. But Bucklin emphasizes that he also just does not think that the Union is going to win the war. And the reason they’re not going to win is because of those officers, the officers who come from West Point. He has particular animus against the officers from West Point.

Eliot Cohen: Why do you think that is the case?

Amy Kass: You think it’s a class thing?

Eliot Cohen: When I read carefully the excerpts you have in the book, it talks about these goddamn gentlemen. So I think it is a class thing.

Leon Kass: The book says that Bucklin has been waiting a long time to say this to some officer. And Chamberlain lets him do it and he says, “I get your point.” They’ve been losing. They’ve been changing generals right and left. The war has been going terribly. And these men have put up with it. They have been in for two years, they’ve seen everything, and they blame their defeats on their leadership. And this could be aggravated by certain class enmity, but it also could be justified, in a way. Bucklin views the officers as “these idiot guys who go to West Point to study, and yet we’re down on the ground getting slaughtered. Show us that we’re going to get some leadership, and we might think differently about it.”

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

C. Chamberlain and the Mutineers

1. The bulk of our attention is directed at Chamberlain’s speech to the men. But Shaara also lets us watch his actions toward and before them from the time
they arrive; his manner, tone, and gestures; and the order in which he proceeds. Look carefully at all aspects of his conduct. How do they strike you, as a reader? How might they have moved you were you among the mutineers?

2. Chamberlain deliberately speaks quietly and slowly, without foul language. Why does he choose this strategy? What is its effect on his hearers?

**IN CONVERSATION**

**Amy Kass:** Chamberlain is under a great deal of pressure. The courier has just come to tell him that the army has to get up and move again. He is reading the men’s faces. He is hoping that there could be some connection between them because they are all Maine men. These are not very philosophical or theoretical things. But instinctually, he knows he cannot shoot them. He just knows that, and he is going to make that clear to them at the very beginning of his speech.

**Eliot Cohen:** The first thing that Chamberlain does is that he hears the men out. Well, actually he does two things: He hears them out, and he feeds them a good meal. Even before there is speech on his part, he has undertaken some practical action, which is quite sound in the circumstances.

**Leon Kass:** Actually, before he even feeds them, he liberates them. They come in and they are described like impressed seamen. They are watched over by a foul-mouthed, bellicose captain who has contempt for Maine men, and they’re guarded by surly guards. The first thing that Chamberlain does is to dismiss the captain. He dismisses the guards and basically makes the men, in the first instance, like free men, as a preparation for the free choice he is eventually going to give them.

**Amy Kass:** When he speaks, he does so quietly. He is obviously a wonderful teacher of rhetoric because his rhetoric and everything that surrounds it is perfect. He speaks quietly, softly, so they have to gather around and really listen.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

3. Chamberlain’s speech divides itself into five distinguishable parts (in ten separated passages of direct quotation, beginning with “I’ve been talking with Bucklin . . .” [236], and ending with “. . . We have to move out” [238]).
   a. Addresses their “problem.” Promises to do what he can.
   b. Outlines his orders: he won’t shoot them, though he is authorized to do so.
   c. Describes the situation, and their freedom to choose whether to fight.
   d. Explains things they should know if they choose to fight (including the regiment’s history, the reasons they volunteered, and the reasons they fight).
   e. Concludes (including again their freedom to choose, the importance of the battle, and a personal appeal).
Pausing after each part, consider the following: Why does Chamberlain say what he says? What does he mean? Why does he take up the subjects in the order in which he does? And, finally, imagining yourself as a mutineer, at each turn, ask yourself how you would react.

4. Chamberlain appeals to a variety of causes. What is the highest or most fundamental appeal he makes? Is it persuasive to you?

5. In general, why do you think Chamberlain’s speech was so successful with the men? Would you have been persuaded by it to choose to fight—and very likely die?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: Shaara gives us what he imagines is going on in Chamberlain’s mind and what Chamberlain believes. He believes in the dignity of man. He loves America because it is the land of the individual, where there’s no royalty, no aristocracy, and a man can become all that he can be. He also loves America because they are fighting for freedom, not for land; for people, not for territory. That’s what he would like to say, but he can’t say it. He says those are tired words.

Eliot Cohen: So what does he say? What is the pitch that he does make?

Leon Kass: I think that the pitch is brilliant. In the opening speech, he takes the men’s grievances seriously, shows them some respect, indicates that he has no intention of shooting them, and says, “Look, whether you want to fight, that’s up to you.” Basically, he’s solved the problem about whether you can force men to fight for freedom by making them free men and saying the choice is theirs.

Eliot Cohen: So he is empowering them by giving them choice. But then he makes the case for freedom, he makes an ideological argument. He says that all of us enlisted for different reasons: Some men did because they were bored; some because they thought it might be fun; some because they were ashamed. And then Chamberlain launches into a defense of freedom: “No man has to bow. . . .” It is, at least in my reading of it, again this anti-aristocratic argument, where this is a place where no man is born to royalty. Here we judge you by what you do, not by what your father was. Here you can be something.

Leon Kass: And then, after the high-pitched speech about ideals and principles, he descends. And that descent is also important. He says, “Look, it’s still the Army, but you’re as free as I can make you. Have a conversation, decide for yourself. You have two choices: You can either get your rifles and come and fight, or you’ll come under guard. In the end, I’ll do what I can for you.” And then, this wonderful pitch: “If we lose this fight, we’re going to lose the war. So if you’ll join us, I’d personally be very grateful.” And in the end, he’s trafficking in
the kind of trust that he has earned by freeing them, feeding them, taking their grievances seriously, respecting them, speaking to them as fellow Americans, and speaking to the better angels of their nature.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

6. Do you think that Chamberlain’s speech would be as effective today? Why or why not?

IV. Thinking with the Text

Shaara’s “Chamberlain” invites questions about the importance of courage and public-spiritedness, as well as the difficulty in obtaining them. It also raises interesting questions about leadership and about the military in American society.

A. Encouraging Courage and Public-Spiritedness

1. What is courage? What makes it so difficult?
2. Winston Churchill called courage “the first of human qualities . . . the quality which guarantees all others.” In what sense might this be true?
3. How can one get ordinary citizens—especially in a republic dedicated to safeguarding their rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—to risk their lives in the service of the nation?
4. How does one encourage public-spiritedness and sacrifice? How effective can speech be toward this goal? What sorts of speech? By whom? When?
5. How important—and effective—are national ideals for inspiring men to fight? Is there a difference between fighting for your fatherland—for blood and soil (what Chamberlain calls “dirt”)—and fighting for a cause? Does it depend on the cause?

IN CONVERSATION

Eliot Cohen: In the last passage, one thing is interesting. Chamberlain starts by talking about freedom. The way he ends, though, is about how what they are all fighting for in the end is each other. I think that Shaara, who himself had been a soldier, understood that a lot of what motivates people to fight is not ideology, but comrades. What Chamberlain does in this passage is that he combines both. There is a broader case about freedom, about the nature of the United States, and he brings that down to how they are all fighting for each other, which I think is something that is quite often the case independent of the cause that one is fighting for.
Amy Kass: I think that’s right. But earlier, in his reflections on America and why it is different to fight for America, Chamberlain appeals to this universal principle that all men are equal and that they are fighting to free human beings—which means, he says, that they are not just fighting for themselves. And fighting for each other would then mean that they are fighting for all men. They are fighting for all humankind.

Eliot Cohen: I don’t know. Chamberlain is also very conscious that he is a Maine man. He’s very conscious of the tribal tie.

Leon Kass: When Chamberlain bends down to pick up the dirt, he says that this is free dirt all the way to the Pacific. In other words, you begin by taking the Maine men and the Maine ties seriously. These are men who would not fight except for Maine men—in fact not even with Maine men altogether, but only with the Second Maine—that’s what they signed up for. Chamberlain is showing them that they belong to a cause that is a national cause—but not merely a national cause, but a universal cause. And the final remark that “We’re fighting for each other” is not, it seems to me, as it is commonly said today, that people in the Army, when you really want to know why they fight, they’re fighting for the guy in the foxhole next to them. It’s not that we’re fighting for ourselves as fellow soldiers, but we’re fighting for each other because of an idea—the idea that all of us have value. I think there is a sense of “We brothers, here” but it’s not “We brothers in battle only.” The decisive sense of the brotherhood here is the brotherhood of man, understood as equally worthy.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

6. Is patriotism—love of country—necessary for the common defense? How can it be instilled in ordinary citizens? How can it be summoned?

7. Should military service—or some other form of national service—be a civic duty? Why or why not?

8. What is the difference between military courage (and military service) and other sorts of courage (and public service)? Which do you regard as most important? Why?

B. Leadership and the Military

1. What are the virtues necessary for leaders in a democratic republic? Are the virtues needed for military leaders different from those of civilian leaders?

2. On the one hand, we Americans want excellent leaders, people whom we can admire and follow. On the other hand, we Americans do not wish to be led, and we do not believe that some people are really better than others. What does this tension imply for leadership in America?
3. Among American leaders, Abraham Lincoln is unsurpassed in inspirational speech that succeeded in blurring the (in this case, enormous) difference between the leader and the led. During the Civil War, on the evening of August 22, 1864, he delivered an address from the White House balcony to the men of the 166th Ohio regiment. He began by thanking them for their service to the Union, then continued as follows:

*I almost always feel inclined, when I happen to say anything to soldiers, to impress upon them in a few brief remarks the importance of success in this contest. It is not merely for today, but for all time to come that we should perpetuate for our children’s children this great and free government, which we have enjoyed all our lives. I beg you to remember this, not merely for my sake, but for yours. I happen temporarily to occupy this big White House. I am a living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father’s child has. It is in order that each of you may have through this free government which we have enjoyed, an open field and a fair chance for your industry, enterprise, intelligence; that you may all have equal privileges in the race of life, with all its desirable human aspirations. It is for this the struggle should be maintained, that we may not lose our birthright. . . . The nation is worth fighting for, to secure such an inestimable jewel.*

Compare Lincoln’s appeal with that of Chamberlain. What generalizations can you offer regarding successful leadership and the encouragement of courage and public spirit in America?

4. The United States maintains civil control of the military. It also has a volunteer army, comprising mainly citizens who serve only for a short time, who are not and will not become professional soldiers. These citizen-soldiers are, however, ruled by a cadre of professional soldiers whose entire career is spent in uniform. What special challenges of leadership do these arrangements produce?
Speech to the Third Army

GEORGE S. PATTON JR.

This selection, taken from The Unknown Patton, a biography by Charles M. Province, deals with the memorable speech by General George Patton (1885–1945) to the Third Army on June 5, 1944, the eve of the Allied invasion of Europe. The first part presents the background, the second the speech itself (as compiled by Province, drawing on many sources and presented as a third-person narrative). Famous for his rapport with his men, Patton was a charismatic leader and an inspirational speaker. According to Province, an Army veteran and the founder and president of the George S. Patton Jr. Historical Society, “Patton always knew exactly what he wanted to say to his soldiers and he never needed notes. . . . Instead of [using] empty, generalized rhetoric of no substance . . . Patton spoke to his men in simple, down to earth language that they understood. He told them truthful lessons he had learned that would keep them alive.” He also had “a unique ability regarding profanity”: when he wanted his men to remember something important, he gave it to them “double dirty.” As Patton explained: “It may not sound nice to some bunch of little old ladies at an afternoon tea party, but it helps my soldiers to remember. You can’t run an army without profanity; and it has to be eloquent profanity.”

The tone, manner, and content of Patton’s speech are very different from that of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain. Unlike Chamberlain, who addresses battle-weary veterans, Patton addresses men who are poised for their first battle; like Chamberlain, he knows that many of them will die in the ensuing combat. How does Patton seek to encourage the men? To what does he appeal? And how does he succeed? Imagining yourself in the audience, what would have been your reaction?

Somewhere in England
June 5th, 1944

The big camp buzzed with a tension. For hundreds of eager rookies, newly arrived from the states, it was a great day in their lives. This day marked their first taste of the “real thing.” Now they were not merely puppets in brown uniforms. They were not going through the motions of soldiering with three thousand miles of ocean between them and English soil. They were actually in the heart of England itself. They were waiting for the arrival of that legendary figure, Lieutenant General George S. Patton Jr.—old “Blood and Guts” himself, about whom many a colorful chapter would be written for the schoolboys of tomorrow. Patton of the brisk, purposeful stride. Patton of the harsh, compelling voice, the lurid vocabulary, the grim and indomitable spirit that carried him and his Army to glory in Africa and Sicily. They called him “America’s Fightingest General.” He was no desk commando. He was the man who was sent for when the going got rough and a fighter was needed. He was the most hated and feared American of all on the part of the German Army.
Patton was coming and the stage was being set. He would address a move which might have a far reaching effect on the global war that, at the moment, was a TOP-SECRET in the files in Washington, D.C.

The men saw the camp turn out “en masse” for the first time and in full uniform, too. Today their marching was not lackadasical. It was serious and the men felt the difference. From the lieutenants in charge of the companies on down in rank they felt the difference.

In long columns they marched down the hill from the barracks. They counted cadence while marching. They turned off to the left, up the rise and so on down into the roped off field where the General was to speak. Gold braid and stripes were everywhere. Soon, company by company, the hillside was a solid mass of brown. It was a beautiful fresh English morning. The tall trees lined the road and swayed gently in the breeze. Across the field, a British farmer calmly tilled his soil. High upon a nearby hill a group of British soldiers huddled together, waiting for the coming of the General. Military Police were everywhere wearing their white leggings, belts, and helmets. They were brisk and grim. The twittering of the birds in the trees could be heard above the dull murmur of the crowd and soft, white clouds floated lazily overhead as the men settled themselves and lit cigarettes.

On the special platform near the speakers stand, Colonels and Majors were a dime a dozen. Behind the platform stood General Patton’s “Guard of Honor”; all specially chosen men. At their right was a band playing rousing marches while the crowd waited and on the platform a nervous sergeant repeatedly tested the loudspeaker. The moment grew near and the necks began to crane to view the tiny winding road that led to Stourport-on-Severn. A captain stepped to the microphone. “When the General arrives,” he said sonorously, “the band will play the Generals March and you will all stand at attention.”

By now the rumor had gotten around that Lieutenant General Simpson, Commanding General of the Fourth Army, was to be with General Patton. The men stirred expectantly. Two of the big boys in one day!

At last, the long black car, shining resplendently in the bright sun, roared up the road, preceded by a jeep full of Military Police. A dead hush fell over the hillside. There he was! Impeccably dressed. With knee high, brown, gleaming boots, shiny helmet, and his Colt .45 Peacemaker swinging in its holster on his right side.

Patton strode down the incline and then straight to the stiff backed “Guard of Honor.” He looked them up and down. He peered intently into their faces and surveyed their backs. He moved through the ranks of the statuesque band like an avenging wraith and, apparently satisfied, mounted the platform with Lieutenant General Simpson and Major General Cook, the Corps Commander, at his side.
Major General Cook then introduced Lieutenant General Simpson, whose Army was still in America, preparing for their part in the war.

“We are here,” said General Simpson, “to listen to the words of a great man. A man who will lead you all into whatever you may face with heroism, ability, and foresight. A man who has proven himself amid shot and shell. My greatest hope is that some day soon, I will have my own Army fighting with his, side by side.”

General Patton arose and strode swiftly to the microphone. The men snapped to their feet and stood silently. Patton surveyed the sea of brown with a grim look. “Be seated,” he said. The words were not a request, but a command. The General’s voice rose high and clear.

“Men, this stuff that some sources sling around about America wanting out of this war, not wanting to fight, is a crock of bullshit. Americans love to fight, traditionally. All real Americans love the sting and clash of battle. You are here today for three reasons. First, because you are here to defend your homes and your loved ones. Second, you are here for your own self respect, because you would not want to be anywhere else. Third, you are here because you are real men and all real men like to fight. When you, here, everyone of you, were kids, you all admired the champion marble player, the fastest runner, the toughest boxer, the big league ball players, and the All-American football players. Americans love a winner. Americans will not tolerate a loser. Americans despise cowards. Americans play to win all of the time. I wouldn’t a hoot in hell for a man who lost and laughed. That’s why Americans have never lost nor will ever lose a war; for the very idea of losing is hateful to an American.”

The General paused and looked over the crowd. “You are not all going to die,” he said slowly. “Only two percent of you right here today would die in a major battle. Death must not be feared. Death, in time, comes to all men. Yes, every man is scared in his first battle. If he says he’s not, he’s a liar. Some men are cowards but they fight the same as the brave men or they get the hell slammed out of them watching men fight who are just as scared as they are. The real hero is the man who fights even though he is scared. Some men get over their fright in a minute under fire. For some, it takes an hour. For some, it takes days. But a real man will never let his fear of death overpower his honor, his sense of duty to his country, and his innate manhood. Battle is the most magnificent competition in which a human being can indulge. It brings out all that is best and it removes all that is base. Americans pride themselves on being He Men and they ARE He Men. Remember that the enemy is just as frightened as you are, and probably more so. They are not supermen.”

“All through your Army careers, you men have bitched about what you call ‘chicken shit drilling.’ That, like everything else in this Army, has a definite purpose. That purpose is alertness. Alertness must be bred into every soldier. I don’t give a fuck for a man who’s not always on his toes. You men are veterans or you wouldn’t be here. You are ready for what’s to come. A man must be alert at all times if he expects to stay alive. If
you’re not alert, sometime, a German son-of-an-asshole-bitch is going to sneak up behind you and beat you to death with a sockful of shit!” The men roared in agreement.

Patton’s grim expression did not change. “There are four hundred neatly marked graves somewhere in Sicily,” he roared into the microphone, “all because one man went to sleep on the job.” He paused and the men grew silent. “But they are German graves, because we caught the bastard asleep before they did.” The General clutched the microphone tightly, his jaw out-thrust, and he continued, “An Army is a team. It lives, sleeps, eats, and fights as a team. This individual heroic stuff is pure horse shit. The bilious bastards who write that kind of stuff for the Saturday Evening Post don’t know any more about real fighting under fire than they know about fucking!”

The men slapped their legs and rolled in glee. This was Patton as the men had imagined him to be, and in rare form, too. He hadn’t let them down. He was all that he was cracked up to be, and more. He had it!

“We have the finest food, the finest equipment, the best spirit, and the best men in the world,” Patton bellowed. He lowered his head and shook it pensively. Suddenly he snapped erect, faced the men belligerently and thundered, “Why, by God, I actually pity those poor sons-of-bitches we’re going up against. By God, I do.” The men clapped and howled delightedly. There would be many a barracks tale about the “Old Man’s” choice phrases. They would become part and parcel of Third Army’s history and they would become the bible of their slang.

“My men don’t surrender,” Patton continued, “I don’t want to hear of any soldier under my command being captured unless he has been hit. Even if you are hit, you can still fight back. That’s not just bullshit either. The kind of man that I want in my command is just like the lieutenant in Libya, who, with a Luger against his chest, jerked off his helmet, swept the gun aside with one hand, and busted the hell out of the Kraut with his helmet. Then he jumped on the gun and went out and killed another German before they knew what the hell was coming off. And, all of that time, this man had a bullet through a lung. There was a real man!”

Patton stopped and the crowd waited. He continued more quietly, “All of the real heroes are not storybook combat fighters, either. Every single man in this Army plays a vital role. Don’t ever let up. Don’t ever think that your job is unimportant. Every man has a job to do and he must do it. Every man is a vital link in the great chain. What if every truck driver suddenly decided that he didn’t like the whine of those shells overhead, turned yellow, and jumped headlong into a ditch? The cowardly bastard could say, ‘Hell, they won’t miss me, just one man in thousands.’ But, what if every man thought that way? Where in the hell would we be now? What would our country, our loved ones, our homes, even the world, be like? No, Goddamit, Americans don’t think like that. Every man does his job. Every man serves the whole. Every department, every unit, is important in the vast scheme of this war. The ordnance men are needed to supply the guns and machinery of war to keep us rolling. The Quartermaster is needed to bring up food and clothes because where we are going there isn’t a hell of a lot to steal. Every last man on
K.P. has a job to do, even the one who heats our water to keep us from getting the ‘G.I. Shits.’”

Patton paused, took a deep breath, and continued, “Each man must not think only of himself, but also of his buddy fighting beside him. We don’t want yellow cowards in this Army. They should be killed off like rats. If not, they will go home after this war and breed more cowards. The brave men will breed more brave men. Kill off the Goddamned cowards and we will have a nation of brave men. One of the bravest men that I ever saw was a fellow on top of a telegraph pole in the midst of a furious fire fight in Tunisia. I stopped and asked what the hell he was doing up there at a time like that. He answered, ‘Fixing the wire, Sir.’ I asked, ‘Isn’t that a little unhealthy right about now?’ He answered, ‘Yes, Sir, but the Goddamned wire has to be fixed.’ I asked, ‘Don’t those planes strafing the road bother you?’ And he answered, ‘No, Sir, but you sure as hell do!’ Now, there was a real man. A real soldier. There was a man who devoted all he had to his duty, no matter how seemingly insignificant his duty might appear at the time, no matter how great the odds. And you should have seen those trucks on the road to Tunisia. Those drivers were magnificent. All day and all night they rolled over those son-of-a-bitching roads, never stopping, never faltering from their course, with shells bursting all around them all of the time. We got through on good old American guts. Many of those men drove for over forty consecutive hours. These men weren’t combat men, but they were soldiers with a job to do. They did it, and in one hell of a way they did it. They were part of a team. Without team effort, without them, the fight would have been lost. All of the links in the chain pulled together and the chain became unbreakable.”

