

AP Lit - "Genius" Synthesis Essay

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“Talent Set on Fire by Courage”: What is Genius?

“Nice one, *genius*.” It’s the sort of remark heard throughout elementary school playgrounds and middle school hallways: four syllables, dripping with sarcasm. And thus, we are introduced to the notion of genius, to the idea that there might be individuals who surpass the ordinary. In time, the images of the genius coalesces—bow ties, coke-bottle glasses, and chalkboards—but when one looks beyond the details, towards the essence of the term, what truly remains? What does it mean? The concept of genius has captured the imagination ever since some prodigious caveman made a particularly nice cave painting—it seems that genius has been around as long as sentience has, that the outlier is necessitated by the ordinary. But despite the millennia of precedence, genius remains fleeting: like a butterfly, it is easy to net, but considerably more difficult to pin down. Before one can understand genius, one must define it—but this is easier said than done.

So, what is the difference between a sophist and a philosopher? There is no glaring answer, just as there is no coherent binary between greatness and mediocrity. The etymology of the word itself is telling—“genius” is derived from the Latin term *genii*, which refers to the divinity of the individual spirit. Yet, “genius” also shares phonetic similarities with “gene”—oddly serendipitous, given that prominent intellectual figures have argued that genius is rooted in heritage and bloodline. But when one looks at the figures who have earned the term, it is not always simple to see what they have in common. Edna, Will, Joseph, and Stephen live disparate

lives in disparate worlds, they come from different backgrounds and they arrive at different conclusions. But these protagonists all share one commonality: a devotion to the marrow of life, a dedication to its *essence*. In *The Glass Bead Game*, Joseph's mentor upholds those "who direct the maximum force of their desires toward the center, toward true being, toward perfection" (82), and in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus is "unheeded [and] happy" once he is "*near to the wild heart of life*" (122) (emphasis mine). In many ways, this holy centrism even evokes Plato's own "world of forms," which contends that the essence of perfection already exists. In this light, genius is a medium through which the form can be realized: it is not creation, but discovery. Furthermore, as Michel Foucault once wrote, "the work of an intellectual is not to mould the political will of others; it is, through the analyses that he does in his own field, to re-examine evidence and assumptions, to shake up habitual ways of working and thinking, to dissipate conventional familiarities." And so, genius is bifurcated from sophistry. Genius is not brute force: it is not solely knowing times tables, it is not just being able to recite *Swann's Way* at the tip of a hat. Genius is the act of inversion: to flip the world and scour the nooks and crannies for novelty, to look under the sofa next to the dust bunnies. In *Portrait*, Stephen remarked "*Contrahit orator, variant in carmine vates*" (129) — speakers summarise, poets transform in their verses. It is this pursuit that embodies the intellect. But before we can draw conclusions on the nature of genius, we must analyze its consequences and how it fits into society at large.

Even at first glance, it is clear that genius is placed upon a pedestal in American society. Sure, late-night television might harbor some anti-intellectual sentimentality (in keeping with Adam Sandleresque blue-collar appeal), but teens nonetheless deride each other with snarky refutals of genius ("*Sure, Einstein*"). The notion of genius is deeply ingrained within American culture: SATs, the Ivy League, MENSA, IQ scores and pub trivia nights—and why not! For, in a

meritocratic society, genius *should* be a shortcut to high society and “the good life” (e.g. six figures and beachside property). Perhaps the prevalence of this fantasy explains the fetishization of academic minutiae: sweater vests, pipes, and cloth-bound books are status symbols, exerting a great deal of influence over contemporary culture. In *Good Will Hunting*, for instance, professors like Lambeau flaunt their academic heritage as a badge of honor (in lieu of genuine brilliance). So, no matter how trivial genius’s role in pop culture might seem, one must remember that such apotheosizing is not without consequence: as a result, many contemporary Western philosophical concepts have lent themselves toward intellectual elitism, from Friedrich Nietzsche's “*Übermensch*” to Ayn Rand’s laissez-faire idealism. In essence, both ideologies absolve the “enlightened” from actual moral culpability, from responsibility to better the lot of their fellow man (see: social darwinism). The love of genius as an agent for long-term progress (telephones, lightbulbs, electricity) trumps short-term human exigencies—and as a result, we have a society with “cinnamon-flavoured dental floss and people sleeping in the street” (per George Carlin). We see the canonization and deitization of genius—for an example, look no further than Mount Rushmore.

This exaltation dovetails with Thomas Carlyle’s “Great Men” theory, which suggested that history is not only written, but shaped by the victors (Carlyle wrote that “the history of the world is but the biography of great men”). There is some merit to this reasoning, for genius is a real phenomenon. But nonetheless, it seems myopic to reduce revolutionary figures down to some inherent “divinity” or “greatness.” In *The Study of Sociology* (1873), British sociologist Herbert Spencer rebutted the theory, declaring the following:

“Even if [one] were...to grant the absurd supposition that the genesis of the great man does not depend on the antecedents furnished by the

society he is born in, there would still be the quite sufficient [fact] that he is powerless in the absence of the material and mental accumulations which his society inherits from the past, and that he is powerless in the absence of the co-existing population, character, intelligence, and social arrangements.”