The General paused and stared challengingly over the silent ocean of men. One could have heard a pin drop anywhere on that vast hillside. The only sound was the stirring of the breeze in the leaves of the bordering trees and the busy chirping of the birds in the branches of the trees at the General’s left.

“Don’t forget,” Patton barked, “you men don’t know that I’m here. No mention of that fact is to be made in any letters. The world is not supposed to know what the hell happened to me. I’m not supposed to be commanding this Army. I’m not even supposed to be here in England. Let the first bastards to find out be the Goddamned Germans. Some day I want to see them raise up on their piss-soaked hind legs and howl, ‘Jesus Christ, it’s the Goddamned Third Army again and that son-of-a-fucking-bitch Patton.’”

“We want to get the hell over there,” Patton continued, “the quicker we clean up this Goddamned mess, the quicker we can take a little jaunt against the purple pissing Japs and clean out their nest, too. Before the Goddamned Marines get all of the credit.”

The men roared approval and cheered delightedly. This statement had real significance behind it. Much more than met the eye and the men instinctively sensed the fact. They knew that they themselves were going to play a very great part in the making of world history. They were being told as much right now. Deep sincerity and seriousness lay behind the General’s colorful words. The men knew and understood it. They loved the way he put it, too, as only he could.
Patton continued quietly, “Sure, we want to go home. We want this war over with. The quickest way to get it over with is to go get the bastards who started it. The quicker they are whipped, the quicker we can go home. The shortest way home is through Berlin and Tokyo. And when we get to Berlin,” he yelled, “I am personally going to shoot that paper hanging son-of-a-bitch Hitler. Just like I’d shoot a snake!”

“When a man is lying in a shell hole, if he just stays there all day, a German will get to him eventually. The hell with that idea. The hell with taking it. My men don’t dig foxholes. I don’t want them to. Foxholes only slow up an offensive. Keep moving. And don’t give the enemy time to dig one either. We’ll win this war, but we’ll win it only by fighting and by showing the Germans that we’ve got more guts than they have; or ever will have. We’re not going to just shoot the sons-of-bitches, we’re going to rip out their living Goddamned guts and use them to grease the treads of our tanks. We’re going to murder those lousy Hun cocksuckers by the bushel-fucking-basket. War is a bloody, killing business. You’ve got to spill their blood, or they will spill yours. Rip them up the belly. Shoot them in the guts. When shells are hitting all around you and you wipe the dirt off your face and realize that instead of dirt it’s the blood and guts of what once was your best friend beside you, you’ll know what to do!”

“I don’t want to get any messages saying, ‘I am holding my position.’ We are not holding a Goddamned thing. Let the Germans do that. We are advancing constantly and we are not interested in holding onto anything, except the enemy’s balls. We are going to twist his balls and kick the living shit out of him all of the time. Our basic plan of operation is to advance and to keep on advancing regardless of whether we have to go over, under, or through the enemy. We are going to go through him like crap through a goose; like shit through a tin horn!”

“From time to time there will be some complaints that we are pushing our people too hard. I don’t give a good Goddamn about such complaints. I believe in the old and sound rule that an ounce of sweat will save a gallon of blood. The harder we push, the more Germans we will kill. The more Germans we kill, the fewer of our men will be killed. Pushing means fewer casualties. I want you all to remember that.”

The General paused. His eagle-like eyes swept over the hillside. He said with pride, “There is one great thing that you men will all be able to say after this war is over and you are home once again. You may be thankful that twenty years from now when you are sitting by the fireplace with your grandson on your knee and he asks you what you did in the great World War II, you won’t have to cough, shift him to the other knee and say, ‘Well, your Granddaddy shoveled shit in Louisiana.’ No, Sir, you can look him straight in the eye and say, ‘Son, your Granddaddy rode with the Great Third Army and a Son-of-a-Goddamned-Bitch named Georgie Patton!’”
Discussion Guide for
Speech to the Third Army

I. About the Author

According to Charles M. Province, founder of the George S. Patton Jr. Historical Society and author of several books about General Patton under whom he served with great pride, George Smith Patton Jr. (1885–1945) was a man of many—even self-contradictory—ways: “He was a noted horseman and polo player, a well-known champion swordsman, and a competent sailor and sportsman . . . an amateur poet . . . a rough and tough soldier . . . a thoughtful and sentimental man. Unpredictable in his actions, [yet] always dependable . . . outgoing, yet introverted.” Hailing from a military family that traced its lineage back well beyond the American Revolution, Patton was already determined during childhood to become a hero. After graduating from the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1909, he received a commission in the United States Army and never left it. He began as a cavalryman and swordsman, but soon became aide to General John J. Pershing, first in Mexico and then in World War I in Europe. There he became an early expert in a new form of battle machine—the tank—which he later used to full effectiveness as commander of the Third Army during World War II.

Though they often referred to him as “Old Blood and Guts” (a description he disliked), most of the men who served with Patton regarded him as a charismatic leader and, despite—or, according to some, because of—his copious use of profanity, an inspirational speaker. He commanded respect not only for his technical expertise, but also for his keen understanding of the human psyche (especially in wartime) and his prodigious knowledge of history and warfare. The much-celebrated movie Patton (made in 1970) makes evident his complex character, his competence, and his view of history as coherent and contiguous. It begins with his famous speech to the troops—in a much cleaned-up version.

II. Summary

General Patton’s speech to the Third Army was given on June 5, 1944, the eve of the Allied invasion of Europe. This third-person account of the speech comes from The Unknown Patton by Charles M. Province, who compiled it from innumerable sources. The first part presents the background, the second the speech itself, interrupted by brief comments on the reaction of the troops. Readers will no doubt be struck by Patton’s harsh and often foul language, and his profuse reliance on profanity. But they should not make the mistake of thinking that Patton had not carefully rehearsed every word, chosen
precisely for its desired persuasive effect. The speech repays careful analysis, and, when one identifies the problems it is designed to address, its genius and power will become evident.

III. Thinking about the Text

General Patton, a lifelong professional soldier born into a family of professional soldiers, addresses civilian soldiers—most of them draftees—the majority of whom had never yet been in battle. We examine the speech mainly to discover how it seeks to accomplish its rhetorical purposes. We are also interested in what it reveals about the nature of leadership in the American democratic republic. On all these matters, comparison with Chamberlain’s speech to the mutineers will prove instructive.

A. The Rhetorical Situation

1. What are Patton’s concerns about his men?
2. What fears and hopes does he have to address?
3. What does he want to accomplish by his speech?

IN CONVERSATION

*In this conversation, Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass discuss Patton’s speech with Eliot A. Cohen, Robert E. Osgood Professor of Strategic Studies at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at the Johns Hopkins University.*

**Amy Kass:** I think Patton’s men are young and untried. They’ve never been in real battle. Patton is, number one, speaking to their fear of death, and number two, to their fear of killing and being killed.

He is also speaking to their fear of being cowards. He says first of all, “Why are you fighting? You’re fighting for your homeland, and for your families.” That’s duty. “You’re fighting for your self-respect.” That’s honor. “But you’re also fighting because you’re men, real men.”

So he’s doing what Chamberlain was doing—he’s appealing to the better angels of their nature, but in a very, very different way.

**Leon Kass:** They have never been in battle. The major rhetorical problem is to address and try to help them curb their fears and also to inspire them to fight and to fight zealously.

_for more discussion on this question, watch the video online._

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B. The Rhetorical Strategy

1. How does Patton address the fears and hopes of his men? How much does he do directly? How much does he do indirectly? Under similar circumstances, what appeal would best address your own fears and hopes?

2. To what does he mainly appeal: honor, duty, manhood and manliness, pride and shame, identification with team or country or himself, desire for glory and reputation, hatred of the enemy, purpose of the war, or American principles and ideals? Why do you think he emphasizes the things he does?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: The very first thing Patton does is he appeals to American manliness, America’s love of victory, and Americans’ love for their own families and homes, love of their own honor, and love of their own manhood. He tells them that America despises cowards.

After that introduction, he directly addresses their fear of death. And it’s wonderful. In the first line he says: “All of you are not going to die. Actually only about two percent of you are going to die. Everyone’s scared. Anybody who says he’s not scared is lying. But a real man won’t let his fear of death overpower his honor, his sense of duty to his country, or his innate manhood.”

Then he goes on to say: “Look, battle is the most magnificent competition. It is where the best comes out; it is where one overcomes all that is base. Americans pride themselves on being he-men, and they really are he-men. And by the way, the enemy’s just as frightened as you are.”

Eliot Cohen: This is basically an appeal to manhood; isn’t it? He is speaking to men. He says, “Men, this stuff that some sources sling around about America wanting out of this war, not wanting to fight, is a crock of bullshit. Americans love to fight, traditionally. All Americans love the sting and clash of battle.”

Leon Kass: Patton couldn’t get away with making such a speech today, but I would imagine there are lots of young men, for better and for worse, who would respond in the same way as the people spoken to in this speech. There really is something about the appeal to courage and the appeal to using your courage in the service of something honorable.

Eliot Cohen: I think that’s right. It is what inspires a lot of people, particularly young males, to volunteer.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.
3. What is the function of Patton’s profanity? What are its effects on the men—and why is it effective? How might these effects contribute to attaining Patton’s overall purpose?

IN CONVERSATION

Eliot Cohen: This is a very different sort of speech than that made by Chamberlain. It is a profane and vulgar speech with a lot of scatological references and a number of sexual references.

Amy Kass: We also know that Patton was not really a profane speaker. He didn’t speak like that normally. He actually used to practice in front of a mirror. And the other wonderful thing he does with this speech is the gift that he leaves them with at the end, which is what they can tell their grandchildren. “When you’re old and your grandchild is sitting on your knee and asks you, ‘What were you doing during the war, the big war?’”

Eliot Cohen: Right, and part of it is about the great Third Army, and part of it is about George S. Patton.

Amy Kass: No, Georgie Patton. He doesn’t even refer to himself with the proper title.

Leon Kass: This is another instance of what we talked about with the Chamberlain speech. Patton is trying once again to dissemble his superiority and make a team of which he’s also a member. It is not just that they’re going to remember that they fought with Georgie Patton, but they’re going to swear like Georgie Patton when they’re talking to their grandchild. That’s what he has them say. What he wants them to say is to refer to him in the same way that he refers to everybody else. The profanity is a way of cutting the tension, reducing the fear, and making them feel like a team with him. They laugh uproariously. They slap their thighs in all of those places, and he makes them a team even before he starts speaking of the army as a team. And it’s a team in which he is the star player.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

C. Analysis of the Speech

Imagine yourself in the audience of soldiers. Pause after each paragraph and try to assess what he said, why he said it, and what effect it would have had on you.

1. The Opening Paragraph (251): How does Patton begin? To what does he first appeal? Are the reasons he suggests that the men are gathered, ready to fight, plausible to you?
2. Second Paragraph, a direct address to the fear of dying (251): Here Patton makes many separate points. Why so many? Why this order? Which appeal is most powerful: to honor, to duty, to country, or to manhood? Does he succeed here in quieting your fear of death? Why or why not?

3. Third Paragraph, about alertness (251–52): What is the point? Why make it here?

4. Paragraphs Four to Eight, about the army as a team (252–53): Trace the several stages in this presentation of the army as a team, with each person having a crucial part to play. How does this section help address the men’s fears? Does the laughter at the beginning help make the men a team?

5. Paragraph Nine, about keeping Patton’s presence a secret (253): Why is this here?

6. Paragraph Ten, the purple-prose paragraph about the mission—to clean up the German mess and to clean out the Japanese nest, “before the [*]^%^ Marines get all the credit” (253): In the next paragraph, Province remarks: “This statement had real significance behind it. . . . [The men] knew that they themselves were going to play a very great part in the making of world history.” Do you see that deep meaning in what Patton said and in how he said it?

7. Paragraphs Eleven to Fourteen, about advancing and pushing hard (254): How do these paragraphs speak to the fears and hopes of the men?

8. Last Paragraph, on what you will be able to say after the war (254): What is accomplished by this closing? Notice especially the very last sentence and the speech Patton invents for you to make to your grandson: What is the effect of that closing, both for your fears and hopes and for your relation to your team and its leaders? Why does he have you speaking in imitation of his own profanity-laced speech?

D. Comparison with Chamberlain’s Speech

Chamberlain and Patton were addressing different sorts of soldiers, under greatly different circumstances and requiring different rhetorical appeals. Nevertheless, some comparisons are fruitful.

1. Unlike Chamberlain, Patton never mentions the causes of the war or the reasons that Americans were fighting it. Why not? Given the circumstances, is this a significant omission?

2. Also unlike Chamberlain, Patton never seems to appeal to specifically American principles and ideals in trying to inspire the men. Why not? Given the circumstances, is this a significant omission?

3. Is Patton’s appeal for manly courage in battle, and the arguments he uses to make it, independent of the cause for which the men are being summoned to fight? Could the same speech have been made by a German or Japanese general to his soldiers?
4. Compare the ways in which Chamberlain and Patton attempt to gain the confidence and trust of their men. What is to be said for and against the ways of each?

5. Would either of these speeches work today? Could the speakers get away with their high-minded appeals to manliness or national greatness and superiority? Their degradation of the enemy? The use of profanity? Even if they were allowed to make these appeals, in these ways, would they be successful with contemporary auditors without consciously being more cynical or ironical in their speech and thought? Whose speech—if either of them—would be most at home in our modern era?—or are they both simply relics of a bygone past?

Patton’s speech, like Chamberlain’s, invites questions about the importance of courage and self-sacrifice, as well as the difficulty in obtaining them. It also raises interesting questions about leadership and about the military in American society. (Many of the following questions were asked also in the Shaara/Chamberlain Discussion Guide.)

A. Encouraging Courage and Self-Sacrifice

1. What is courage? What makes it so difficult? Is Patton’s definition of courage—fighting even though scared—correct? Is there more to courage than this definition?

IN CONVERSATION

**Eliot Cohen:** “Battle is the most magnificent competition in which a human being can indulge. It brings out all that is best; it removes all that is base.” Do you believe that?

**Leon Kass:** Do I believe that’s simply true? It’d take some discussion, and I’d probably wind up saying no.

But there is a sense in which battle is where a person has a chance to put his entire life on the line with his own valor and his own prowess and serve something greater than himself and serve the people next to him.

**Amy Kass:** It’s also not an accident that ancient epics were all about battle.

**Leon Kass:** Or that the Greek word for courage, *andreia,* is the virtue of the male, of the he-man, as if there is something about rolling your entire life up into one moment and asking yourself how will you stand with respect to your own finitude, and will you distinguish yourself, conquering your fears and doing your duty, or will you fail?
Eliot Cohen: But what do you think he denounces in all this? He denounces a view of courage. He denounces the idea of individual heroism. I don’t think this is simply about courage in the narrow sense. He wants everyone to understand that everyone has an important role to play. What is the one heroic example that he talks about? It is the guy who is shimmying up a telephone pole to fix a wire. It is not somebody who is actually going out and killing a German. It is someone who is doing his duty despite fear, and he is doing it well.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

2. How can one get ordinary citizens—especially in a republic dedicated to safeguarding their rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—to risk their lives in the service of the nation? Conversely, how do you temper a martial spirit and the love of war and glory? Which is the bigger challenge in modern American life?

3. How exactly does one encourage public-spiritedness and self-sacrifice? How effective can speech be toward this goal? What sorts of speech? By whom?

4. How important—and effective—are honor and duty for inspiring men to fight? Is there a difference between fighting for your honor and manhood—to avoid being a coward—and fighting for a cause or for public service? Which is more likely to inspire people today to fight?

5. Is patriotism—love of country—necessary for the common defense? How can it be instilled in ordinary citizens? How can it be summoned?

6. Should military service—or some other form of national service—be a civic duty? Why or why not?

7. What is the difference between military courage (and military service) and other sorts of courage (and public service)? Give concrete examples of civic courage not related to war. Which sort of courage do you regard as most important? Why?

IN CONVERSATION

Eliot Cohen: Isn’t there as much need for civic courage, including, frequently, individual courage?

As I was reading through it, I was reflecting on the television series that had a huge impact on me growing up, Profiles in Courage, which was a television version of John F. Kennedy’s award-winning book. I was very struck by the number of cases in the show of people showing enormous courage, which usually meant standing alone against their own crowd—John Adams, for example, being willing to defend the soldiers accused at the Boston Massacre. Isn’t that kind of courage as necessary for the continuation of the republic as martial courage?
Amy Kass: Definitely yes. Courage is necessary in civilian life. Part of the reason we have martial courage here is that one is literally putting one’s life on the line, so what is at stake is something a bit different.

Leon Kass: Well, it’s not just that the stakes are different. What are the virtues that citizens are called upon to display? The first thing called upon is to practice some sort of self-command and to earn some self-respect, if they have their own house in order. Second, they’re obliged to be law-abiding and also have some care for the doing of justice. But then there is the question of what happens when the polity as a whole is threatened, and therefore the question becomes: Don’t we need people who are willing to make the sacrifice and to display courage against the fear of great evil, the fear of death, when the polity itself and its own existence and safety are on the line?

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

B. Leadership and the Military

1. What are the virtues necessary for leaders in a democratic republic? Are the virtues needed for military leaders different from those of civilian leaders?
2. On the one hand, we Americans want excellent leaders, people whom we can admire and follow. On the other hand, we Americans do not wish to be led, and we do not believe that some people are really better than others. What does this tension imply for leadership in America? Which of the two military commanders, Chamberlain or Patton, would you rather follow? Why?
3. The United States maintains civil control of the military. It also has a volunteer army, comprising mainly citizens who serve for only a short time, who are not and will not become professional soldiers. These citizen-soldiers are, however, ruled by a cadre of professional soldiers whose entire career is spent in uniform. What special challenges of leadership do these arrangements produce?
Compassion: Toward Neighbors
Bartleby, the Scrivener:  
A Story of Wall-Street

HERMAN MELVILLE

The summons to compassion and neighborliness is often most difficult to answer when the suffering we confront seems beyond our capacity to remedy. Poverty invites us to give money. Illness calls for medical care. But how do we respond to those maimed in soul and spirit—the homeless, helpless, and hopeless in our midst? No story presents this problem more powerfully than “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853) by Herman Melville (1819–91). In this story, a nameless, middling lawyer—perhaps an American everyman—struggles to do right by Bartleby, an “incurably forlorn” man in his employ, who “prefers not” to make any effort on his own behalf or to accept the kind of help that is offered. Melville makes deft use of images of walls—the brick walls of Wall Street and the Tombs (the city jail), the partitions and doors in the office—to call attention to the imprisonment of the spirit and the barriers separating one soul from another.

The mysterious Bartleby invites multiple interpretations: Is he, for example, a victim of corporate America or technological progress, a quiet rebel against American commercialism, a sufferer from mental illness (“luny”), or a suffering Christ-like figure “sent” to test the proud of heart? But our attention is drawn more to the lawyer-citizen: How do we assess his responses to Bartleby? What might he have done differently? What prevents him from adhering to the divine injunction that “ye love one another”? What do you make of the coda the lawyer-narrator adds at the end, especially his final words, “Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!”? Are people like Bartleby best understood as human beings with problems to be solved (“DO something”) or as fellow sufferers who most need our companionship (“BE there”)? Is the problem-solving mentality, to defeat disease, poverty, and misfortune compatible with the mentality to respond lovingly to our existential joys and sorrows?

I am a rather elderly man. The nature of my avocations for the last thirty years has brought me into more than ordinary contact with what would seem an interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom as yet nothing that I know of has ever been written:—I mean the law-copyists or scriveners. I have known very many of them, professionally and privately, and if I pleased, could relate divers histories, at which good-natured gentlemen might smile, and sentimental souls might weep. But I waive the biographies of all other scriveners for a few passages in the life of Bartleby, who was a scrivener of the strangest I ever saw or heard of. While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done. I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and in his case those are very small. What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, that is all I know of him, except, indeed, one vague report which will appear in the sequel.
Ere introducing the scrivener, as he first appeared to me, it is fit I make some mention of myself, my employés, my business, my chambers, and general surroundings; because some such description is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the chief character about to be presented.

Imprimis: I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best. Hence, though I belong to a profession proverbially energetic and nervous, even to turbulence, at times, yet nothing of that sort have I ever suffered to invade my peace. I am one of those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause; but in the cool tranquillity of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men’s bonds and mortgages and title-deeds. All who know me, consider me an eminently safe man. The late John Jacob Astor,††‡ a personage little given to poetic enthusiasm, had no hesitation in pronouncing my first grand point to be prudence; my next, method. I do not speak it in vanity, but simply record the fact, that I was not unemployed in my profession by the late John Jacob Astor; a name which, I admit, I love to repeat, for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion. I will freely add, that I was not insensible to the late John Jacob Astor’s good opinion.

Some time prior to the period at which this little history begins, my avocations had been largely increased. The good old office, now extinct in the State of New-York, of a Master in Chancery,§§§ had been conferred upon me. It was not a very arduous office, but very pleasantly remunerative. I seldom lose my temper; much more seldom indulge in dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages; but I must be permitted to be rash here and declare, that I consider the sudden and violent abrogation of the office of Master in Chancery, by the new Constitution, as a —— premature act; inasmuch as I had counted upon a life-lease of the profits, whereas I only received those of a few short years. But this is by the way.

My chambers were up stairs at No.— Wall-street. At one end they looked upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious sky-light shaft, penetrating the building from top to bottom. This view might have been considered rather tame than otherwise, deficient in what landscape painters call “life.” But if so, the view from the other end of my chambers offered, at least, a contrast, if nothing more. In that direction my windows commanded an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade; which wall required no spy-glass to bring out its lurking beauties, but for the benefit of all near-sighted spectators, was pushed up to within ten feet of my window panes. Owing to the great height of the surrounding buildings, and my chambers being on the second floor, the interval between this wall and mine not a little resembled a huge square cistern.

At the period just preceding the advent of Bartleby, I had two persons as copyists in my employment, and a promising lad as an office-boy. First, Turkey; second, Nippers;

††‡ (1763–1848) a German-American business magnate and the United States’ first multi-millionaire who made his fortune through fur-trading and smuggling opium.

§§§ An officer of a court of equity appointed to assist the court. Areas traditionally handled by chancery courts included wills and probate, adoptions and guardianships, and marriage and divorce.
third, Ginger Nut. These may seem names, the like of which are not usually found in the Directory. In truth they were nicknames, mutually conferred upon each other by my three clerks, and were deemed expressive of their respective persons or characters. Turkey was a short, pursy Englishman of about my own age, that is, somewhere not far from sixty. In the morning, one might say, his face was of a fine florid hue, but after twelve o’clock, meridian—his dinner hour—it blazed like a grate full of Christmas coals; and continued blazing—but, as it were, with a gradual wane—till 6 o’clock, P.M. or thereabouts, after which I saw no more of the proprietor of the face, which gaining its meridian with the sun, seemed to set with it, to rise, culminate, and decline the following day, with the like regularity and undiminished glory. There are many singular coincidences I have known in the course of my life, not the least among which was the fact, that exactly when Turkey displayed his fullest beams from his red and radiant countenance, just then, too, at that critical moment, began the daily period when I considered his business capacities as seriously disturbed for the remainder of the twenty-four hours. Not that he was absolutely idle, or averse to business then; far from it. The difficulty was, he was apt to be altogether too energetic. There was a strange, inflamed, flurried, flighty recklessness of activity about him. He would be incautious in dipping his pen into his inkstand. All his blots upon my documents, were dropped there after twelve o’clock, meridian. Indeed, not only would he be reckless and sadly given to making blots in the afternoon, but some days he went further, and was rather noisy. At such times, too, his face flamed with augmented blazonry, as if cannel coal had been heaped on anthracite. He made an unpleasant racket with his chair; spilled his sand-box; in mending his pens, impatiently split them all to pieces, and threw them on the floor in a sudden passion; stood up and leaned over his table, boxing his papers about in a most indecorous manner, very sad to behold in an elderly man like him. Nevertheless, as he was in many ways a most valuable person to me, and all the time before twelve o’clock, meridian, was the quickest, steadiest creature too, accomplishing a great deal of work in a style not easy to be matched—for these reasons, I was willing to overlook his eccentricities, though indeed, occasionally, I remonstrated with him. I did this very gently, however, because, though the civilest, nay, the blandest and most reverential of men in the morning, yet in the afternoon he was disposed, upon provocation, to be slightly rash with his tongue, in fact, insolent. Now, valuing his morning services as I did, and resolved not to lose them; yet, at the same time made uncomfortable by his inflamed ways after twelve o’clock; and being a man of peace, unwilling by my admonitions to call forth unseemly retorts from him; I took upon me, one Saturday noon (he was always worse on Saturdays), to hint to him, very kindly, that perhaps now that he was growing old, it might be well to abridge his labors; in short, he need not come to my chambers after twelve o’clock, but, dinner over, had best go home to his lodgings and rest himself till tea-time. But no; he insisted upon his afternoon devotions. His countenance became intolerably fervid, as he oratorically assured me—gesticulating with a long ruler at the other end of the room—that if his services in the morning were useful, how indispensable, then, in the afternoon?

“With submission, sir,” said Turkey on this occasion, “I consider myself your right-hand man. In the morning I but marshal and deploy my columns; but in the afternoon I put myself at their head, and gallantly charge the foe, thus!”—and he made a violent thrust with the ruler.
“But the blots, Turkey,” intimated I.

“But, with submission, sir, behold these hairs! I am getting old. Surely, sir, a blot or two of a warm afternoon is not to be severely urged against gray hairs. Old age—even if it blot the page—is honorable. With submission, sir, we both are getting old.”

This appeal to my fellow-feeling was hardly to be resisted. At all events, I saw that go he would not. So I made up my mind to let him stay, resolving, nevertheless, to see to it, that during the afternoon he had to do with my less important papers.

Nippers, the second on my list, was a whiskered, sallow, and, upon the whole, rather piratical-looking young man of about five and twenty. I always deemed him the victim of two evil powers—ambition and indigestion. The ambition was evinced by a certain impatience of the duties of a mere copyist, an unwarrantable usurpation of strictly professional affairs, such as the original drawing up of legal documents. The indigestion seemed betokened in an occasional nervous testiness and grinning irritability, causing the teeth to audibly grind together over mistakes committed in copying; unnecessary maledictions, hissed, rather than spoken, in the heat of business; and especially by a continual discontent with the height of the table where he worked. Though of a very ingenious mechanical turn, Nippers could never get this table to suit him. He put chips under it, blocks of various sorts, bits of pasteboard, and at last went so far as to attempt an exquisite adjustment by final pieces of folded blotting-paper. But no invention would answer. If, for the sake of easing his back, he brought the table lid at a sharp angle well up towards his chin, and wrote there like a man using the steep roof of a Dutch house for his desk:—then he declared that it stopped the circulation in his arms. If now he lowered the table to his waistbands, and stooped over it in writing, then there was a sore aching in his back. In short, the truth of the matter was, Nippers knew not what he wanted. Or, if he wanted any thing, it was to be rid of a scrivener’s table altogether. Among the manifestations of his diseased ambition was a fondness he had for receiving visits from certain ambiguous-looking fellows in seedy coats, whom he called his clients. Indeed I was aware that not only was he, at times, considerable of a ward-politician, but he occasionally did a little business at the Justices’ courts, and was not unknown on the steps of the Tombs. I have good reason to believe, however, that one individual who called upon him at my chambers, and who, with a grand air, he insisted was his client, was no other than a dun, and the alleged title-deed, a bill. But with all his failings, and the annoyances he caused me, Nippers, like his compatriot Turkey, was a very useful man to me; wrote a neat, swift hand; and, when he chose, was not deficient in a gentlemanly sort of deportment. Added to this, he always dressed in a gentlemanly sort of way; and so, incidentally, reflected credit upon my chambers. Whereas with respect to Turkey, I had much ado to keep him from being a reproach to me. His clothes were apt to look oily and smell of eating-houses. He wore his pantaloons very loose and baggy in summer. His coats were execrable; his hat not to be handled. But while the hat was a thing of indifference to me, inasmuch as his natural civility and deference, as a dependent Englishman, always led him to doff it the moment he entered the room, yet his coat was another matter. Concerning his coats, I reasoned with him; but with no effect. The truth was, I suppose, that a man with so small an income, could not afford to sport such a
lustrous face and a lustrous coat at one and the same time. As Nippers once observed, Turkey’s money went chiefly for red ink. One winter day I presented Turkey with a highly respectable looking coat of my own, a padded gray coat, of a most comfortable warmth, and which buttoned straight up from the knee to the neck. I thought Turkey would appreciate the favor, and abate his rashness and obstreperousness of afternoons. But no. I verily believe that buttoning himself up in so downy and blanket-like a coat had a pernicious effect upon him; upon the same principle that too much oats are bad for horses. In fact, precisely as a rash, restive horse is said to feel his oats, so Turkey felt his coat. It made him insolent. He was a man whom prosperity harmed.

Though concerning the self-indulgent habits of Turkey I had my own private surmises, yet touching Nippers I was well persuaded that whatever might be his faults in other respects, he was, at least, a temperate young man. But indeed, nature herself seemed to have been his vintner, and at his birth charged him so thoroughly with an irritable, brandy-like disposition, that all subsequent potations were needless. When I consider how, amid the stillness of my chambers, Nippers would sometimes impatiently rise from his seat, and stooping over his table, spread his arms wide apart, seize the whole desk, and move it, and jerk it, with a grim, grinding motion on the floor, as if the table were a perverse voluntary agent, intent on thwarting and vexing him; I plainly perceive that for Nippers, brandy and water were altogether superfluous.

It was fortunate for me that, owing to its peculiar cause—indigestion—the irritability and consequent nervousness of Nippers, were mainly observable in the morning, while in the afternoon he was comparatively mild. So that Turkey’s paroxysms only coming on about twelve o’clock, I never had to do with their eccentricities at one time. Their fits relieved each other like guards. When Nippers’ was on, Turkey’s was off; and vice versa. This was a good natural arrangement under the circumstances.

Ginger Nut, the third on my list, was a lad some twelve years old. His father was a carman, ambitious of seeing his son on the bench instead of a cart, before he died. So he sent him to my office as student at law, errand boy, and cleaner and sweeper, at the rate of one dollar a week. He had a little desk to himself, but he did not use it much. Upon inspection, the drawer exhibited a great array of the shells of various sorts of nuts. Indeed, to this quick-witted youth the whole noble science of the law was contained in a nut-shell. Not the least among the employments of Ginger Nut, as well as one which he discharged with the most alacrity, was his duty as cake and apple purveyor for Turkey and Nippers. Copying law papers being proverbially a dry, husky sort of business, my two scriveners were fain to moisten their mouths very often with Spitzenbergs to be had at the numerous stalls nigh the Custom House and Post Office. Also, they sent Ginger Nut very frequently for that peculiar cake—small, flat, round, and very spicy—after which he had been named by them. Of a cold morning when business was but dull, Turkey would gobble up scores of these cakes, as if they were mere wafers—indeed they sell them at the rate of six or eight for a penny—the scrape of his pen blending with the crunching of the crisp particles in his mouth. Of all the fiery afternoon blunders and flurried rashnesses of Turkey, was his once moistening a ginger-cake between his lips, and clapping it on to a mortgage for a seal. I came within an ace of dismissing him then.
But he mollified me by making an oriental bow, and saying—“With submission, sir, it was generous of me to find you in stationery on my own account.”

Now my original business—that of a conveyancer and title hunter, and drawer-up of recondite documents of all sorts—was considerably increased by receiving the master’s office. There was now great work for scriveners. Not only must I push the clerks already with me, but I must have additional help. In answer to my advertisement, a motionless young man one morning, stood upon my office threshold, the door being open, for it was summer. I can see that figure now—pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby.

After a few words touching his qualifications, I engaged him, glad to have among my corps of copyists a man of so singularly sedate an aspect, which I thought might operate beneficially upon the flighty temper of Turkey, and the fiery one of Nippers.

I should have stated before that ground glass folding-doors divided my premises into two parts, one of which was occupied by my scriveners, the other by myself. According to my humor I threw open these doors, or closed them. I resolved to assign Bartleby a corner by the folding-doors, but on my side of them, so as to have this quiet man within easy call, in case any trifling thing was to be done. I placed his desk close up to a small side-window in that part of the room, a window which originally had afforded a lateral view of certain grimy back-yards and bricks, but which, owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all, though it gave some light. Within three feet of the panes was a wall, and the light came down from far above, between two lofty buildings, as from a very small opening in a dome. Still further to a satisfactory arrangement, I procured a high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice. And thus, in a manner, privacy and society were conjoined.

At first Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sun-light and by candle-light. I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically.

It is, of course, an indispensable part of a scrivener’s business to verify the accuracy of his copy, word by word. Where there are two or more scriveners in an office, they assist each other in this examination, one reading from the copy, the other holding the original. It is a very dull, wearisome, and lethargic affair. I can readily imagine that to some sanguine temperaments it would be altogether intolerable. For example, I cannot credit that the mettlesome poet Byron would have contentedly sat down with Bartleby to examine a law document of, say five hundred pages, closely written in a crimpy hand.

Now and then, in the haste of business, it had been my habit to assist in comparing some brief document myself, calling Turkey or Nippers for this purpose. One object I had in placing Bartleby so handy to me behind the screen, was to avail myself of his services.
on such trivial occasions. It was on the third day, I think, of his being with me, and before any necessity had arisen for having his own writing examined, that, being much hurried to complete a small affair I had in hand, I abruptly called to Bartleby. In my haste and natural expectancy of instant compliance, I sat with my head bent over the original on my desk, and my right hand sideways, and somewhat nervously extended with the copy, so that immediately upon emerging from his retreat, Bartleby might snatch it and proceed to business without the least delay.

In this very attitude did I sit when I called to him, rapidly stating what it was I wanted him to do—namely, to examine a small paper with me. Imagine my surprise, nay, my consternation, when without moving from his privacy, Bartleby in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, “I would prefer not to.”

I sat awhile in perfect silence, rallying my stunned faculties. Immediately it occurred to me that my ears had deceived me, or Bartleby had entirely misunderstood my meaning. I repeated my request in the clearest tone I could assume. But in quite as clear a one came the previous reply, “I would prefer not to.”

“Prefer not to,” echoed I, rising in high excitement, and crossing the room with a stride. “What do you mean? Are you moon-struck? I want you to help me compare this sheet here—take it,” and I thrust it towards him.

“I would prefer not to,” said he.

I looked at him steadfastly. His face was leanly composed; his gray eye dimly calm. Not a wrinkle of agitation rippled him. Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been any thing ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises. But as it was, I should have as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero out of doors. I stood gazing at him awhile, as he went on with his own writing, and then reseated myself at my desk. This is very strange, thought I. What had one best do? But my business hurried me. I concluded to forget the matter for the present, reserving it for my future leisure. So calling Nippers from the other room, the paper was speedily examined.

A few days after this, Bartleby concluded four lengthy documents, being quadruplicates of a week’s testimony taken before me in my High Court of Chancery. It became necessary to examine them. It was an important suit, and great accuracy was imperative. Having all things arranged I called Turkey, Nippers and Ginger Nut from the next room, meaning to place the four copies in the hands of my four clerks, while I should read from the original. Accordingly Turkey, Nippers and Ginger Nut had taken their seats in a row, each with his document in hand, when I called to Bartleby to join this interesting group.

“Bartleby! quick, I am waiting.”
I heard a slow scrape of his chair legs on the uncarpeted floor, and soon he appeared standing at the entrance of his hermitage.

“What is wanted?” said he mildly.

“The copies, the copies,” said I hurriedly. “We are going to examine them. There”—and I held towards him the fourth quadruplicate.

“I would prefer not to,” he said, and gently disappeared behind the screen.

For a few moments I was turned into a pillar of salt, standing at the head of my seated column of clerks. Recovering myself, I advanced towards the screen, and demanded the reason for such extraordinary conduct.

“Why do you refuse?”

“I would prefer not to.”

With any other man I should have flown outright into a dreadful passion, scorned all further words, and thrust him ignominiously from my presence. But there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but in a wonderful manner touched and disconcerted me. I began to reason with him.

“These are your own copies we are about to examine. It is labor saving to you, because one examination will answer for your four papers. It is common usage. Every copyist is bound to help examine his copy. Is it not so? Will you not speak? Answer!”

“I prefer not to,” he replied in a flute-like tone. It seemed to me that while I had been addressing him, he carefully revolved every statement that I made; fully comprehended the meaning; could not gainsay the irresistible conclusions; but, at the same time, some paramount consideration prevailed with him to reply as he did.

“You are decided, then, not to comply with my request—a request made according to common usage and common sense?”

He briefly gave me to understand that on that point my judgment was sound. Yes: his decision was irreversible.

It is not seldom the case that when a man is browbeaten in some unprecedented and violently unreasonable way, he begins to stagger in his own plainest faith. He begins, as it were, vaguely to surmise that, wonderful as it may be, all the justice and all the reason is on the other side. Accordingly, if any disinterested persons are present, he turns to them for some reinforcement for his own faltering mind.

“Turkey,” said I, “what do you think of this? Am I not right?”
"With submission, sir," said Turkey, with his blandest tone, "I think that you are."

"Nippers," said I, "what do you think of it?"

"I think I should kick him out of the office."

(The reader of nice perceptions will here perceive that, it being morning, Turkey’s answer is couched in polite and tranquil terms, but Nippers replies in ill-tempered ones. Or, to repeat a previous sentence, Nippers’ ugly mood was on duty and Turkey’s off.)

"Ginger Nut," said I, willing to enlist the smallest suffrage in my behalf, "what do you think of it?"

"I think, sir, he’s a little luny," replied Ginger Nut with a grin.

"You hear what they say," said I, turning towards the screen, "come forth and do your duty."

But he vouchsafed no reply. I pondered a moment in sore perplexity. But once more business hurried me. I determined again to postpone the consideration of this dilemma to my future leisure. With a little trouble we made out to examine the papers without Bartleby, though at every page or two, Turkey deferentially dropped his opinion that this proceeding was quite out of the common; while Nippers, twitching in his chair with a dyspeptic nervousness, ground out between his set teeth occasional hissing maledictions against the stubborn oaf behind the screen. And for his (Nippers’s) part, this was the first and the last time he would do another man’s business without pay.

Meanwhile Bartleby sat in his hermitage, oblivious to every thing but his own peculiar business there.

Some days passed, the scrivener being employed upon another lengthy work. His late remarkable conduct led me to regard his ways narrowly. I observed that he never went to dinner; indeed that he never went any where. As yet I had never of my personal knowledge known him to be outside of my office. He was a perpetual sentry in the corner. At about eleven o’clock though, in the morning, I noticed that Ginger Nut would advance toward the opening in Bartleby’s screen, as if silently beckoned thither by a gesture invisible to me where I sat. The boy would then leave the office jingling a few pence, and reappear with a handful of ginger-nuts which he delivered in the hermitage, receiving two of the cakes for his trouble.

He lives, then, on ginger-nuts, thought I; never eats a dinner, properly speaking; he must be a vegetarian then; but no; he never eats even vegetables, he eats nothing but ginger-nuts. My mind then ran on in reveries concerning the probable effects upon the human constitution of living entirely on ginger-nuts. Ginger-nuts are so called because they contain ginger as one of their peculiar constituents, and the final flavoring one. Now
what was ginger? A hot, spicy thing. Was Bartleby hot and spicy? Not at all. Ginger, then, had no effect upon Bartleby. Probably he preferred it should have none.

Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance. If the individual so resisted be of a not inhumane temper, and the resisting one perfectly harmless in his passivity; then, in the better moods of the former, he will endeavor charitably to construe to his imagination what proves impossible to be solved by his judgment. Even so, for the most part, I regarded Bartleby and his ways. Poor fellow! thought I, he means no mischief; it is plain he intends no insolence; his aspect sufficiently evinces that his eccentricities are involuntary. He is useful to me. I can get along with him. If I turn him away, the chances are he will fall in with some less indulgent employer, and then he will be rudely treated, and perhaps driven forth miserably to starve. Yes. Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval. To befriend Bartleby; to humor him in his strange wilfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience. But this mood was not invariable with me. The passiveness of Bartleby sometimes irritated me. I felt strangely goaded on to encounter him in new opposition, to elicit some angry spark from him answerable to my own. But indeed I might as well have essayed to strike fire with my knuckles against a bit of Windsor soap. But one afternoon the evil impulse in me mastered me, and the following little scene ensued:

“Bartleby,” said I, “when those papers are all copied, I will compare them with you.”

“I would prefer not to.”

“How? Surely you do not mean to persist in that mulish vagary?”

No answer.

I threw open the folding-doors near by, and turning upon Turkey and Nippers, exclaimed:

“Bartleby a second time says, he won’t examine his papers. What do you think of it, Turkey?”

It was afternoon, be it remembered. Turkey sat glowing like a brass boiler, his bald head steaming, his hands reeling among his blotted papers.

“Think of it?” roared Turkey; “I think I’ll just step behind his screen, and black his eyes for him!”

So saying, Turkey rose to his feet and threw his arms into a pugilistic position. He was hurrying away to make good his promise, when I detained him, alarmed at the effect of incautiously rousing Turkey’s combativeness after dinner.
“Sit down, Turkey,” said I, “and hear what Nippers has to say. What do you think of it, Nippers? Would I not be justified in immediately dismissing Bartleby?”

“Excuse me, that is for you to decide, sir. I think his conduct quite unusual, and indeed unjust, as regards Turkey and myself. But it may only be a passing whim.”

“Ah,” exclaimed I, “you have strangely changed your mind then—you speak very gently of him now.”

“All beer,” cried Turkey; “gentleness is effects of beer—Nippers and I dined together to-day. You see how gentle I am, sir. Shall I go and black his eyes?”

“You refer to Bartleby, I suppose. No, not to-day, Turkey,” I replied; “pray, put up your fists.”

I closed the doors, and again advanced towards Bartleby. I felt additional incentives tempting me to my fate. I burned to be rebelled against again. I remembered that Bartleby never left the office.

“Bartleby,” said I, “Ginger Nut is away; just step round to the Post Office, won’t you? (it was but a three minutes walk,) and see if there is any thing for me.”

“I would prefer not to.”

“You will not?”

“I prefer not.”

I staggered to my desk, and sat there in a deep study. My blind inveteracy returned. Was there any other thing in which I could procure myself to be ignominiously repulsed by this lean, penniless wight?—my hired clerk? What added thing is there, perfectly reasonable, that he will be sure to refuse to do?

“Bartleby!”

No answer.

“Bartleby,” in a louder tone.

No answer.

“Bartleby,” I roared.

Like a very ghost, agreeably to the laws of magical invocation, at the third summons, he appeared at the entrance of his hermitage.
“Go to the next room, and tell Nippers to come to me.”