In other words: although it is convenient to portray geniuses as “self-made men,” even the staunchest objectivist must recognize that the development of genius is hitched upon material circumstance. First and foremost, it is built upon the accumulation of social capital, the great legacy of any civilization (Thomas Newton: “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”) But this is not the only externality—for when considering genius, one must also consider the bottleneck effect of social stratification. Again, inherent genius appears to be a legitimate phenomenon (consider self-taught artists, for instance), but true genius is only *realized* when this spark and the fuel of education coincide—and for most of history, education has been withheld from all but the ruling class (in practice, it is not the “Great Men” theory so much as the “Great WASPs” theory). And even if education is obtainable, the narrow window through which genius is perceived can act as a restrictive force (ask Rosalind Franklin, who was snubbed by Watson & Crick in the discovery of DNA). The reader is perhaps most acutely reminded of these realities in Chopin’s *The Awakening*, where Edna’s nascent genius is smothered by rigid societal mores. And this is a wealthy white woman in the 20th century—god forbid anyone else attempt to get a scholarship and actualize their entelechy. Or, consider *Good Will Hunting*. If Will had not had the good fortune to be discovered by a Harvard professor, would he have been capable of realizing his potential? And even academia itself seems all too frequently to hamper genius—as seen in both Joseph Knecht’s dissatisfaction with the conformity of Castalia and Stephen

Dedalus's frustration with the ineptitude of his professor (Tundish—it was on the tip of his tongue!) So, although it is difficult to determine where the first glow of genius comes from, it can be held that it is only refined through proper education and the precedence of a just society.

But even beyond this, one must ask: is the life of genius a life worth living? It is commonly said that “ignorance is bliss,” and thus it is (paradoxically) folly to be sage. Knowledge is often sobering, and the truth often hurts—ask Edna, for whom “despondency had come over... in the wakeful night, and had never lifted” (151). Even in the midst of a mystical moment, Stephen feels above him “the vast indifferent dome and the calm processes of the heavenly bodies” (124). If knowledge is unsettling, it is perspective that terrifies: for it reminds the unlucky of the brevity of their own life. And beyond cosmological insignificance, knowledge also produces an awareness of the futility of thought: the more you know, the more you know how little you know. At one point in *The Glass Bead Game*, a frustrated Knecht laments that “everything is contradictory, everything tangential; there are no certainties anywhere. Everything can be interpreted one way and then again interpreted in the opposite sense. The whole of world history can be explained as development and progress and can also be seen as nothing but decadence and meaninglessness. Isn't there any truth? Is there no real and valid doctrine?” (83). Socrates might have revelled in this ambiguity, stating that “wisdom is knowing that [you] know nothing”—but in the present day, unilateral negation radiates defeatism.

So, as Edna says, is it “better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life?” (147). Where does this suffering spring from, existential crises notwithstanding? Genius is alienating, by necessity and by definition; the downside of brilliance is the loneliness therein. This is exemplified by the solitary Stoicism of Stephen Dedalus—even as the novel progresses, Stephen feels ostracized for his faith toward Irish tradition (linguistic

and otherwise). And in the same vein, genius seems to necessitate insulation (if not isolation) from the outside world. It matters little which is the cause and which is the effect—loneliness seems inexorably bound to genius; it follows genius as death follows the living, as the sepulchral widow follows the young lovers in *The Awakening*. In *The Glass Bead Game*, it is suggested that this isolation is necessary to maximize the potential of genius (hence Castalia's self-imposed intellectual embargo). But what does this matter if it makes life miserable? Knecht experiences a pervasive undertow of angst, while Dedalus is prone to bouts of histrionic melancholy; and Edna, even in a nuclear household, feels utterly alone. Take, for instance, *The Awakening*'s working title: "A Solitary Soul." In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf wrote that "to love makes one solitary." It seems that a love of knowledge is no different.

This steers the discussion towards another question: what is the responsibility of genius, and what is its cost? This topic is most profoundly addressed in one work: Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," where a prisoner is freed from a subterranean facsimile of the real world—to the contempt and derision of his former cellmates. The freed man stumbles into the blinding light of day and views with his own two eyes a world deeper and richer than all that had come prior—but Plato contended that the penalty for such transcendence was death; As a student of Socrates, he was all too familiar with the consequences of "corrupting the minds of the youth." So, do the enlightened have a responsibility to share their knowledge—even at the penalty of death? There is no easy answer, but self-sacrifice for an higher ideal remains the paragon of virtue. Although extremely controversial upon its initial publication, *The Awakening*'s conclusion neither smiles nor frowns on a woman prepared to renege on self-preservation before sacrificing her self. And in *The Glass Bead Game*, Knecht's departure from Castalia leads to an early death—but it is an end with purpose (almost martyrdom), "begetting, birth, and suffering, and death" (431). The

autobiographical heroes of Hesse and Joyce's novels contribute to society in the same way their authors did—through the realization of ideas, through the translation of abstract concepts onto the printed page. Is it fair that they be remembered more fondly than, say, Alexander Fleming (discoverer of penicillin) or Jonas Salk (inventor of the polio vaccine), who had an immediate effect on the world? What does genius matter if it doesn't feed the hungry?

Again: anyone who proclaims a cut-and-dry answer is almost certainly liar. There is no round peg for this square hole, there is no magic bullet. The ethics and efficacy of genius can not be set in stone, but one thing can: its importance. Genius matters, and the realization of genius matters. Consider Robin Williams's words in *Dead Poets Society*:

“We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race, and the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for.”

True genius is the selfless pursuit of the things worth staying alive for. It is not easy, and it never has been—as Mademoiselle Reisz remarked in *The Awakening*, it requires “the courageous soul” which can not be “acquired by one's own efforts”; it is the cachet of “the soul that dares and defies” alone (86). Genius is not defined by background, birthright, or bloodline, it is not constrained by method or medium. The nature of genius, rather, lies in the pursuit of the divine, in the journey toward the center. It is the path of Edna, Will, Joseph, and Stephen—even in pain and even in suffering. As Henry Van Dyke wrote, genius is “talent set on fire by courage”—a powder keg, ignited by the bravery one needs to persevere. It is not the path of

least resistance, but it is a path nonetheless. It may not be easily defined, but it is easily felt, in the reverberations of brilliance that rock society for decades. Genius can not be set in stone, but it is—and above all else, it matters.

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