“I prefer not to,” he respectfully and slowly said, and mildly disappeared.

“Very good, Bartleby,” said I, in a quiet sort of serenely severe self-possessed tone, intimating the unalterable purpose of some terrible retribution very close at hand. At the moment I half intended something of the kind. But upon the whole, as it was drawing towards my dinner-hour, I thought it best to put on my hat and walk home for the day, suffering much from perplexity and distress of mind.

Shall I acknowledge it? The conclusion of this whole business was, that it soon became a fixed fact of my chambers, that a pale young scrivener, by the name of Bartleby, had a desk there; that he copied for me at the usual rate of four cents a folio (one hundred words); but he was permanently exempt from examining the work done by him, that duty being transferred to Turkey and Nippers, out of compliment doubtless to their superior acuteness; moreover, said Bartleby was never on any account to be dispatched on the most trivial errand of any sort; and that even if entreated to take upon him such a matter, it was generally understood that he would prefer not to—in other words, that he would refuse point-blank.

As days passed on, I became considerably reconciled to Bartleby. His steadiness, his freedom from all dissipation, his incessant industry (except when he chose to throw himself into a standing revery behind his screen), his great stillness, his unalterableness of demeanor under all circumstances, made him a valuable acquisition. One prime thing was this,—he was always there;—first in the morning, continually through the day, and the last at night. I had a singular confidence in his honesty. I felt my most precious papers perfectly safe in his hands. Sometimes to be sure I could not, for the very soul of me, avoid falling into sudden spasmodic passions with him. For it was exceeding difficult to bear in mind all the time those strange peculiarities, privileges, and unheard of exemptions, forming the tacit stipulations on Bartleby’s part under which he remained in my office. Now and then, in the eagerness of dispatching pressing business, I would inadvertently summon Bartleby, in a short, rapid tone, to put his finger, say, on the incipient tie of a bit of red tape with which I was about compressing some papers. Of course, from behind the screen the usual answer, “I prefer not to,” was sure to come; and then, how could a human creature with the common infirmities of our nature, refrain from bitterly exclaiming upon such perverseness—such unreasonableness. However, every added repulse of this sort which I received only tended to lessen the probability of my repeating the inadvertence.

Here it must be said, that according to the custom of most legal gentlemen occupying chambers in densely-populated law buildings, there were several keys to my door. One was kept by a woman residing in the attic, which person weekly scrubbed and daily swept and dusted my apartments. Another was kept by Turkey for convenience sake. The third I sometimes carried in my own pocket. The fourth I knew not who had.
Now, one Sunday morning I happened to go to Trinity Church, to hear a celebrated preacher, and finding myself rather early on the ground, I thought I would walk around to my chambers for a while. Luckily I had my key with me; but upon applying it to the lock, I found it resisted by something inserted from the inside. Quite surprised, I called out; when to my consternation a key was turned from within; and thrusting his lean visage at me, and holding the door ajar, the apparition of Bartleby appeared, in his shirt sleeves, and otherwise in a strangely tattered dishabille, saying quietly that he was sorry, but he was deeply engaged just then, and—preferred not admitting me at present. In a brief word or two, he moreover added, that perhaps I had better walk round the block two or three times, and by that time he would probably have concluded his affairs.

Now, the utterly unsurmised appearance of Bartleby, tenanting my law-chambers of a Sunday morning, with his cadaverously gentlemanly nonchalance, yet withal firm and self-possessed, had such a strange effect upon me, that incontinently I slunk away from my own door, and did as desired. But not without sundry twinges of impotent rebellion against the mild effrontery of this unaccountable scrivener. Indeed, it was his wonderful mildness chiefly, which not only disarmed me, but unmanned me, as it were. For I consider that one, for the time, is a sort of unmanned when he tranquilly permits his hired clerk to dictate to him, and order him away from his own premises. Furthermore, I was full of uneasiness as to what Bartleby could possibly be doing in my office in his shirt sleeves, and in an otherwise dismantled condition of a Sunday morning. Was any thing amiss going on? Nay, that was out of the question. It was not to be thought of for a moment that Bartleby was an immoral person. But what could he be doing there?—copying? Nay again, whatever might be his eccentricities, Bartleby was an eminently decorous person. He would be the last man to sit down to his desk in any state approaching to nudity. Besides, it was Sunday; and there was something about Bartleby that forbade the supposition that he would by any secular occupation violate the proprieties of the day.

Nevertheless, my mind was not pacified; and full of a restless curiosity, at last I returned to the door. Without hindrance I inserted my key, opened it, and entered. Bartleby was not to be seen. I looked round anxiously, peeped behind his screen; but it was very plain that he was gone. Upon more closely examining the place, I surmised that for an indefinite period Bartleby must have ate, dressed, and slept in my office, and that too without plate, mirror, or bed. The cushioned seat of a ricketty old sofa in one corner bore the faint impress of a lean, reclining form. Rolled away under his desk, I found a blanket; under the empty grate, a blacking box and brush; on a chair, a tin basin, with soap and a ragged towel; in a newspaper a few crumbs of ginger-nuts and a morsel of cheese. Yes, thought I, it is evident enough that Bartleby has been making his home here, keeping bachelor’s hall all by himself. Immediately then the thought came sweeping across me, What miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed! His poverty is great; but his solitude, how horrible! Think of it. Of a Sunday, Wall-street is deserted as Petra; and every night of every day it is an emptiness. This building too, which of week-days hums with industry and life, at nightfall echoes with sheer vacancy, and all through Sunday is forlorn. And here Bartleby makes his home; sole spectator of a solitude which
he has seen all populous—a sort of innocent and transformed Marius brooding among the ruins of Carthage!

For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me. Before, I had never experienced aught but a not-unpleasing sadness. The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam. I remembered the bright silks and sparkling faces I had seen that day, in gala trim, swan-like sailing down the Mississippi of Broadway; and I contrasted them with the pallid copyist, and thought to myself, Ah, happiness courts the light, so we deem the world is gay; but misery hides aloof, so we deem that misery there is none. These sad fancyings—chimeras, doubtless, of a sick and silly brain—led on to other and more special thoughts, concerning the eccentricities of Bartleby. Presentiments of strange discoveries hovered round me. The scrivener’s pale form appeared to me laid out, among uncaring strangers, in its shivering winding sheet.

Suddenly I was attracted by Bartleby’s closed desk, the key in open sight left in the lock.

I mean no mischief, seek the gratification of no heartless curiosity, thought I; besides, the desk is mine, and its contents too, so I will make bold to look within. Every thing was methodically arranged, the papers smoothly placed. The pigeon holes were deep, and removing the files of documents, I groped into their recesses. Presently I felt something there, and dragged it out. It was an old bandanna handkerchief, heavy and knotted. I opened it, and saw it was a savings’ bank.

I now recalled all the quiet mysteries which I had noted in the man. I remembered that he never spoke but to answer; that though at intervals he had considerable time to himself, yet I had never seen him reading—no, not even a newspaper; that for long periods he would stand looking out, at his pale window behind the screen, upon the dead brick wall; I was quite sure he never visited any refectory or eating house; while his pale face clearly indicated that he never drank beer like Turkey, or tea and coffee even, like other men; that he never went any where in particular that I could learn; never went out for a walk, unless indeed that was the case at present; that he had declined telling who he was, or whence he came, or whether he had any relatives in the world; that though so thin and pale, he never complained of ill health. And more than all, I remembered a certain unconscious air of pallid—how shall I call it?—of pallid haughtiness, say, or rather an austere reserve about him, which had positively awed me into my tame compliance with his eccentricities, when I had feared to ask him to do the slightest incidental thing for me, even though I might know, from his long-continued motionlessness, that behind his screen he must be standing in one of those dead-wall reveries of his.

Revolving all these things, and coupling them with the recently discovered fact that he made my office his constant abiding place and home, and not forgetful of his morbid moodiness; revolving all these things, a prudential feeling began to steal over me. My first emotions had been those of pure melancholy and sincerest pity; but just in proportion as the forlornness of Bartleby grew and grew to my imagination, did that same
melancholy merge into fear, that pity into repulsion. So true it is, and so terrible too, that up to a certain point the thought or sight of misery enlists our best affections; but, in certain special cases, beyond that point it does not. They err who would assert that invariably this is owing to the inherent selfishness of the human heart. It rather proceeds from a certain hopelessness of remedying excessive and organic ill. To a sensitive being, pity is not seldom pain. And when at last it is perceived that such pity cannot lead to effectual succor, common sense bids the soul be rid of it. What I saw that morning persuaded me that the scrivener was the victim of innate and incurable disorder. I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach.

I did not accomplish the purpose of going to Trinity Church that morning. Somehow, the things I had seen disqualified me for the time from church-going. I walked homeward, thinking what I would do with Bartleby. Finally, I resolved upon this;—I would put certain calm questions to him the next morning, touching his history, &c., and if he declined to answer them openly and unreservedly (and I supposed he would prefer not), then to give him a twenty dollar bill over and above whatever I might owe him, and tell him his services were no longer required; but that if in any other way I could assist him, I would be happy to do so, especially if he desired to return to his native place, wherever that might be, I would willingly help to defray the expenses. Moreover, if, after reaching home, he found himself at any time in want of aid, a letter from him would be sure of a reply.

The next morning came.

“Bartleby,” said I, gently calling to him behind his screen.

No reply.

“Bartleby,” said I, in a still gentler tone, “come here; I am not going to ask you to do any thing you would prefer not to do—I simply wish to speak to you.”

Upon this he noiselessly slid into view.

“Will you tell me, Bartleby, where you were born?”

“I would prefer not to.”

“Will you tell me any thing about yourself?”

“I would prefer not to.”

“But what reasonable objection can you have to speak to me? I feel friendly towards you.”
He did not look at me while I spoke, but kept his glance fixed upon my bust of Cicero, which as I then sat, was directly behind me, some six inches above my head.

“What is your answer, Bartleby?” said I, after waiting a considerable time for a reply, during which his countenance remained immovable, only there was the faintest conceivable tremor of the white attenuated mouth.

“At present I prefer to give no answer,” he said, and retired into his hermitage.

It was rather weak in me I confess, but his manner on this occasion nettled me. Not only did there seem to lurk in it a certain calm disdain, but his perverseness seemed ungrateful, considering the undeniable good usage and indulgence he had received from me.

Again I sat ruminating what I should do. Mortified as I was at his behavior, and resolved as I had been to dismiss him when I entered my office, nevertheless I strangely felt something superstitious knocking at my heart, and forbidding me to carry out my purpose, and denouncing me for a villain if I dared to breathe one bitter word against this forlornest of mankind. At last, familiarly drawing my chair behind his screen, I sat down and said: “Bartleby, never mind then about revealing your history; but let me entreat you, as a friend, to comply as far as may be with the usages of this office. Say now you will help to examine papers to-morrow or next day: in short, say now that in a day or two you will begin to be a little reasonable:—say so, Bartleby.”

“At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable,” was his mildly cadaverous reply.

Just then the folding-doors opened, and Nippers approached. He seemed suffering from an unusually bad night’s rest, induced by severer indigestion than common. He overheard those final words of Bartleby.

“Prefer not, eh?” gritted Nippers—“I’d prefer him, if I were you, sir,” addressing me—“I’d prefer him; I’d give him preferences, the stubborn mule! What is it, sir, pray, that he prefers not to do now?”

Bartleby moved not a limb.

“Mr. Nippers,” said I, “I’d prefer that you would withdraw for the present.”

Somehow, of late I had got into the way of involuntarily using this word “prefer” upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions. And I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already and seriously affected me in a mental way. And what further and deeper aberration might it not yet produce? This apprehension had not been without efficacy in determining me to summary measures.
As Nippers, looking very sour and sulky, was departing, Turkey blandly and deferentially approached.

“With submission, sir,” said he, “yesterday I was thinking about Bartleby here, and I think that if he would but prefer to take a quart of good ale every day, it would do much towards mending him, and enabling him to assist in examining his papers.”

“So you have got the word too,” said I, slightly excited.

“With submission, what word, sir,” asked Turkey, respectfully crowding himself into the contracted space behind the screen, and by so doing, making me jostle the scrivener. “What word, sir?”

“I would prefer to be left alone here,” said Bartleby, as if offended at being mobbed in his privacy.

“That’s the word, Turkey,” said I—“that’s it.”

“Oh, prefer? oh yes—queer word. I never use it myself. But, sir, as I was saying, if he would but prefer—”

“Turkey,” interrupted I, “you will please withdraw.”

“Oh certainly, sir, if you prefer that I should.”

As he opened the folding-door to retire, Nippers at his desk caught a glimpse of me, and asked whether I would prefer to have a certain paper copied on blue paper or white. He did not in the least roguishly accent the word prefer. It was plain that it involuntarily rolled from his tongue. I thought to myself, surely I must get rid of a demented man, who already has in some degree turned the tongues, if not the heads of myself and clerks. But I thought it prudent not to break the dismission at once.

The next day I noticed that Bartleby did nothing but stand at his window in his dead-wall revery. Upon asking him why he did not write, he said that he had decided upon doing no more writing.

“Why, how now? what next?” exclaimed I, “do no more writing?”

“No more.”

“And what is the reason?”

“Do you not see the reason for yourself,” he indifferently replied.
I looked steadfastly at him, and perceived that his eyes looked dull and glazed. Instantly it occurred to me, that his unexampled diligence in copying by his dim window for the first few weeks of his stay with me might have temporarily impaired his vision.

I was touched. I said something in condolence with him. I hinted that of course he did wisely in abstaining from writing for a while; and urged him to embrace that opportunity of taking wholesome exercise in the open air. This, however, he did not do. A few days after this, my other clerks being absent, and being in a great hurry to dispatch certain letters by the mail, I thought that, having nothing else earthly to do, Bartleby would surely be less inflexible than usual, and carry these letters to the post-office. But he blankly declined. So, much to my inconvenience, I went myself.

Still added days went by. Whether Bartleby’s eyes improved or not, I could not say. To all appearance, I thought they did. But when I asked him if they did, he vouchsafed no answer. At all events, he would do no copying. At last, in reply to my urgings, he informed me that he had permanently given up copying.

“What!” exclaimed I; “suppose your eyes should get entirely well—better than ever before—would you not copy then?”

“I have given up copying,” he answered, and slid aside.

He remained as ever, a fixture in my chamber. Nay—if that were possible— he became still more of a fixture than before. What was to be done? He would do nothing in the office: why should he stay there? In plain fact, he had now become a millstone to me, not only useless as a necklace, but afflictive to bear. Yet I was sorry for him. I speak less than truth when I say that, on his own account, he occasioned me uneasiness. If he would but have named a single relative or friend, I would instantly have written, and urged their taking the poor fellow away to some convenient retreat. But he seemed alone, absolutely alone in the universe. A bit of wreck in the mid Atlantic. At length, necessities connected with my business tyrannized over all other considerations. Decently as I could, I told Bartleby that in six days’ time he must unconditionally leave the office. I warned him to take measures, in the interval, for procuring some other abode. I offered to assist him in this endeavor, if he himself would but take the first step towards a removal. “And when you finally quit me, Bartleby,” added I, “I shall see that you go not away entirely unprovided. Six days from this hour, remember.”

At the expiration of that period, I peeped behind the screen, and lo! Bartleby was there.

I buttoned up my coat, balanced myself, advanced slowly towards him, touched his shoulder, and said, “The time has come; you must quit this place; I am sorry for you; here is money; but you must go.”

“I would prefer not,” he replied, with his back still towards me.
“You must.”

He remained silent.

Now I had an unbounded confidence in this man’s common honesty. He had frequently restored to me sixpences and shillings carelessly dropped upon the floor, for I am apt to be very reckless in such shirt-button affairs. The proceeding then which followed will not be deemed extraordinary.

“Bartleby,” said I, “I owe you twelve dollars on account; here are thirty-two; the odd twenty are yours.—Will you take it?” and I handed the bills towards him.

But he made no motion.

“I will leave them here then,” putting them under a weight on the table. Then taking my hat and cane and going to the door I tranquilly turned and added—“After you have removed your things from these offices, Bartleby, you will of course lock the door—since every one is now gone for the day but you—and if you please, slip your key underneath the mat, so that I may have it in the morning. I shall not see you again; so good-bye to you. If hereafter in your new place of abode I can be of any service to you, do not fail to advise me by letter. Good-bye, Bartleby, and fare you well.”

But he answered not a word; like the last column of some ruined temple, he remained standing mute and solitary in the middle of the otherwise deserted room.

As I walked home in a pensive mood, my vanity got the better of my pity. I could not but highly plume myself on my masterly management in getting rid of Bartleby. Masterly I call it, and such it must appear to any dispassionate thinker. The beauty of my procedure seemed to consist in its perfect quietness. There was no vulgar bullying, no bravado of any sort, no choleric hectoring, and striding to and fro across the apartment, jerking out vehement commands for Bartleby to bundle himself off with his beggarly traps. Nothing of the kind. Without loudly bidding Bartleby depart—as an inferior genius might have done—I assumed the ground that depart he must; and upon that assumption built all I had to say. The more I thought over my procedure, the more I was charmed with it. However I over my procedure, the more I was charmed with it. Nevertheless, next morning, upon awakening, I had my doubts,—I had somehow slept off the fumes of vanity. One of the coolest and wisest hours a man has, is just after he awakes in the morning. My procedure seemed as sagacious as ever,—but only in theory. How it would prove in practice—there was the rub. It was truly a beautiful thought to have assumed Bartleby’s departure; but, after all, that assumption was simply my own, and none of Bartleby’s. The great point was, not whether I had assumed that he would quit me, but whether he would prefer so to do. He was more a man of preferences than assumptions.

After breakfast, I walked down town, arguing the probabilities pro and con. One moment I thought it would prove a miserable failure, and Bartleby would be found all alive at my office as usual; the next moment it seemed certain that I should find his chair
empty. And so I kept veering about. At the corner of Broadway and Canal-street, I saw quite an excited group of people standing in earnest conversation.

“I’ll take odds he doesn’t,” said a voice as I passed.

“Doesn’t go?—done!” said I, “put up your money.”

I was instinctively putting my hand in my pocket to produce my own, when I remembered that this was an election day. The words I had overheard bore no reference to Bartleby, but to the success or non-success of some candidate for the mayoralty. In my intent frame of mind, I had, as it were, imagined that all Broadway shared in my excitement, and were debating the same question with me. I passed on, very thankful that the uproar of the street screened my momentary absent-mindedness.

As I had intended, I was earlier than usual at my office door. I stood listening for a moment. All was still. He must be gone. I tried the knob. The door was locked. Yes, my procedure had worked to a charm; he indeed must be vanished. Yet a certain melancholy mixed with this: I was almost sorry for my brilliant success. I was fumbling under the door mat for the key, which Bartleby was to have left there for me, when accidentally my knee knocked against a panel, producing a summoning sound, and in response a voice came to me from within—“Not yet; I am occupied.”

It was Bartleby.

I was thunderstruck. For an instant I stood like the man who, pipe in mouth, was killed one cloudless afternoon long ago in Virginia, by summer lightning; at his own warm open window he was killed, and remained leaning out there upon the dreamy afternoon, till some one touched him, when he fell.

“Not gone!” I murmured at last. But again obeying that wondrous ascendancy which the inscrutable scrivener had over me, and from which ascendancy, for all my chafing, I could not completely escape, I slowly went down stairs and out into the street, and while walking round the block, considered what I should next do in this unheard-of perplexity. Turn the man out by an actual thrusting I could not; to drive him away by calling him hard names would not do; calling in the police was an unpleasant idea; and yet, permit him to enjoy his cadaverous triumph over me,—this too I could not think of. What was to be done? or, if nothing could be done, was there any thing further that I could assume in the matter? Yes, as before I had prospectively assumed that Bartleby would depart, so now I might retrospectively assume that departed he was. In the legitimate carrying out of this assumption, I might enter my office in a great hurry, and pretending not to see Bartleby at all, walk straight against him as if he were air. Such a proceeding would in a singular degree have the appearance of a home-thrust. It was hardly possible that Bartleby could withstand such an application of the doctrine of assumptions. But upon second thoughts the success of the plan seemed rather dubious. I resolved to argue the matter over with him again.
“Bartleby,” said I, entering the office, with a quietly severe expression, “I am seriously displeased. I am pained, Bartleby. I had thought better of you. I had imagined you of such a gentlemanly organization, that in any delicate dilemma a slight hint would suffice—in short, an assumption. But it appears I am deceived. Why,” I added, unaffectedly starting, “you have not even touched that money yet,” pointing to it, just where I had left it the evening previous.

He answered nothing.

“Will you, or will you not, quit me?” I now demanded in a sudden passion, advancing close to him.

“**I would prefer not** to quit you,” he replied, gently emphasizing the **not**.

“What earthly right have you to stay here? Do you pay any rent? Do you pay my taxes? Or is this property yours?”

He answered nothing.

“Are you ready to go on and write now? Are your eyes recovered? Could you copy a small paper for me this morning? or help examine a few lines? Or step round to the post-office? In a word, will you do any thing at all, to give a coloring to your refusal to depart the premises?”

He silently retired into his hermitage.

I was now in such a state of nervous resentment that I thought it but prudent to check myself at present from further demonstrations. Bartleby and I were alone. I remembered the tragedy of the unfortunate Adams and the still more unfortunate Colt in the solitary office of the latter; and how poor Colt, being dreadfully incensed by Adams, and imprudently permitting himself to get wildly excited, was at unawares hurried into his fatal act—an act which certainly no man could possibly deplore more than the actor himself. Often it had occurred to me in my ponderings upon the subject, that had that altercation taken place in the public street, or at a private residence, it would not have terminated as it did. It was the circumstance of being alone in a solitary office, up stairs, of a building entirely unhallowed by humanizing domestic associations—an uncarpeted office, doubtless, of a dusty, haggard sort of appearance;—this it must have been, which greatly helped to enhance the irritable desperation of the hapless Colt.

But when this old Adam of resentment rose in me and tempted me concerning Bartleby, I grappled him and threw him. How? Why, simply by recalling the divine injunction: “A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another.” Yes, this it was that saved me. Aside from higher considerations, charity often operates as a vastly wise and prudent principle—a great safeguard to its possessor. Men have committed murder for jealousy’s sake, and anger’s sake, and hatred’s sake, and selfishness’ sake, and spiritual pride’s sake; but no man that ever I heard of, ever committed a diabolical
murder for sweet charity’s sake. Mere self-interest, then, if no better motive can be enlisted, should, especially with high-tempered men, prompt all beings to charity and philanthropy. At any rate, upon the occasion in question, I strove to drown my exasperated feelings towards the scrivener by benevolently construing his conduct. Poor fellow, poor fellow! thought I, he don’t mean any thing; and besides, he has seen hard times, and ought to be indulged.

I endeavored also immediately to occupy myself, and at the same time to comfort my despondency. I tried to fancy that in the course of the morning, at such time as might prove agreeable to him, Bartleby, of his own free accord, would emerge from his hermitage, and take up some decided line of march in the direction of the door. But no. Half-past twelve o’clock came; Turkey began to glow in the face, overturn his inkstand, and become generally obstreperous; Nippers abated down into quietude and courtesy; Ginger Nut munched his noon apple; and Bartleby remained standing at his window in one of his profoundest dead-wall reveries. Will it be credited? Ought I to acknowledge it? That afternoon I left the office without saying one further word to him.

Some days now passed, during which, at leisure intervals I looked a little into “Edwards on the Will,” and “Priestley on Necessity.” Under the circumstances, those books induced a salutary feeling. Gradually I slid into the persuasion that these troubles of mine touching the scrivener, had been all predestinated from eternity, and Bartleby was billeted upon me for some mysterious purpose of an all-wise Providence, which it was not for a mere mortal like me to fathom. Yes, Bartleby, stay there behind your screen, thought I; I shall persecute you no more; you are harmless and noiseless as any of these old chairs; in short, I never feel so private as when I know you are here. At last I see it, I feel it; I penetrate to the predestinated purpose of my life. I am content. Others may have loftier parts to enact; but my mission in this world, Bartleby, is to furnish you with office-room for such period as you may see fit to remain.

I believe that this wise and blessed frame of mind would have continued with me, had it not been for the unsolicited and uncharitable remarks obtruded upon me by my professional friends who visited the rooms. But thus it often is, that the constant friction of illiberal minds wears out at last the best resolves of the more generous. Though to be sure, when I reflected upon it, it was not strange that people entering my office should be struck by the peculiar aspect of the unaccountable Bartleby, and so be tempted to throw out some sinister observations concerning him. Sometimes an attorney having business with me, and calling at my office, and finding no one but the scrivener there, would undertake to obtain some sort of precise information from him touching my whereabouts; but without heeding his idle talk, Bartleby would remain standing immovable in the middle of the room. So after contemplating him in that position for a time, the attorney would depart, no wiser than he came.

Also, when a Reference was going on, and the room full of lawyers and witnesses and business was driving fast; some deeply occupied legal gentleman present, seeing Bartleby wholly unemployed, would request him to run round to his (the legal gentleman’s) office and fetch some papers for him. Thereupon, Bartleby would tranquilly decline, and yet
remain idle as before. Then the lawyer would give a great stare, and turn to me. And what
could I say? At last I was made aware that all through the circle of my professional
acquaintance, a whisper of wonder was running round, having reference to the strange
creature I kept at my office. This worried me very much. And as the idea came upon me
of his possibly turning out a long-lived man, and keep occupying my chambers, and
denying my authority; and perplexing my visitors; and scandalizing my professional
reputation; and casting a general gloom over the premises; keeping soul and body
together to the last upon his savings (for doubtless he spent but half a dime a day), and in
the end perhaps outlive me, and claim possession of my office by right of his perpetual
occupancy: as all these dark anticipations crowded upon me more and more, and my
friends continually intruded their relentless remarks upon the apparition in my room; a
great change was wrought in me. I resolved to gather all my faculties together, and for
ever rid me of this intolerable incubus.

Ere revolving any complicated project, however, adapted to this end, I first simply
suggested to Bartleby the propriety of his permanent departure. In a calm and serious
tone, I commended the idea to his careful and mature consideration. But having taken
three days to meditate upon it, he apprised me that his original determination remained
the same; in short, that he still preferred to abide with me.

What shall I do? I now said to myself, buttoning up my coat to the last button. What
shall I do? what ought I to do? what does conscience say I should do with this man, or
rather ghost. Rid myself of him, I must; go, he shall. But how? You will not thrust him,
the poor, pale, passive mortal,—you will not thrust such a helpless creature out of your
door? you will not dishonor yourself by such cruelty? No, I will not, I cannot do that.
Rather would I let him live and die here, and then mason up his remains in the wall. What
then will you do? For all your coaxing, he will not budge. Bribes he leaves under your
own paper-weight on your table; in short, it is quite plain that he prefers to cling to you.

Then something severe, something unusual must be done. What! surely you will not
have him collared by a constable, and commit his innocent pallor to the common jail?
And upon what ground could you procure such a thing to be done?—a vagrant, is he?
What! he a vagrant, a wanderer, who refuses to budge? It is because he will not be a
vagrant, then, that you seek to count him as a vagrant. That is too absurd. No visible
means of support: there I have him. Wrong again: for indubitably he does support
himself, and that is the only unanswerable proof that any man can show of his possessing
the means so to do. No more then. Since he will not quit me, I must quit him. I will
change my offices; I will move elsewhere; and give him fair notice, that if I find him on
my new premises I will then proceed against him as a common trespasser.

Acting accordingly, next day I thus addressed him: “I find these chambers too far
from the City Hall; the air is unwholesome. In a word, I propose to remove my offices
next week, and shall no longer require your services. I tell you this now, in order that you
may seek another place.”

He made no reply, and nothing more was said.
On the appointed day I engaged carts and men, proceeded to my chambers, and having but little furniture, every thing was removed in a few hours. Throughout, the scrivener remained standing behind the screen, which I directed to be removed the last thing. It was withdrawn; and being folded up like a huge folio, left him the motionless occupant of a naked room. I stood in the entry watching him a moment, while something from within me upbraided me.

I re-entered, with my hand in my pocket—and—and my heart in my mouth.

“Good-bye, Bartleby; I am going—good-bye, and God some way bless you; and take that,” slipping something in his hand. But it dropped upon the floor, and then,—strange to say—I tore myself from him whom I had so longed to be rid of.

Established in my new quarters, for a day or two I kept the door locked, and started at every footfall in the passages. When I returned to my rooms after any little absence, I would pause at the threshold for an instant, and attentively listen, ere applying my key. But these fears were needless. Bartleby never came nigh me.

I thought all was going well, when a perturbed looking stranger visited me, inquiring whether I was the person who had recently occupied rooms at No.—Wall-street.

Full of forebodings, I replied that I was.

“Then sir,” said the stranger, who proved a lawyer, “you are responsible for the man you left there. He refuses to do any copying; he refuses to do any thing; he says he prefers not to; and he refuses to quit the premises.”

“I am very sorry, sir,” said I, with assumed tranquillity, but an inward tremor, “but, really, the man you allude to is nothing to me—he is no relation or apprentice of mine, that you should hold me responsible for him.”

“In mercy’s name, who is he?”

“I certainly cannot inform you. I know nothing about him. Formerly I employed him as a copyist; but he has done nothing for me now for some time past.”

“I shall settle him then,—good morning, sir.”

Several days passed, and I heard nothing more; and though I often felt a charitable prompting to call at the place and see poor Bartleby, yet a certain squeamishness of I know not what withheld me.

All is over with him, by this time, thought I at last, when through another week no further intelligence reached me. But coming to my room the day after, I found several persons waiting at my door in a high state of nervous excitement.

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“That’s the man—here he comes,” cried the foremost one, whom I recognized as the lawyer who had previously called upon me alone.

“You must take him away, sir, at once,” cried a portly person among them, advancing upon me, and whom I knew to be the landlord of No.—Wall-street. “These gentlemen, my tenants, cannot stand it any longer; Mr. B——” pointing to the lawyer, “has turned him out of his room, and he now persists in haunting the building generally, sitting upon the banisters of the stairs by day, and sleeping in the entry by night. Every body is concerned; clients are leaving the offices; some fears are entertained of a mob; something you must do, and that without delay.”

Aghast at this torrent, I fell back before it, and would fain have locked myself in my new quarters. In vain I persisted that Bartleby was nothing to me—no more than to any one else. In vain:—I was the last person known to have any thing to do with him, and they held me to the terrible account. Fearful then of being exposed in the papers (as one person present obscurely threatened) I considered the matter, and at length said, that if the lawyer would give me a confidential interview with the scrivener, in his (the lawyer’s) own room, I would that afternoon strive my best to rid them of the nuisance they complained of.

Going up stairs to my old haunt, there was Bartleby silently sitting upon the banister at the landing.

“What are you doing here, Bartleby?” said I.

“Sitting upon the banister,” he mildly replied.

I motioned him into the lawyer’s room, who then left us.

“Bartleby,” said I, “are you aware that you are the cause of great tribulation to me, by persisting in occupying the entry after being dismissed from the office?”

No answer.

“Now one of two things must take place. Either you must do something, or something must be done to you. Now what sort of business would you like to engage in? Would you like to re-engage in copying for some one?”

“No; I would prefer not to make any change.”

“Would you like a clerkship in a dry-goods store?”

“There is too much confinement about that. No, I would not like a clerkship; but I am not particular.”

“Too much confinement,” I cried, “why you keep yourself confined all the time!”
“I would prefer not to take a clerkship,” he rejoined, as if to settle that little item at once.

“How would a bar-tender’s business suit you? There is no trying of the eyesight in that.”

“I would not like it at all; though, as I said before, I am not particular.”

His unwonted wordiness inspirited me. I returned to the charge.

“Well then, would you like to travel through the country collecting bills for the merchants? That would improve your health.”

“No, I would prefer to be doing something else.”

“How then would going as a companion to Europe, to entertain some young gentleman with your conversation,—how would that suit you?”

“Not at all. It does not strike me that there is anything definite about that. I like to be stationary. But I am not particular.”

“Stationary you shall be then,” I cried, now losing all patience, and for the first time in all my exasperating connection with him fairly flying into a passion. “If you do not go away from these premises before night, I shall feel bound—indeed I am bound—to—to quit the premises myself!” I rather absurdly concluded, knowing not with what possible threat to try to frighten his immobility into compliance. Despairing of all further efforts, I was precipitately leaving him, when a final thought occurred to me—one which had not been wholly indulged before.

“Bartleby,” said I, in the kindest tone I could assume under such exciting circumstances, “will you go home with me now—not to my office, but my dwelling—and remain there till we can conclude upon some convenient arrangement for you at our leisure? Come, let us start now, right away.”

“No: at present I would prefer not to make any change at all.”

I answered nothing; but effectually dodging every one by the suddenness and rapidity of my flight, rushed from the building, ran up Wall-street towards Broadway, and jumping into the first omnibus was soon removed from pursuit. As soon as tranquility returned I distinctly perceived that I had now done all that I possibly could, both in respect to the demands of the landlord and his tenants, and with regard to my own desire and sense of duty, to benefit Bartleby, and shield him from rude persecution. I now strove to be entirely care-free and quiescent; and my conscience justified me in the attempt; though indeed it was not so successful as I could have wished. So fearful was I of being again hunted out by the incensed landlord and his exasperated tenants, that, surrendering my business to Nippers, for a few days I drove about the upper part of the town and through the suburbs, in my rockaway; crossed over to Jersey City and Hoboken, and paid
fugitive visits to Manhattanville and Astoria. In fact I almost lived in my rockaway for the time.

When again I entered my office, lo, a note from the landlord lay upon the desk. I opened it with trembling hands. It informed me that the writer had sent to the police, and had Bartleby removed to the Tombs as a vagrant. Moreover, since I knew more about him than any one else, he wished me to appear at that place, and make a suitable statement of the facts. These tidings had a conflicting effect upon me. At first I was indignant; but at last almost approved. The landlord’s energetic, summary disposition had led him to adopt a procedure which I do not think I would have decided upon myself; and yet as a last resort, under such peculiar circumstances, it seemed the only plan.

As I afterwards learned, the poor scrivener, when told that he must be conducted to the Tombs, offered not the slightest obstacle, but in his pale unmov ing way, silently acquiesced.

Some of the compassionate and curious bystanders joined the party; and headed by one of the constables arm in arm with Bartleby, the silent procession filed its way through all the noise, and heat, and joy of the roaring thoroughfares at noon.

The same day I received the note I went to the Tombs, or to speak more properly, the Halls of Justice. Seeking the right officer, I stated the purpose of my call, and was informed that the individual I described was indeed within. I then assured the functionary that Bartleby was a perfectly honest man, and greatly to be compassionated, however unaccountably eccentric. I narrated all I knew, and closed by suggesting the idea of letting him remain in as indulgent confinement as possible till something less harsh might be done—though indeed I hardly knew what. At all events, if nothing else could be decided upon, the alms-house must receive him. I then begged to have an interview.

Being under no disgraceful charge, and quite serene and harmless in all his ways, they had permitted him freely to wander about the prison, and especially in the inclosed grass-platted yard thereof. And so I found him there, standing all alone in the quietest of the yards, his face towards a high wall, while all around, from the narrow slits of the jail windows, I thought I saw peering out upon him the eyes of murderers and thieves.

“Bartleby!”

“I know you,” he said, without looking round,—“and I want nothing to say to you.”

“It was not I that brought you here, Bartleby,” said I, keenly pained at his implied suspicion. “And to you, this should not be so vile a place. Nothing reproachful attaches to you by being here. And see, it is not so sad a place as one might think. Look, there is the sky, and here is the grass.”

“I know where I am,” he replied, but would say nothing more, and so I left him.
As I entered the corridor again, a broad meat-like man, in an apron, accosted me, and jerking his thumb over his shoulder said—"Is that your friend?"

"Yes."

"Does he want to starve? If he does, let him live on the prison fare, that's all."

"Who are you?" asked I, not knowing what to make of such an unofficially speaking person in such a place.

"I am the grub-man. Such gentlemen as have friends here, hire me to provide them with something good to eat."

"Is this so?" said I, turning to the turnkey.

He said it was.

"Well then," said I, slipping some silver into the grub-man's hands (for so they called him). "I want you to give particular attention to my friend there; let him have the best dinner you can get. And you must be as polite to him as possible."

"Introduce me, will you?" said the grub-man, looking at me with an expression which seemed to say he was all impatience for an opportunity to give a specimen of his breeding.

Thinking it would prove of benefit to the scrivener, I acquiesced; and asking the grub-man his name, went up with him to Bartleby.

"Bartleby, this is Mr. Cutlets; you will find him very useful to you."

"Your servant, sir, your servant," said the grub-man, making a low salutation behind his apron. "Hope you find it pleasant here, sir; nice grounds—cool apartments, sir—hope you'll stay with us some time—try to make it agreeable. May Mrs. Cutlets and I have the pleasure of your company to dinner, sir, in Mrs. Cutlets' private room?"

"I prefer not to dine to-day," said Bartleby, turning away. "It would disagree with me; I am unused to dinners." So saying he slowly moved to the other side of the inclosure, and took up a position fronting the dead-wall.

"How's this?" said the grub-man, addressing me with a stare of astonishment. "He's odd, aint he?"

"I think he is a little deranged," said I, sadly.

"Deranged? deranged is it? Well now, upon my word, I thought that friend of yours was a gentleman forger; they are always pale and genteel-like, them forgers. I can't help
pity ’em—can’t help it, sir. Did you know Monroe Edwards?” he added touchingly, and paused. Then, laying his hand pityingly on my shoulder, sighed, “he died of consumption at Sing-Sing. So you weren’t acquainted with Monroe?”

“No, I was never socially acquainted with any forgers. But I cannot stop longer. Look to my friend yonder. You will not lose by it. I will see you again.”

Some few days after this, I again obtained admission to the Tombs, and went through the corridors in quest of Bartleby; but without finding him.

“I saw him coming from his cell not long ago,” said a turnkey, “may be he’s gone to loiter in the yards.”

So I went in that direction.

“Are you looking for the silent man?” said another turnkey passing me. “Yonder he lies—sleeping in the yard there. ’Tis not twenty minutes since I saw him lie down.”

The yard was entirely quiet. It was not accessible to the common prisoners. The surrounding walls, of amazing thickness, kept off all sounds behind them. The Egyptian character of the masonry weighed upon me with its gloom. But a soft imprisoned turf grew under foot. The heart of the eternal pyramids, it seemed, wherein, by some strange magic, through the clefts, grass-seed, dropped by birds, had sprung.

Strangely huddled at the base of the wall, his knees drawn up, and lying on his side, his head touching the cold stones, I saw the wasted Bartleby. But nothing stirred. I paused; then went close up to him; stooped over, and saw that his dim eyes were open; otherwise he seemed profoundly sleeping. Something prompted me to touch him. I felt his hand, when a tingling shiver ran up my arm and down my spine to my feet.

The round face of the grub-man peered upon me now. “His dinner is ready. Won’t he dine to-day, either? Or does he live without dining?”

“Lives without dining,” said I, and closed the eyes.

“Eh!—He’s asleep, ain’t he?”

“With kings and counsellors,” murmured I.

There would seem little need for proceeding further in this history. Imagination will readily supply the meager recital of poor Bartleby’s interment. But ere parting with the reader, let me say, that if this little narrative has sufficiently interested him, to awaken curiosity as to who Bartleby was, and what manner of life he led prior to the present narrator’s making his acquaintance, I can only reply, that in such curiosity I fully share, but am wholly unable to gratify it. Yet here I hardly know whether I should divulge one little item of rumor, which came to my ear a few months after the scrivener’s decease.
Upon what basis it rested, I could never ascertain; and hence, how true it is I cannot now tell. But inasmuch as this vague report has not been without a certain strange suggestive interest to me, however sad, it may prove the same with some others; and so I will briefly mention it. The report was this: that Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington, from which he had been suddenly removed by a change in the administration. When I think over this rumor, hardly can I express the emotions which seize me. Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames? For by the cart-load they are annually burned. Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring:—the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a bank-note sent in swiftest charity:—he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death.

Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!
Discussion Guide for
“Bartleby, the Scrivener:
A Story of Wall-Street”

I. About the Author

Herman Melville (1819–91), today hailed as one of America’s greatest writers, had in his own time a very mixed career. Some of his early sea stories and sea adventures were esteemed by the public, but his epic (and to him, most significant) novel, *Moby-Dick* (1851), was very badly received. Indeed, after it appeared, Melville became something of a pariah in the literary world. Turning to poetry, he encountered similar neglect. In the last quarter-century of his life, he wrote little and published less. (*Billy Budd*, today regarded as one of his finest works, was published posthumously.) Friends feared for his sanity. His wife’s family tried not only to get her to leave him but also to have him committed as insane. He wound up working for nineteen years as a customs inspector in New York, and when he died, he seemed destined for obscurity. One might therefore wonder whether his tale about the mysterious Bartleby is, among other things, intended as a profoundly disheartening allegory about the artist’s—and his own—relation to our commercial, democratic society. But that, of course, depends on what you think the story says and means.

II. Summary

The basic plot is rather simple: a middling Wall Street lawyer—also the narrator of the story—needing more assistance, hires a new scrivener (copyist) to join his firm. Enter Bartleby. Although initially very productive in his copying, after three days he calmly refuses when asked to help with proofreading or any other office tasks: “I would prefer not to” is his reply, one repeated more than twenty times in the story. The lawyer and his other employees are shocked, but Bartleby holds fast: he prefers not to. Both touched and disconcerted yet choosing not to fire him, the lawyer is strangely drawn into coping with Bartleby and his growing refusals and eccentricities—the theme of the rest of the story.

Bartleby, we learn, is always in the office, either incessantly working or staring out the window at a facing wall. On a chance Sunday visit to the office, the lawyer discovers that Bartleby also lives there. Eventually Bartleby’s refusals extend also to his work as a copyist: he prefers not to do any work, yet he prefers not to quit the office. The lawyer, waffling between pity and indignation, finally asks him—bribes him—to leave, then later commands him to leave his office. But Bartleby prefers not to. Instead, the lawyer moves
his office, leaving Bartleby behind.

Another lawyer moves into the building and quickly learns that Bartleby comes with the territory. He complains to the narrator, who disclaims any responsibility for him. The new proprietor has Bartleby arrested for vagrancy, and he is imprisoned in “the Tombs,” officially known as the Halls of Justice (290). There, too, he prefers not to, including “not to eat.” The narrator visits Bartleby but can’t get through to him. On his next visit, the narrator finds Bartleby lying dead, huddled against a wall in the prison yard.

At the very end, in a brief coda, the narrator informs us of a late-arriving rumor to the effect that Bartleby had previously worked as a clerk in an obscure branch of the Post Office known as the Dead Letter Office, sorting through undeliverable mail—mail that would have brought hoped-for news and gifts to people who died with their hopes unfulfilled.

III. Thinking about the Text

Unlike its basic plot, the story’s meaning and implications are far from simple. So we will proceed slowly, starting with what we learn of the characters and then moving to the heart of the story, the relationship between Bartleby and the lawyer. We conclude this section by attending to the story’s short coda.

A. The Characters

Early in the story, the narrator/lawyer says: “Ere introducing the scrivener [i.e., Bartleby], as he first appeared to me, it is fit I make some mention of myself, my employés, my business, my chambers, and general surroundings; because some such description is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the chief character [Bartleby] about to be presented” (265). Following this lead, and limiting ourselves to the first five pages of the story, look at each in turn:

1. The lawyer—what is he like?
   a. What do you make of his “profound conviction” that the easiest life is the best? Do you share this conviction?
   b. What does it mean to be considered by others as “an eminently safe man”?
   c. Who is John Jacob Astor? And what we do learn about the narrator from his mention of Astor?
   d. Why does the narrator draw attention to the fact that he received but soon lost the office of “Master of Chancery”?
   e. Why doesn’t he tell us his name?

2. The employés (i.e., the two scriveners, Turkey and Nippers, and the office boy, Ginger Nut)—what are they like?
   a. What is the work of a scrivener? How does it differ from the work of ancient scribes, who copied holy books?
   b. What do the attitudes and ways of his scriveners tell us about the lawyer as an employer? As a human being?
3. The business—what sort of law does the lawyer practice?
   a. Why does he refer to it as a “snug business”?

4. The chambers and general surroundings—what are they like?

Focusing now on the “advent” of Bartleby (265), describe:

5. Bartleby—what is he like?
   a. Describe the work quarters he has been given.
   b. What would it be like to work in such quarters?

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**IN CONVERSATION**

*In this conversation, Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass discuss Melville’s story with Diana Schaub, coeditor of What So Proudly We Hail, and Wilfred McClay, the SunTrust Bank Chair of Excellence in Humanities at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.*

**Diana Schaub:** The narrator says, “I’m going to tell the story of Bartleby, the Scrivener, but to really understand Bartleby you’re going to have to understand me, and my employees, and my business.” He presents himself with a great deal of frankness. He says, “I am an eminently safe man.” He makes clear that he is not really ambitious and that this is the source of his very remunerative law business.

**Amy Kass:** He calls it a *snug* business, so even that is comfortable. There is no risk to be taken there.

**Leon Kass:** And he puts up with these characters in the office—Turkey, who is an alcoholic who gets violent in the afternoon; Nippers, who is a younger man, ambitious and dyspeptic, and who is violent in the morning; and Ginger Nut, who is a twelve-year-old kid whose father sent him there. Bartleby puts up with these people who, at best, do a half-day’s work and are causing difficulty. He puts up with them partly because he does not like confrontation and he will work around their deficiencies—and, after all, when they do work, they do pretty good work. He’s an accommodationist.

*For more discussion on this question,*

[watch the video online.]

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**B. Bartleby’s Conduct with the Lawyer**

“It is, of course,” the lawyer/narrator explains, “an indispensable part of a scrivener’s business to verify the accuracy of his copy, word by word” (269). And, as we soon learn, “common usage and common sense” (271) require copyists to assist, as well, in the proofreading of others’ copy and to help out with other office tasks. But when Bartleby is asked, on the third day of his employment, to help proofread a document, he says, “I would prefer not to.” And, after twenty-plus other requests, Bartleby makes twenty-plus...
Discussion Guide, “Bartleby, the Scrivener”

similar replies. We watch as Bartleby’s responses—almost all negative preferences, stated mildly but firmly and without anger or impatience—gradually extend from preferring not to proofread, then to copying anything, then to doing any tasks or activities whatsoever, even eating. He becomes more and more passive, gradually withdrawing more and more into his “hermitage,” his “dead-wall reveries,” and himself. To the lawyer, he gradually appears more and more like a “ghost,” an “apparition,” and a “cadaver.”

1. How should we regard Bartleby’s responses to the lawyer?
2. What do you make of his peculiarities?
3. What does his appearance suggest about his attitude toward other people? Toward work or activity, in general? Toward the world?
4. Why does Bartleby “prefer not to” perform more and more actions throughout the story? Does this say more about the nature of the work or more about the state of his soul?
5. Is there a difference between stating one’s preferences (negatively or positively) and imposing one’s will? Does “I would prefer not to” differ from “I will not”?
6. Is it possible to say what moves Bartleby? Or is he a mystery beyond comprehension?
7. Is Bartleby unique? Or are there other “Bartlebys,” who—from whatever cause—become passive and passionless beings with largely negative preferences?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: At the first appearance, Bartleby is motionless. When an ad is placed and Bartleby arrives at an open door, he just appears out of nowhere, motionless at the door. He looks incredibly forlorn, like a lost sheep. He is pale, respectable but pale.

He appeals to the lawyer, in part, because, unlike the others in the office, he is not going to make any trouble. In fact, the lawyer has this fantasy that he is going to bring Bartleby into the office and maybe Bartleby’s calmness and placidity will spread to the obstreperous other two.

Wilfred McClay: It is said several times that the lawyer is disarmed by Bartleby. And when he does one of those outrageous “I would prefer not to,” the lawyer thinks to respond and then he says “Well, something in him just disarmed me.” Is it Bartleby’s forlornness that does this?

Diana Schaub: Though there are times that the lawyer does respond to Bartleby’s forlornness, the lawyer’s being disarmed is more the willfulness of Bartleby, because there is something very willful about his refusals. The lawyer says that he
himself operates on assumptions. And those assumptions are usually wrong and then he engages in all these kind of rationalizations, and he uses his prudence and his reason to come up with explanations for why Bartleby is behaving the way he is.

But Bartleby acts, the lawyer comes to realize, just on the basis of preferences. And the preference is always a negative preference: it is never a preference to do something, but is a preference that he would prefer not to.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

C. The Lawyer’s Conduct toward Bartleby

In responding to Bartleby, the lawyer “rall[ies his] stunned faculties” (270) but becomes annoyed; he is repeatedly “disarmed” and “unmanned” (276) by him but also “in a wonderful manner touched and disconcerted” (277); he is full of pity but also repulsion; he is “thunderstruck” (283) by Bartleby but recognizes his “wondrous ascendancy” (283) over him.

After discovering that Bartleby lives in his office, he feels “stinging” and “fraternal” melancholy—we are both “sons of Adam,” he realizes (277)—but he instantly rejects it as “sad fancyings.” Indeed, in several places, he describes his responses, using Biblical (e.g., “a pillar of salt,” 271), generally religious (e.g., 276), and specifically Christian references (e.g., 278, 285).

But despite his mixed responses and his appeals to religion, he tries (several times) to dismiss Bartleby, assuming after each such decision that Bartleby will heed his word. When Bartleby continues to stand fast, the lawyer instead moves his own offices. When questioned about Bartleby by the lawyer who took up occupancy in his former office, the lawyer, like Peter with respect to Jesus, three times denies any relation to or knowledge of him. Yet he will voluntarily converse with Bartleby two more times, trying again on both occasions to help him by offering, among other things, to take him to his own home and later, after Bartleby is removed to the Tombs, by making sure that he is well fed.

1. How does the lawyer see Bartleby? Does he see him as anything more than “Bartleby, the Scrivener”?
2. What do you think of the lawyer’s treatment of Bartleby? Is it commendable? Deplorable? Understandable? Or something else? Is there anything else the lawyer should have done? How would you act if you were in the lawyer’s place?
3. Does he, on balance, “do well by” Bartleby—or not?
4. What is the source of Bartleby’s “wondrous ascendancy” over the lawyer? (283) Or, more plainly, why does the lawyer put up with him? Should he have?
5. Do you think the lawyer learns anything from Bartleby? If not, why not? If yes, when and what does he learn? (In this regard, think particularly about what he might mean when he says, “For a few moments I was turned into a pillar of salt” [cf. Genesis 19:26], as well as his many other religious references, including his pronouncement, when he finds Bartleby dead: He lies “with kings and counsellors” [cf. Job 3:11-15]). If you don’t think the lawyer learns anything from Bartleby, what should he have learned? What have you learned?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: When I first read the story and Bartleby refuses to proofread the copies that he himself has written, that was it, he was out of there. For the lawyer, “the conditions of our relationship are employment. I’m not your social worker or your father confessor or your friend. You’ve come here to do a job. We have, by everybody’s mutual understanding, a relationship of utility. That’s all there is here. When we cease to be useful the one to the other, that’s it.” And I think the story is meant to be an education of people like me.

Amy Kass: So what you are suggesting is that what the lawyer could do for Bartleby is to somehow treat him on a human level. He could give him some hope, he could give him some encouragement.

Leon Kass: And he could give him some human company.

Diana Schaub: But remember that Bartleby stands in dead-wall reveries hour after hour. And so if what you are calling for is to join him, well, you cannot engage him in conversation because he rejects conversation, so you are just going to stand with him and look at the wall. Now, it is possible that Bartleby might recognize that as some kind of reaching out to him and respond to it, and so maybe it is worth an effort. But I think you are underestimating the threat that Bartleby poses.

Leon Kass: Right, there is one moment where Bartleby has preferred not to do something, and the lawyer tries again: “And what is the reason for that?” Bartleby says, “You can see for yourself the reason.” And the lawyer looks at him and says, “Oh! Your eyesight! Your eyesight is gone bad because you’ve been scribbling here in the dark.” The lawyer has, in a way, medicalized him. Bartleby is in effect saying, “Don’t you see . . . ?” —and then, of course we can all fill in what you think would be seen if you saw Bartleby as the broken, dispirited, hopeless human being that he is. But the lawyer is looking for some kind of problem that he can fix.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.
D. Coda

Early in 1853, Melville was asked by *Putnam’s Magazine*, the nation’s then-leading literary monthly, to contribute a work of short fiction. Apparently, he began by writing a story about a young wife who waits seventeen years for news from her husband, who left home to find work. As Melville conceived the story, the mailbox was a reminder of the passage of time: unused, it rots and falls apart. Word never comes. For unknown reasons, this story was abandoned, but the forlorn mailbox and the absent mail seem to have found themselves into the Dead Letter Office, which is mentioned in the coda to “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” the story that was in fact published at the end of the same year. In the coda, the mention of the Dead Letter Office is intended to give us some idea about the life of Bartleby prior to the events narrated in the story. But the lawyer/narrator specifically warns us that the information he divulges is an “item of rumor”: “hence, how true it is I cannot now tell.” He includes it, he tells us, because of its “suggestive interest” to him and possibly to us, his readers, as well.

1. Does the coda help you to better understand Bartleby? If so, in what way(s)?
2. What would it have been like to work in the Dead Letter Office? What effect do you think it had on Bartleby, and why? How do you think his work in the Dead Letter Office may have changed the way he viewed his work as a scrivener?
3. Does the coda help you to better understand the lawyer? If so, does it change your assessment of the lawyer? For better or for worse? What is the lawyer’s own relationship with letters? With human communication in general?
4. What is the meaning of the lawyer’s final exclamation, “Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!” (293)?

IN CONVERSATION

**Diana Schaub:** We should remind ourselves of what a scrivener is. A scrivener, or a scribe, is a public copyist, an official writer, but it is a role that had a much higher status in the past. If you go back to Ancient Israel or all the way up through New Testament times, the scribes were those who studied Scripture, and they served as copyists, editors, teachers, and jurists. The letters they dealt with were *living* letters: they were the living letters of the word of God.

But Bartleby now lives in a world where letters serve a very different and a much attenuated function, and in which scribes and scriveners have a much reduced function. So at the end of the story, the lawyer passes along this rumor that he had heard about Bartleby having maybe worked in the Dead Letter Office. The lawyer, who very much believes in the efficacy of letters, speculates that this experience of letters gone awry would have perhaps contributed to Bartleby’s affliction: “On errands of life, these letters speed to death.” But it seems that what the lawyer does not understand is that, for Bartleby, the letters he deals with in the
law office are just as much dead letters as those that he dealt with in the Dead Letter Office of the Post Office. And it is that dawning realization of Bartleby’s that is the origin of his progressive refusals, and there is a progress in those refusals, of those withdrawals from life.

Bartleby has really given up on the word; he’s given up on communication, and that is why he lapses into silence and speaks only to refuse engagement and stares at these blank walls instead. And that is why Bartleby has to reject this entire world of letters. It is why he doesn’t read, why he won’t write, why he won’t have anything to do with the Post Office.

In contrast, the lawyer is absolutely wedded to the world of letters. When he tries to get rid of Bartleby he says, “Why don’t you go off and then write me a letter if there is anything that you need from me and I will come to your aid.” Or he says, “If I could only find out whether he has family, and then I could write a letter to them.” He really believes in the efficacy of letters, which is to say of reason, even though his understanding of reason is a very narrow one.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

IV. Thinking with the Text

This story, like the others in What So Proudly We Hail, is, of course, interesting in itself. But, again like the others, it can also be read as a mirror in which we can see ourselves as human beings and as American citizens, and through which we can become more thoughtful about what our national and civic identity might mean and require. This story invites reflection, especially about our personal and civic attitudes toward our neighbors, about the need for the virtue of compassion and what it entails, and about the symbolic and literal meaning of “erecting walls” between ourselves and our neighbors. It also invites us to think about some of the implications of our American principles and ways.

A. Doing for Others

As the story unfolds, the lawyer refers to Bartleby in multiple ways: as his employee, as a friend, and as an “incurably forlorn” fellow human being—one of the “sons of Adam” (277). But until the very end, despite the multiple possible relationships that these references imply, the lawyer constantly tries to do something for Bartleby. Indeed, one is tempted to see all of his exchanges with Bartleby, as well as all his efforts to “help him,” as an endless succession of dead letters, an endless and futile effort to find remedies.

1. How are people like Bartleby best understood? As human beings with problems to be solved? As fellow sufferers in need of companionship? In some other way?

2. Does the following generalization about how we human beings behave with
respect to the suffering of others tell us more about the lawyer/narrator or more about all human beings, ourselves included?

So true it is, and so terrible too, that up to a certain point the thought or sight of misery enlists our best affections; but, in certain special cases, beyond that point it does not. They err who would assert that invariably this is owing to the inherent selfishness of the human heart. It rather proceeds from a certain hopelessness of remedying excessive and organic ill. To a sensitive being, pity is not seldom pain. And when at last it is perceived that such pity cannot lead to effectual succor, common sense bids the soul rid of it. (278)

3. Were you to meet a Bartleby, how would you behave? Would you try to “do something” for him? If so, what? Or would you try instead to “be there” with him? If so, how? Is there yet another way to deal with the sort of deep human difficulties that a man like Bartleby presents?
4. What are the implications of your response to the previous question for our civic life? What do fellow citizens owe to one another?

B. “A Story of Wall-Street”: Communicating with Others

There are varying accounts of how Wall Street derived its name, but a generally accepted version traces it to an earthen wall on the northern boundary of the seventeenth-century New Amsterdam settlement, erected, it is thought, to protect against encroachment by New England colonists or incursions by Native Americans. Though the original wall has long since disappeared, the story’s subtitle, “A Story of Wall-Street,” points us to another general theme that Melville invites us to consider: the symbolic and general meaning and consequences of erecting walls.

1. Do walls or “fences,” as Robert Frost’s famous poem “Mending Wall” states, “make good neighbors”?
2. Is the problem-solving mentality a way, whether intended or not, of placing walls between us and the realities of suffering and pain?
3. Can walls enhance, as well as diminish, communication between people? Think of the walls within the office—both the one which Bartleby stares at and the “walls” that the lawyer has erected to separate himself from Bartleby: the “high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice. And thus, in a manner, privacy and society were conjoined” (269).
4. Are walls—and the privacy they promote—conducive to productivity?
5. What kind of speech has the best chance of overcoming the barriers between people? Can speech be effective if people do not share the same assumptions about the world? (The lawyer, you may recall, says that he has “assumptions” [about the reasonableness of people and the world], but Bartleby has “preferences.”)
IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: The office is basically a walled-in room with a partition of folding doors in between offices. It has windows on one side that point to a white wall, and on the other side the windows point to a red wall that has turned black. It’s located on the second floor and is surrounded by huge structures so that one imagines that it is quite dim, and probably dingy, and there is no carpeting on the floor. The whole picture is rather bleak.

Diana Schaub: Melville understood what cubicle culture was like long before cubicles were actually built. There are these double doors that go between the outer office where the other scribes are and the lawyer himself is. But then when Bartleby comes on, the lawyer puts Bartleby in his own room, but sets up another little partition so that he does not have to see Bartleby but he can always be within range of the lawyer’s voice, so it really does become a true cubicle.

Leon Kass: So the lawyer has put Bartleby in a place where he will not have to look at him. The lawyer talks about how he has society and privacy together. But the view of this society is, “I am present with my tools. Yes, they have their human qualities, but I can ignore them providing they do their work.”

Wilfred McClay: Is there a connection between this highly specialized, dehumanized labor that Bartleby is engaged in and the dehumanized environment, where he is seen merely as a scrivener and not as a forlorn human being? Is there some connection between that and, if not capitalism, at least modernity and the division of labor?

Leon Kass: Melville shows us a world in which the emphasis on a kind of rationalization produces a world in which everybody is alone. It is not just Bartleby who has no family. The lawyer, we assume, has nobody at home. Nippers and Turkey have nobody at home. Ginger Nut has a father. This is a world of isolated human beings. The question he is raising for us, in a way, is this: is the greatness of American finance and industry, capitalism, bought at a cost of an erosion of the fundamental relations of human beings, one to the other? You do not have to be a Marxist to raise this question about the alienation of human beings under conditions of modern life, and it might be the very backside of what is wonderful about it.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

C. Questions about America

Wall Street is historically, economically, and symbolically a central American place and institution. Stones from the original wall of Wall Street were later used in building the
first City Hall. After the American Revolution, the first Congress assembled there in 1789; there George Washington was sworn in as the first president of the United States. Originally inhabited by private residences, Wall Street was by Melville’s time home to many law firms and well on its way to becoming the hub of financial markets that it is today. Thus, although the story of Bartleby may be read as a universal human tale, the setting itself, as well as the people who work there, invites us to think specifically about America and about the issues the story raises for us as American citizens.

1. **Individualism**. Might either the lawyer or Bartleby—or both—represent the downside of the American individualism we so proudly hail? Does the depiction of either of these characters, both of whom live isolated lives detached from forebears and families, suggest something more general about the sufficiency of the American emphasis on freedom, individual rights, and independence? How would the story be different if Bartleby or the lawyer had families with whom they lived?

2. **Enterprise and Commerce**. What does the story have to say about the human significance of the world of business? What happens to a people who focus mainly on economic matters? According to one interpretation of the story, “Wall Street is a place where the soul comes to die.” To what extent might that be true?

3. **Religion**. Do the many religious references in the story, especially to Christianity, convey any suggestions about the importance of religion in America? What about his comparison of Wall Street on Sunday to “Petra” (276), the ancient biblical city known for its tombs made from pink rock? Is Melville suggesting—and if so, would you agree—that religion is needed to make America’s utilitarian and materialistic spirit more humane? Is it strong enough to do so?

4. **Law and Justice**. Does Melville’s treatment of the lawyer(s) imply a criticism of law in America? Does Melville’s reference to the “Halls of Justice” as the “Tombs” and his brief treatment of the jail imply a criticism of justice in America?

5. **Reason and Practical Rationality**. What can we learn from the story about the strengths and weaknesses of America’s love of rationality, practicality, and useful activities?

6. Is Melville’s story a cautionary tale? If so, about what is he cautioning us? Commerce? Lawyerly prudence, accommodation, and balance? The utilitarian and problem-solving attitude many Americans adopt toward life and toward other human beings? Something else?

**IN CONVERSATION**

**Amy Kass:** We did nothing with the Christianity in this story, which is very prominent and very important. But it is a false Christianity that the lawyer has, and what Melville might be pointing to is that you need some kind of religion to
nurture this other, more spiritual, aspect of human beings.

**Wilfred McClay:** On that Sunday that the lawyer comes to his office, and he was going to Trinity Church, the famous church on Wall Street, and he gets there a little early and goes by his chambers. He discovers that Bartleby is there, and he is so disturbed by that that he says that he could not continue on to church. Could he not go to church because he felt unworthy to be there? I don’t think so. I think it’s because of the feeling of what he would get there is somehow incommensurate with the reality of what he has seen, of the desperation and the dark insight into the human prospect: “Ah, humanity!”

**Amy Kass:** But it also has to do with the fact that the lawyer has no understanding of what church is for. He’s going to church to hear some sermon by a famous man. That is what leads him there. We have no reason to believe that he is a regular churchgoer. So he is not fit to go there because he suddenly has a window into the human soul.

**Leon Kass:** Americans, as a practical-minded people focused on the here and now and the bottom line, tend only on Sundays to think about the ultimate matters, about the first things, about the last things, about the soul and its fate. We are in danger of being forgetful about those ultimate things. Melville was always interested in those things. *Moby-Dick* is about nothing so much as those sorts of ultimate questions. And here is a story which is significant by the absence of these things, except in the presence of Bartleby who, naked and alone, is confronting that large and mysterious thing and may be embracing it out of sickness and despair.

*For more discussion on this question,*

[watch the video online.](#)
Making One out of Many
This curriculum began with the question of national identity and with Edward Everett Hale’s story “The Man without a Country,” about an American soldier who is permanently exiled at sea from his native land, in accordance with his wish never again to hear the name of the United States. We conclude with this story (1907) by Willa Cather (1873–1947), about how an American expatriate discovers the meaning of his home country. Lyon Hartwell, the son of an American artist, born abroad and now himself a sculptor living in Paris, habitually entertains his fellow Americans, all the while working on a memorial statue of his late uncle, his namesake, who was killed in the Civil War while still in his teens.

Cather’s story describes a rare episode of self-revelation, as Hartwell tells his compatriots of his epiphany about American identity. How does Hartwell’s insight come? What does he discover? Crucial to his experience is his encounter with his namesake’s copy of Virgil’s Aeneid, inside of which his uncle drew the federal flag and inscribed the opening two lines of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” How and why is Hartwell moved by this encounter? What, for Hartwell, is the relation of the flag to the Republic for which it stands? What is the relation of the flag to our—and to your—American identity?

Seven of us, students, sat one evening in Hartwell’s studio on the Boulevard St. Michel. We were all fellow-countrymen; one from New Hampshire, one from Colorado, another from Nevada, several from the farm lands of the Middle West, and I myself from California. Lyon Hartwell, though born abroad, was simply, as every one knew, “from America.” He seemed, almost more than any other one living man, to mean all of it—from ocean to ocean. When he was in Paris, his studio was always open to the seven of us who were there that evening, and we intruded upon his leisure as often as we thought permissible.

Although we were within the terms of the easiest of all intimacies, and although the great sculptor, even when he was more than usually silent, was at all times the most gravely cordial of hosts, yet, on that long remembered evening, as the sunlight died on the burnished brown of the horse-chestnuts below the windows, a perceptible dullness yawned through our conversation.

We were, indeed, somewhat low in spirit, for one of our number, Charley Bentley, was leaving us indefinitely, in response to an imperative summons from home. Tomorrow his studio, just across the hall from Hartwell’s, was to pass into other hands, and Bentley’s luggage was even now piled in discouraged resignation before his door. The various bales and boxes seemed literally to weigh upon us as we sat in his neighbor’s hospitable rooms, drearily putting in the time until he should leave us to catch the ten o’clock express for Dieppe.
The day we had got through very comfortably, for Bentley made it the occasion of a somewhat pretentious luncheon at Maxim’s. There had been twelve of us at table, and the two young Poles were thirsty, the Gascon so fabulously entertaining, that it was near upon five o’clock when we put down our liqueur glasses for the last time, and the red, perspiring waiter, having pocketed the reward of his arduous and protracted services, bowed us affably to the door, flourishing his napkin and brushing back the streaks of wet, black hair from his rosy forehead. Our guests having betaken themselves belated to their respective engagements, the rest of us returned with Bentley—only to be confronted by the depressing array before his door. A glance about his denuded rooms had sufficed to chill the glow of the afternoon, and we fled across the hall in a body and begged Lyon Hartwell to take us in.

Bentley had said very little about it, but we all knew what it meant to him to be called home. Each of us knew what it would mean to himself, and each had felt something of that quickened sense of opportunity which comes at seeing another man in any way counted out of the race. Never had the game seemed so enchanting, the chance to play it such a piece of unmerited, unbelievable good fortune.

It must have been, I think, about the middle of October, for I remember that the sycamores were almost bare in the Luxembourg Gardens that morning, and the terrace about the queens of France were strewn with crackling brown leaves. The fat red roses, out the summer long on the stand of the old flower woman at the corner, had given place to dahlias and purple asters. First glimpses of autumn toilettes flashed from the carriages; wonderful little bonnets nodded at one along the Champs-Elysées; and in the Quarter an occasional feather boa, red or black or white, brushed one’s coat sleeve in the gay twilight of the early evening. The crisp, sunny autumn air was all day full of the stir of people and carriages and of the cheer of salutations; greetings of the students, returned brown and bearded from their holiday, gossip of people come back from Trouville, from St. Valery, from Dieppe, from all over Brittany and the Norman coast. Everywhere was the joyousness of return, the taking up again of life and work and play.

I had felt ever since early morning that this was the saddest of all possible seasons for saying good-by to that old, old city of youth, and to that little corner of it on the south shore which since the Dark Ages themselves—yes, and before—has been so peculiarly the land of the young.

I can recall our very postures as we lounged about Hartwell’s rooms that evening, with Bentley making occasional hurried trips to his desolated workrooms across the hall—as if haunted by a feeling of having forgotten something—or stopping to poke nervously at his perroquets, which he had bequeathed to Hartwell, gilt cage and all. Our host himself sat on the couch, his big, bronze-like shoulders backed up against the window, his shaggy head, beaked nose, and long chin cut clean against the gray light.

Our drowsing interest, in so far as it could be said to be fixed upon anything, was centered upon Hartwell’s new figure, which stood on the block ready to be cast in bronze, intended as a monument for some American battlefield. He called it “The Color
Sergeant.” It was the figure of a young soldier running, clutching the folds of a flag, the staff of which had been shot away. We had known it in all the stages of its growth, and the splendid action and feeling of the thing had come to have a kind of special significance for the half dozen of us who often gathered at Hartwell’s rooms—though, in truth, there was as much to dishearten one as to inflame, in the case of a man who had done so much in a field so amazingly difficult; who had thrown up in bronze all the restless, teeming force of that adventurous wave still climbing westward in our own land across the waters. We recalled his “Scout,” his “Pioneer,” his “Gold Seekers,” and those monuments in which he had invested one and another of the heroes of the Civil War with such convincing dignity and power.

“Where in the world does he get the heat to make an idea like that carry?” Bentley remarked morosely, scowling at the clay figure. “Hang me, Hartwell, if I don’t think it’s just because you’re not really an American at all, that you can look at it like that.”

The big man shifted uneasily against the window. “Yes,” he replied smiling, “perhaps there is something in that. My citizenship was somewhat belated and emotional in its flowering. I’ve half a mind to tell you about it, Bentley.” He rose uncertainly, and, after hesitating a moment, went back into his workroom, where he began fumbling among the litter in the corners.

At the prospect of any sort of personal expression from Hartwell, we glanced questioningly at one another; for although he made us feel that he liked to have us about, we were always held at a distance by a certain diffidence of his. There were rare occasions—when he was in the heat of work or of ideas—when he forgot to be shy, but they were so exceptional that no flattery was quite so seductive as being taken for a moment into Hartwell’s confidence. Even in the matter of opinions—the commonest of currency in our circle—he was niggardly and prone to qualify. No man ever guarded his mystery more effectually. There was a singular, intense spell, therefore, about those few evenings when he had broken through this excessive modesty, or shyness, or melancholy, and had, as it were, committed himself.

When Hartwell returned from the back room, he brought with him an unframed canvas which he put on an easel near his clay figure. We drew close about it, for the darkness was rapidly coming on. Despite the dullness of the light, we instantly recognized the boy of Hartwell’s “Color Sergeant.” It was the portrait of a very handsome lad in uniform, standing beside a charger impossibly rearing. Not only in his radiant countenance and flashing eyes, but in every line of his young body there was an energy, a gallantry, a joy of life, that arrested and challenged one.

“Yes, that’s where I got the notion,” Hartwell remarked, wandering back to his seat in the window. “I’ve wanted to do it for years, but I’ve never felt quite sure of myself. I was afraid of missing it. He was an uncle of mine, my father’s half-brother, and I was named for him. He was killed in one of the big battles of Sixty-four, when I was a child. I never saw him—never knew him until he had been dead for twenty years. And then, one night,
I came to know him as we sometimes do living persons—intimately, in a single moment.”

He paused to knock the ashes out of his short pipe, refilled it, and puffed at it thoughtfully for a few moments with his hands on his knees. Then, settling back heavily among the cushions and looking absently out of the window, he began his story. As he proceeded further and further into the experience which he was trying to convey to us, his voice sank so low and was sometimes so charged with feeling, that I almost thought he had forgotten our presence and was remembering aloud. Even Bentley forgot his nervousness in astonishment and sat breathless under the spell of the man’s thus breathing his memories out into the dusk.

“It was just fifteen years ago this last spring that I first went home, and Bentley’s having to cut away like this brings it all back to me.

“I was born, you know, in Italy. My father was a sculptor, though I dare say you’ve not heard of him. He was one of those first fellows who went over after Story and Powers,—went to Italy for ‘Art,’ quite simply; to lift from its native bough the willing, iridescent bird. Their story is told, informingly enough, by some of those ingenuous marble things at the Metropolitan. My father came over some time before the outbreak of the Civil War, and was regarded as a renegade by his family because he did not go home to enter the army. His half-brother, the only child of my grandfather’s second marriage, enlisted at fifteen and was killed the next year. I was ten years old when the news of his death reached us. My mother died the following winter, and I was sent away to a Jesuit school, while my father, already ill himself, stayed on at Rome, chipping away at his Indian maidens and marble goddesses, still gloomily seeking the thing for which he had made himself the most unhappy of exiles.

“He died when I was fourteen, but even before that I had been put to work under an Italian sculptor. He had an almost morbid desire that I should carry on his work, under, as he often pointed out to me, conditions so much more auspicious. He left me in the charge of his one intimate friend, an American gentleman in the consulate at Rome, and his instructions were that I was to be educated there and to live there until I was twenty-one. After I was of age, I came to Paris and studied under one master after another until I was nearly thirty. Then, almost for the first time, I was confronted by a duty which was not my pleasure.

“My grandfather’s death, at an advanced age, left an invalid maiden sister of my father’s quite alone in the world. She had suffered for years from a cerebral disease, a slow decay of the faculties which rendered her almost helpless. I decided to go to America and, if possible, bring her back to Paris, where I seemed on my way toward what my poor father had wished for me.

“On my arrival at my father’s birthplace, however, I found that this was not to be thought of. To tear this timid, feeble, shrinking creature, doubly aged by years and illness, from the spot where she had been rooted for a lifetime, would have been little
short of brutality. To leave her to the care of strangers seemed equally heartless. There was clearly nothing for me to do but to remain and wait for that slow and painless malady to run its course. I was there something over two years.

“My grandfather’s home, his father’s homestead before him, lay on the high banks of a river in Western Pennsylvania. The little town twelve miles down the stream, whither my great-grandfather used to drive his ox-wagon on market days, had become, in two generations, one of the largest manufacturing cities in the world. For hundreds of miles about us the gentle hill slopes were honeycombed with gas wells and coal shafts; oil derricks creaked in every valley and meadow; the brooks were sluggish and discolored with crude petroleum, and the air was impregnated by its searching odor. The great glass and iron manufactories had come up and up the river almost to our very door; their smoky exhalations brooded over us, and their crashing was always in our ears. I was plunged into the very incandescence of human energy. But, though my nerves tingled with the feverish, passionate endeavor which snapped in the very air about me, none of these great arteries seemed to feed me; this tumultuous life did not warm me. On every side were the great muddy rivers, the ragged mountains from which the timber was being ruthlessly torn away, the vast tracts of wild country, and the gulches that were like wounds in the earth; everywhere the glare of that relentless energy which followed me like a searchlight and seemed to scorch and consume me. I could only hide myself in the tangled garden, where the dropping of a leaf or the whistle of a bird was the only incident.

“The Hartwell homestead had been sold away little by little, until all that remained of it was garden and orchard. The house, a square brick structure, stood in the midst of a great garden which sloped toward the river, ending in a grassy bank which fell some forty feet to the water’s edge. The garden was now little more than a tangle of neglected shrubbery; damp, rank, and of that intense blue-green peculiar to vegetation in smoky places where the sun shines but rarely, and the mists form early in the evening and hang late in the morning.

“I shall never forget it as I saw it first, when I arrived there in the chill of a backward June. The long, rank grass, thick and soft and falling in billows, was always wet until midday. The gravel walks were bordered with great lilac-bushes, mock-orange, and bridal-wreath. Back of the house was a neglected rose garden, surrounded by a low stone wall over which the long suckers trailed and matted. They had wound their pink, thorny tentacles, layer upon layer, about the lock and the hinges of the rusty iron gate. Even the porches of the house, and the very windows, were damp and heavy with growth: wistaria, clematis, honeysuckle, and trumpet vine. The garden was grown up with trees, especially that part of it which lay above the river. The bark of the old locusts was blackened by the smoke that crept continually up the valley, and their feathery foliage, so merry in its movement and so yellow and joyous in its color, seemed peculiarly precious under that somber sky. There were sycamores and copper beeches; gnarled apple-trees, too old to bear; and fall pear-trees, hung with a sharp, hard fruit in October; all with a leafage singularly rich and luxuriant, and peculiarly vivid in color. The oaks about the house had been old trees when my great-grandfather built his cabin there, more than a century
before, and this garden was almost the only spot for miles along the river where any of the original forest growth still survived. The smoke from the mills was fatal to trees of the larger sort, and even these had the look of doomed things—bent a little toward the town and seemed to wait with head inclined before that on-coming, shrieking force.

“About the river, too, there was a strange hush, a tragic submission—it was so leaden and sullen in its color, and it flowed so soundlessly forever past our door.

“I sat there every evening, on the high veranda overlooking it, watching the dim outlines of the steep hills on the other shore, the flicker of the lights on the island, where there was a boat-house, and listening to the call of the boatmen through the mist. The mist came as certainly as night, whitened by moonshine or starshine. The tin water-pipes went splash, splash, with it all evening, and the wind, when it rose at all, was little more than a sighing of the old boughs and a troubled breath in the heavy grasses.

“At first it was to think of my distant friends and my old life that I used to sit there; but after awhile it was simply to watch the days and weeks go by, like the river which seemed to carry them away.

“Within the house I was never at home. Month followed month, and yet I could feel no sense of kinship with anything there. Under the roof where my father and grandfather were born, I remained utterly detached. The somber rooms never spoke to me, the old furniture never seemed tinctured with race. This portrait of my boy uncle was the only thing to which I could draw near, the only link with anything I had ever known before.

“There is a good deal of my father in the face, but it is my father transformed and glorified; his hesitating discontent drowned in a kind of triumph. From my first day in that house, I continually turned to this handsome kinsman of mine, wondering in what terms he had lived and had his hope; what he had found there to look like that, to bound at one, after all those years, so joyously out of the canvas.

“From the timid, clouded old woman over whose life I had come to watch, I learned that in the backyard, near the old rose garden, there was a locust-tree which my uncle had planted. After his death, while it was still a slender sapling, his mother had a seat built round it, and she used to sit there on summer evenings. His grave was under the apple-trees in the old orchard.

“My aunt could tell me little more than this. There were days when she seemed not to remember him at all.

“It was from an old soldier in the village that I learned the boy’s story. Lyon was, the old man told me, but fourteen when the first enlistment occurred, but was even then eager to go. He was in the court-house square every evening to watch the recruits at their drill, and when the home company was ordered off he rode into the city on his pony to see the men board the train and to wave them good-by. The next year he spent at home with a tutor, but when he was fifteen he held his parents to their promise and went into the army.
He was color sergeant of his regiment and fell in a charge upon the breastworks of a fort about a year after his enlistment.

“...The veteran showed me an account of this charge which had been written for the village paper by one of my uncle’s comrades who had seen his part in the engagement. It seems that as his company were running at full speed across the bottom lands toward the fortified hill, a shell burst over them. This comrade, running beside my uncle, saw the colors waver and sink as if falling, and looked to see that the boy’s hand and forearm had been torn away by the exploding shrapnel. The boy, he thought, did not realize the extent of his injury, for he laughed, shouted something which his comrade did not catch, caught the flag in his left hand, and ran on up the hill. They went splendidly up over the breastworks, but just as my uncle, his colors flying, reached the top of the embankment, a second shell carried away his left arm at the arm-pit, and he fell over the wall with the flag settling about him.

“It was because this story was ever present with me, because I was unable to shake it off, that I began to read such books as my grandfather had collected upon the Civil War. I found that this war was fought largely by boys, that more men enlisted at eighteen than at any other age. When I thought of those battlefields—and I thought of them much in those days—there was always that glory of youth above them, that impetuous, generous passion stirring the long lines on the march, the blue battalions in the plain. The bugle, whenever I have heard it since, has always seemed to me the very golden throat of that boyhood which spent itself so gaily, so incredibly.

“I used often to wonder how it was that this uncle of mine, who seemed to have possessed all the charm and brilliancy allotted to his family and to have lived up its vitality in one splendid hour, had left so little trace in the house where he was born and where he had awaited his destiny. Look as I would, I could find no letters from him, no clothing or books that might have been his. He had been dead but twenty years, and yet nothing seemed to have survived except the tree he had planted. It seemed incredible and cruel that no physical memory of him should linger to be cherished among his kindred,—nothing but the dull image in the brain of that aged sister. I used to pace the garden walks in the evening, wondering that no breath of his, no echo of his laugh, of his call to his pony or his whistle to his dogs, should linger about those shaded paths where the pale roses exhaled their dewy, country smell. Sometimes, in the dim starlight, I have thought that I heard on the grasses beside me the stir of a footfall lighter than my own, and under the black arch of the lilacs I have fancied that he bore me company.

“There was, I found, one day in the year for which my old aunt waited, and which stood out from the months that were all of a sameness to her. On the thirtieth of May she insisted that I should bring down the big flag from the attic and run it up upon the tall flagstaff beside Lyon’s tree in the garden. Later in the morning she went with me to carry some of the garden flowers to the grave in the orchard,—a grave scarcely larger than a child’s.
“I had noticed, when I was hunting for the flag in the attic, a leather trunk with my own name stamped upon it, but was unable to find the key. My aunt was all day less apathetic than usual; she seemed to realize more clearly who I was, and to wish me to be with her. I did not have an opportunity to return to the attic until after dinner that evening, when I carried a lamp up-stairs and easily forced the lock of the trunk. I found all the things that I had looked for; put away, doubtless, by his mother, and still smelling faintly of lavender and rose leaves; his clothes, his exercise books, his letters from the army, his first boots, his riding-whip, some of his toys, even. I took them out and replaced them gently. As I was about to shut the lid, I picked up a copy of the *Æneid*, on the fly-leaf of which was written in a slanting, boyish hand,

Lyon Hartwell, January, 1862.

He had gone to the wars in Sixty-three, I remembered.

“My uncle, I gathered, was none too apt at his Latin, for the pages were dog-eared and rubbed and interlined, the margins mottled with pencil sketches—bugles, stacked bayonets, and artillery carriages. In the act of putting the book down, I happened to run over the pages to the end, and on the fly-leaf at the back I saw his name again, and a drawing—with his initials and a date—of the Federal flag; above it, written in a kind of arch and in the same unformed hand:

‘Oh, say, can you see by the dawn’s early light
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight’s last gleaming?’

It was a stiff, wooden sketch, not unlike a detail from some Egyptian inscription, but, the moment I saw it, wind and color seemed to touch it. I caught up the book, blew out the lamp, and rushed down into the garden.

“I seemed, somehow, at last to have known him; to have been with him in that careless, unconscious moment and to have known him as he was then.

“As I sat there in the rush of this realization, the wind began to rise, stirring the light foliage of the locust over my head and bringing, fresher than before, the woody odor of the pale roses that overran the little neglected garden. Then, as it grew stronger, it brought the sound of something sighing and stirring over my head in the perfumed darkness.

“I thought of that sad one of the Destinies who, as the Greeks believed, watched from birth over those marked for a violent or untimely death. Oh, I could see him, there in the shine of the morning, his book idly on his knee, his flashing eyes looking straight before him, and at his side that grave figure, hidden in her draperies, her eyes following his, but seeing so much farther—seeing what he never saw, that great moment at the end, when he swayed above his comrades on the earthen wall.
“All the while, the bunting I had run up in the morning flapped fold against fold, heaving and tossing softly in the dark—against a sky so black with rain clouds that I could see above me only the blur of something in soft, troubled motion.

“The experience of that night, coming so overwhelmingly to a man so dead, almost rent me in pieces. It was the same feeling that artists know when we, rarely, achieve truth in our work; the feeling of union with some great force, of purpose and security, of being glad that we have lived. For the first time I felt the pull of race and blood and kindred, and felt beating within me things that had not begun with me. It was as if the earth under my feet had grasped and rooted me, and were pouring its essence into me. I sat there until the dawn of morning, and all night long my life seemed to be pouring out of me and running into the ground.”

Hartwell drew a long breath that lifted his heavy shoulders, and then let them fall again. He shifted a little and faced more squarely the scattered, silent company before him. The darkness had made us almost invisible to each other, and, except for the occasional red circuit of a cigarette end traveling upward from the arm of a chair, he might have supposed us all asleep.

“And so,” Hartwell added thoughtfully, “I naturally feel an interest in fellows who are going home. It’s always an experience.”

No one said anything, and in a moment there was a loud rap at the door,—the concierge, come to take down Bentley’s luggage and to announce that the cab was below. Bentley got his hat and coat, enjoined Hartwell to take good care of his *perroquets*, gave each of us a grip of the hand, and went briskly down the long flights of stairs. We followed him into the street, calling our good wishes, and saw him start on his drive across the lighted city to the Gare St. Lazare.
Discussion Guide for
“The Namesake”

I. About the Author

Willa Sibert Cather (1873–1947), one of America’s most beloved authors, is best known for her novels depicting the lives of people who settled the American heartland and the Southwest: *O Pioneers!, My Ántonia*, *A Lost Lady*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Her life, like her writing, crisscrossed much of the United States. Born in Virginia, Cather grew up in Nebraska and graduated from the University of Nebraska. She then worked as a journalist and as a teacher in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, before moving to New York City in 1906 where she lived the rest of her life, but making long visits back to the Midwest, the Southwest, and California.

Scholars have suggested that “The Namesake” (written in 1907) has autobiographical significance: Cather’s maternal uncle, William Seibert Boak, died in the Civil War (fighting for the Confederacy), and Cather gave herself a slightly modified version of his middle name. But in the story itself, the earlier death of a (Union) Civil War hero becomes the centerpiece of a moving exploration of American national identity and of the vocation of the artist in relation to his country. Like her protagonist, Lyon Hartwell, Cather visited Paris and fell in love with it. She also greatly admired Henry James, who wrote extensively about America while living as an expatriate abroad. But unlike both Hartwell and James, Cather always made America her home.

II. Summary

The story is set in Paris at the turn of the twentieth century. Seven young American students, aspiring artists all, gather in the apartment-studio of the great sculptor Lyon Hartwell on a night when one of them, Charles Bentley, is departing for home. On display in the apartment, ready for casting, is Hartwell’s latest statue, “The Color Sergeant,” a work that draws the admiration—and envy—of the students. Challenged by Bentley to explain where he gets “the heat to make an idea like that carry,” Hartwell tells his young admirers the story of his own American “homecoming.”

Born in Italy to a self-exiled (and ultimately unsuccessful) American artist, Hartwell was orphaned by age fourteen. Still, he remained in Rome, studying sculpture, attempting to fulfill his father’s artistic ambitions for him, later moving to Paris to continue his artistic career. Ten years later, on the cusp of some success, he says, “almost for the first time . . . confronted by a duty which was not my pleasure”: his grandfather died,
leaving his father’s ailing maiden sister alone (310).

Intending to bring his aunt back to Paris, Hartwell journeyed to his father’s and grandfather’s birthplace—and to America—for the first time. Quickly realizing that it would be cruel to uproot his aunt, he remained in America two years, waiting for her illness to run its course. There he languished, feeling utterly estranged from the old family home and from the bustling industrial world encroaching upon it. One thing only drew him near: the portrait of his “boy uncle,” his father’s half-brother and his namesake. The uncle’s face reminds him of his father, but of his “father transformed and glorified; his hesitant discontent drowned in a kind of triumph” (312). Determined to learn what his boy uncle, dead at the age of sixteen, had found to make him look as he did, he tracks down the story of how he enlisted in the Civil War at age fifteen, became color sergeant of his regiment, and fell in a charge the next year, both his arms dismembered but covered by the Federal flag he had been carrying. He found no further clues about his uncle until the next Memorial Day, when his aunt, who seemed to live for this day, insisted that he retrieve the big flag from the attic and run it up the flagstaff, located in the garden beside the locust tree Uncle Lyon had planted long ago.

In the attic, Hartwell found a trunk with his “own” name on it. Later that night, he returned to the attic, opened the trunk, and found many of his uncle’s things. Among them was his uncle’s copy of Virgil’s *Aeneid* (a Latin epic poem that tells the legendary story of Aeneas, a Trojan who left the ruins of Troy and traveled to Italy, where he became the founder of Rome), inside of which his namesake had drawn the Federal flag (initialed and dated 1862, the year before his enlistment), and above which he had written the first two lines of Francis Scott Key’s poem, “The Star Spangled Banner.” “I seemed . . . at last to have known him,” he says, “in that careless, unconscious moment . . . as he was then” (314). Hartwell spends the rest of the dark and ominous night of Memorial Day sitting next to the locust tree, the flag, barely visible, continuing to flap overhead. There he experienced, he says, “the feeling that artists know when we, rarely, achieve truth in our work; the feeling of union with some great force, of purpose and security, of being glad that we have lived.” Sitting there until the dawn’s early light, he felt, for the first time “the pull of race and blood and kindred, and felt beating within me things that had not begun with me” (315). He concludes with an image of his rebirth as an American, rooted in the American soil.

Hartwell finishes his personal story. His young admirers sit in silence. Bentley’s cab arrives to start him on his voyage home to America.

### III. Thinking about the Text

The story raises many interesting questions about its main character, and especially about his identity as an American and as an artist.

**A. Hartwell in Paris**
1. How does Lyon Hartwell appear to his young American admirers, and why?
   They are identified as coming from particular parts of the United States; he is
   identified as being rather “from America . . . ocean to ocean” (307). What
   does that suggest about him?
2. Why does the usually reticent sculptor choose this occasion to tell his story?
3. What is his answer to Bentley’s claim that it is only because Hartwell is not an
   American that he can look so clearly and movingly at American subjects?

IN CONVERSATION

In this conversation, Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass discuss Cather’s story with Diana Schaub,
coeditor of What So Proudly We Hail, and William Schambra, director of the Hudson Institute’s
Bradley Center for Philanthropy and Civic Renewal.

Diana Schaub: The other students are drawn to Hartwell, first because he is a
great sculptor; they are young men studying the same art. But they are also drawn
to him because of his connection with America.

Though Hartwell was born abroad, everyone describes him as simply being “from
America.” Hartwell seems to sum up all of America in his person, from ocean to
ocean. The other young American sculptors are regional in some way—they’re
from New Hampshire, or they’re from out West. In a way, Hartwell, by not being
in America but rather being from America—that distance enables him to sum up
what it means to be American.

Leon Kass: While admiring the now finished magnum opus, “The Color
Sergeant,” Bentley says to Hartwell, “I almost think that it’s because you are not
really an American that you can manage something like this, that you have the
heat to carry off an idea of this sort.” And Hartwell says, perhaps that’s the case.
He uses that kind of challenge, and invitation based on their perception of him
and his work, to tell them his story.

Diana Schaub: The other artists think that whoever is called home is taken out of
the race in some way. So Hartwell’s story shows them that in being called
home—that is the place where they can actually gain this “heat” and subject
matter that will turn them into true artists.

Leon Kass: In a way, as the flag itself is an emblem, Hartwell is making a “one
out of the many” of this group. That is another way in which, by representing the
color sergeant before them and telling them this story on this occasion, Hartwell
is doing the job that the flag does for a disparate nation such as ours.

For more discussion on this question,
watch the video online.
B. Hartwell’s Journey to America

1. Why is Lyon Hartwell so attracted by the portrait of his namesake?
2. What moves Hartwell so much in learning the story of his namesake’s life and death?
3. What is the significance of his discoveries inside his uncle’s marked-up copy of Virgil’s *Aeneid* (314)? What does he learn about his namesake? Is Virgil’s *Aeneid* itself of any significance in what he learns?

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**IN CONVERSATION**

**Diana Schaub:** Everyone who looks at the portrait of Hartwell’s boy uncle is said to be captivated by its energy and gallantry and joy and life. It is this very handsome young man that anyone would respond to. But there is also a very specific appeal for Hartwell. His own father had been an expatriate, but a very dissatisfied one. He’s described as the most unhappy of exiles. But in looking at this picture of his uncle, he sees the visage of his father, but the visage of his father now transformed and glorified, and he very much wants to understand the source of that.

**Amy Kass:** In a way, the portrait gives Hartwell back the father that he never knew. So the portrait is itself very attractive, but it’s more than just a portrait to him. Besides the gallantry and the joy of life, the portrait leaves him with a question: Hartwell now wants to know what it is that enabled this young man to give up everything in a moment and to sacrifice himself. When he finds his uncle’s copy of Virgil’s *Aeneid*—in the back fly-leaf of which is his uncle’s drawing of the federal flag, and above the flag his uncle has written the question asked by “The Star Spangled Banner”—it is a moment in which suddenly everything comes together for him: what it was that his uncle was living for, what it was that he was willing to die for. And that has everything to do with the Republic.

**Leon Kass:** That discovery in the attic comes after Hartwell has already been on a quest to find out more about his uncle. His aunt is able to tell him that his uncle planted a tree in the garden and that the boy’s mother put a bench around it where she could sit after he died. Hartwell knows that his uncle is buried in the rose garden. He finds out from an old soldier how it is that his uncle actually died: He tried to enlist at age fourteen, and actually enlisted at age fifteen. In a charge against the breastworks, the boy is carrying the flag and has it shot out from his arm. He loses one arm, grabs the banner in the other, and makes it to the top of the hill, cheerfully laughing. There he has his other arm shot off and is killed, and he dies with the flag wrapped around him. Hartwell wants to find out about the Civil War, and he discovers that it was a war fought by boys. He couldn’t somehow understand what this was all about. He is looking for what it could have
been that made these boys, in the peak of their lives, with all of their vivacity and energy, give it all up.

The date is 1862 when Hartwell’s uncle scribbles in the book. It’s the year before he enlists. And here he is studying Latin and the story of the founding of Rome and doodling pictures of cannons and muskets—his mind is elsewhere. One cannot help but think that either he is repelled by the Roman example or inspired by the patriotic sentiment there. And so he wonders: how does it stand now with our Republic, which is now absolutely in peril? He cannot wait to get out there and serve her.

Amy Kass: The *Aeneid* is about the hero Aeneas who founds Rome out of the ashes of Troy; it’s a sort of new life resurrected. Hartwell’s boy uncle wants to find out what is happening to our Republic? What is going to save her? How does it fare with us? Are we going to live?

*For more discussion on this question,*

[watch the video online.](#)

4. What happens to Hartwell on the night of Memorial Day? What does he learn about himself (314–15)?

5. What does Hartwell mean when he says that the experience of that night gave him “the same feeling that artists know when we, rarely, achieve truth in our work; the feeling of union with some great force, of purpose and security, of being glad that we have lived” (315)?

6. What does Harwell mean when he says, “I felt the pull of race and blood and kindred, and felt beating within me things that had not begun with me” (315)?

7. What does Hartwell mean when he says, “[I]t was as if the earth under my feet had grasped and rooted me, and were pouring its essence into me” (315)?

8. What is the role of the flag in his process of self-discovery?

**IN CONVERSATION**

Leon Kass: The scene is Memorial Day. Hartwell has just been put in contact with what he takes to be the guiding nerve of his namesake boy uncle’s life. It’s a dark and miserable night. He’s got his uncle’s inscribed copy of Virgil’s *Aeneid* in his hand, and he sits under the flag—which he cannot see—and it is a kind of Francis Scott Key moment for him.

Hartwell says, “The experience of that night, coming so overwhelmingly to a man so dead, almost rent me in pieces. It was the same feeling that artists know when we, rarely, achieve truth in our work; the feeling of union with some great force, of purpose and security, of being glad that we have lived. For the first time I felt
the pull of race and blood and kindred, and felt beating within me things that had
not begun with me. It was as if the earth under my feet had grasped and rooted
me, and were pouring its essence into me. I sat there until the dawn of morning,
and all night long my life seemed to be pouring out of me and running into the
ground.”

The end is especially strange to me. It sounds as if he’s dying; he is losing his
lifeblood and is turning into a plant. The image is that he’s now rooted, like his
namesake uncle’s tree is, and he’s standing in the same ground, like the flagpole
beneath which he’s sitting.

**Amy Kass:** But you need roots in order to live. A plant needs roots in order to
live. He’s not describing his death; he’s describing his rebirth.

*For more discussion on this question,*

[watch the video online.]

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**C. Hartwell’s American Identity**

1. How does his experience on that special Memorial Day affect Hartwell
   afterward—in his life and in his art?
2. In his essay on “True Americanism,” Theodore Roosevelt says that an
   American who chooses to live abroad never really becomes a European: “He
   only ceases being an American, and becomes nothing.” Is this true of
   Hartwell? Why or why not?
3. Why, after his moment of self-discovery and of his link with his namesake and
   with America, does Lyon Hartwell return to live and work in Paris? Is it true,
   as some have argued, that he chooses art and fame over life and country?
4. How American really is Hartwell?

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**IN CONVERSATION**

**William Schambra:** Hartwell goes back to Paris in the name of art. And yet he
has taken something of America with him. At that distance, he is able, perhaps, to
capture America better than if he were immersed in it. There’s something about
his being *from* America. He isn’t an American. He’s *from* America. There is a
necessary distance there. Maybe he had to leave. Maybe he had to go abroad in
order to preserve that distance.

**Diana Schaub:** He is a flag bearer; he has planted the American flag solidly on
Parisian soil. Cather also seems to be very aware of the demands of art and what
that required during this time period. You really couldn’t carry out this kind of
endeavor purely on American soil so Hartwell is still in the process of perfecting
his craft and his technique. He actually says that he has wanted to do this color sergeant sculpture for fifteen years, but he hasn’t been confident in his abilities to carry it off yet. So his apprenticeship in Europe has been very important for his art.

**Leon Kass:** He is teaching the Americans, and he does send his sculptures home to America to adorn our cemeteries and our public places. He is offering us beautified and more heroic pictures of ourselves, and he is gracing the national memory. But he says that he came late to his citizenship. It is a *partial* citizenship, however philanthropic, not to participate in one’s own self-government. Cather herself, although she fell in love with Paris, did not become an expatriate, and she told her American stories and glorified the American experience without ceasing to be one among us. So I think there is at least that difficulty about Lyon Hartwell.

*For more discussion on this question,*

[watch the video online.]

**D. Hartwell as Artist**

1. Why does Hartwell sculpt the subjects he sculpts?
2. What picture of America—and presented in what manner and spirit—does Hartwell offer in his statues?
3. Compare the sculpture (and the portrait) of “The Color Sergeant” with the story of the actual life and death of its subject, as Hartwell comes to know it. Which is more truthful? Who does a better job in conveying the truth about “The Namesake”: Hartwell or Cather?
4. What is responsible for Hartwell’s artistic success (in contrast with his father)? What is the answer to the question Bentley poses near the beginning of the story: “Where in the world does he get the heat to make an idea like that carry” (309)?
5. Compare Hartwell as artist to Virgil as poet and Cather as writer: Do they make their subjects, or do their subjects make them? What is the relationship between the artist and his subject? Does the first line of Virgil’s *Aeneid*—“Of arms and the man I sing”—shed any light on this?

**E. The Title**

1. What is the meaning of the title? Who or what is a “namesake”? What is implied in carrying another person’s name? In living “for the sake of the name”?
2. When Hartwell memorializes his namesake in “The Color Sergeant,” does he do honor to the name, even though he does not name him in the sculpture’s title? Assuming that sculptor Hartwell’s own name appears on the statue, is he gaining a name for himself by exploiting that of his uncle?
3. Is it perhaps Cather, rather than Hartwell, who makes clear that both “namesakes” are needed if each one is to receive the honor (the name) that he deserves?

**IN CONVERSATION**

**Leon Kass:** What does it mean to name someone for somebody else? It means that you think that the life of the person for whom you are naming your child has some significance for the new life coming forward. And the person who is the younger version of the namesake would somehow think that his life should be informed for the sake of the name that he was given. And then the question is: How do you do honor to your name? Because your name is not just yours alone, it is also an inheritance.

Here Hartwell makes an effort to come to terms with who he was named for, and when he feels the pull of the blood and the kinship and the race within him, it’s as if his uncle’s blood now lives in him in a way that it never has before. For the first time, he has earned the name, and, to some extent, the cause for which his uncle spent his brief vitality.

It raises a question for all of us: What would it mean to do honor to those who have come before us, even if we don’t literally carry their exact name? Can one feel the ties of race and blood and kindred and the causes to which our ancestors gave what was theirs? Whose namesake are we? And what would it take to live up to that inheritance?

**Amy Kass:** One other point about naming: I know it has a religious overtone, but literally when you name a child—to name something is to call it into being. And that gives it its life. That’s what Hartwell comes to realize. He comes to realize that his life, his energy, is the same as that of his namesake. And he’s going to continue it.

*For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.*

**IV. Thinking with the Text**

The plot of the story, as already noted, invites attention to several large themes, among them the nature and basis of American identity, the relation of art (and stories) to American identity, and the meaning and importance of the American flag.

**A. American Identity**
1. America is said, rightly, to be a nation founded not on ties of blood and soil, but on ideas and ideals. What then is the role of ties to land and ancestors for American identity? In the past? Today?

2. Can an American living abroad be an American citizen in the full sense? Conversely, can living abroad contribute positively to someone’s American identity?

3. Is living within the United States sufficient to make us American citizens in the full sense?

4. On what does your own identity and citizenship as an American really rest?

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: Whenever you emphasize blood, race, and kindred—that doesn’t sound particularly American. It could be German; it could be anything. And we pride ourselves on the fact that principles do inform us. But I think in Hartwell’s case, the emotional attachment is as necessary as the principles are. This story enables Hartwell to find meaning in his own patriotism, and that patriotism is informed by the principles of the Republic. So while he emphasizes blood, race, and kindred, I think you cannot simply separate it from the fact that it’s the Star-Spangled Banner that he looks to, the Federal flag that he draws, and all that that stands for.

Diana Schaub: This is the blood that has been spent or sacrificed for a cause, and the cause is the cause of Union as represented by the flag. It does seem to me that he achieves a kind of coming together of blood and the ideas.

Leon Kass: I think that a more general point could be made: the principles by themselves are not enough to attach anybody. There are many people who could affirm these principles. They could live elsewhere, and they might be sympathetic to America, but to belong depends not only on embracing these principles—that’s a necessary, but not a sufficient condition—but on being attached to the history of the people who have lived their lives under those principles, who have struggled and sacrificed to preserve and to perpetuate them. What he sees is that this attachment is his own personal legacy, not only in family ties, but in the very name that he carries. These are lives that have been spent to protect and preserve—not just the principles, but the entire way of life and the people who live under those principles.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

B. Art, Stories, and American Identity

1. What is the role of art (Hartwell’s statues) and stories (Cather’s “The Namesake”) in creating and sustaining American identity? In making one out
of many? How do art and stories speak to us in ways that other media do not?
2. Does devotion to art require some detachment and distance from one’s civic identity and activity? Are artists as artists doing something important for citizenship?
3. Is America as a nation hospitable to art and a concern with the beautiful? Is our national preoccupation with what is useful—industry, economics, technology, and so forth—congenial to the appreciation of what is beautiful (and useless)?
4. What is the relation between art or literature and national memory?

IN CONVERSATION

William Schambra: Hartwell’s sculptures aren’t abstractions of Lady Liberty or of Indian goddesses or princesses, but rather are taken from specific episodes from American history: the pioneers, the Gold Rush, the settlers. They are sculptures that combine the specific history of this country with some sense of the larger principles behind it. The sculptures all symbolize larger symbols, but at the same they’re quite specific and quite grounded. They present the story of this place.

Amy Kass: The sculptures provide the robust national memory that is needed in order to perpetuate attachment to America.

William Schambra: Let’s explore for a moment the relationship between art and stories—that is, the art that Hartwell presents us with, and the story here that Cather writes.

Diana Schaub: I think you can see that question in what we are told about the sculpture. The sculpture of the color sergeant leaves out the gory details of the actual incident.

We know that the young boy had both of his arms shot off. Cather’s story, which tells us this, is somehow truer than the sculpture. The sculpture engages in a certain idealization or beautification. You can claim that it captures the inner truth of the moment in beautifying it, that it captures the young boy’s heart. But Cather’s story seems more complete because it captures all of those elements.

Amy Kass: The story enables us to know what the young boy actually experienced, which we otherwise would have no access to. So in that sense, the story certainly is fuller.

Even a flag, an emblem, or an image depends upon talking with others about it to give it meaning. The image itself is not necessarily going to speak to you in the way in which it speaks to this young man.

Diana Schaub: So literature can lead to a more mature patriotism, in contrast to
Hartwell the sculptor, who almost seems to still be in the grip of a kind of boyish patriotism.

Amy Kass: He’s in the grip of heat—and that’s what the young artists admire about him.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.

C. The Flag

1. What is a flag? What is special about the meaning of the American flag?
2. What role can or should the flag play in creating national identity?
3. How important to America are its national symbols? Are they more or less important to a nation that is founded on ideas and ideals?
4. What feelings and thoughts does the American flag arouse in you?

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: The flag is an image. It’s an image that speaks thousands of words for us.

Diana Schaub: It seems that a nation that is founded on ideas is probably more in need of the kind of tangible symbolism that a flag provides than a nation that is based on blood and soil.

If I think about my own attachments, I grew up in Minnesota, and I still think of myself as a Minnesotan even though I haven’t lived there since I was a teenager. And yet I have no particular attachment to the Minnesota state flag. We all come from one of the states, but we’re not especially attached to the flags of our states—it seems that the really rooted place doesn’t need a flag. So there is a connection between the ideational nature of our Founding and the need for these symbols, and so it’s interesting that this symbol, this flag, becomes the foundation for Hartwell’s own rootedness.

Leon Kass: Before the Civil War, the flag, which now has become this iconic feature in American life and really is the emblem of “the land I love,” the “home of the free and the brave,” did not carry this meaning. In the story, it is specifically the federal flag—meaning that it’s the Union flag, as opposed to the flag of the

rebellion. So the flag also acquires the meaning of the history of the defense of the Republic for which it stands. It is not just an abstract embodiment of one out of many. The flag does these things, like many symbols, silently. You bring things to it. “The Star-Spangled Banner” adds something; the Pledge of Allegiance adds something. I’m not sure that the flag by itself is sufficient and whether stories like Cather’s story don’t help us even more than the flag does by itself. In other words, the story about the flag and its meaning as carried by the flag bearer. . . .

Amy Kass: The story of the flag needs an artist to tell it.

Leon Kass: And it might need a storyteller more than it needs a sculptor.

For more discussion on this question, watch the video online.
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