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Destiny of Genius

When someone hears the word “genius,” there is usually a pretty standard image of an old man with glasses and maybe long, unkempt white hair—probably popularized by Albert Einstein—making an appearance in his or her consciousness. The definition of the word genius is often mistaken for that of others, such as insanity or mere intellect, which is understandable considering that genius is a trait that is difficult for most to empathize with. The only way to truly understand genius is to analyze the work of geniuses themselves: the writers, poets, philosophers, and artists. This is not to say that genius does not reside in other fields; as most know, there is plenty of room for brilliance in science and math. However, the humanities provide a relatable method for the rest of the world to see what happens in a genius’s mind.

For example, James Joyce, one of the most influential novelists of the twentieth century, wrote *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to describe how his childhood sculpted the genius mind he had throughout his life. This novel is a direct representation of genius through a genius himself; through his eyes it is easier to understand life when born with the kind of gift he has. Michael Cunningham deeply studied the genius and life of Virginia Woolf, one of the twentieth century’s other brilliant authors, through his novel *The Hours*. After studying her life, Cunningham was able to empathize and believed Virginia’s story needed to be told to the world. One of the most fundamental philosopher’s to have ever lived, Plato, comments on the nature of

reality—and indirectly, genius—through his “Allegory of the Cave.” Plato is known throughout history as a genius who can create observations and explanations for human nature, as philosophers do, and has provided many generations with questions and answers to ponder. Lastly, in more recent culture, Matt Damon and Ben Affleck portray the dynamics of being a genius through their film, *Good Will Hunting*. Arguably geniuses themselves, these brilliant actors give their take on what the life of a genius young man is like and how he views his potential.

Between these works, there are both common threads and disparities in regards to the nature of genius due to it being so convoluted. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen has many encounters with bullies who believe to be superior to him, often in intellect. In that time, education was a sign of wealth, and smarter kids were praised; however, these boys’ knowledge of poets and philosophers could not compare to the genius Stephen discovered in himself. Not to say that Stephen is inherently better than any of these kids based on how he was born, but to harass someone because they think they are “some kind of an intellect” (*Good Will Hunting*) leads to a different perspective on the public’s opinion of genius. In *Good Will Hunting*, a Harvard student also antagonizes those whom he views as lesser until Will, a naturally born genius, puts him back into place, embarrassing him in an exchange of regurgitated information versus original thinking. This sets one of the main distinctions between genius and one’s stereotypical notion of a scholar: the ability to distinguish oneself as able to create new ideas and engage in critical thinking.

Although, if those like the Harvard student Will meets at the bar continue to be told by society that they are the best and brightest because of their “hundred and fifty grand...education

[they] coulda picked up for a dollar fifty in late charges at the Public Library” (*Good Will Hunting*), they create an negative image of intellectuals in the eyes of many. Professor Lambeau, caught up in his mathematical achievements, such as his field’s metal, sometimes is viewed—harshly to say the least—as an “arrogant...prick” (*Good Will Hunting*). This is at an expense to true geniuses who are not just “know-it-all” who often possess a lot of money, but one who has a naturally received aptitude for both intaking information and making meaningful connections. For this reason, many geniuses tend to shy away from recognition, even if well deserved, to avoid social consequences. Personalities vary from person to person, but humbleness is a common attribute in those often mistaken for a more shallow type of intellectual.

These misconceptions stem from the inability for most to understand the mind of a genius without deeper study. Plato, in the “Allegory of the Cave,” introduces an idea that reality is relative; the reality of a genius is clearly different than that of others. Just as the prisoner who is freed has the chance to understand all of these new aspects of reality, such as the sun and the outdoors, geniuses can see further connections and create ideas no one has ever thought of. If the prisoner had gone back to talk to his fellow men in the cave, they would not be able to fathom what he is talking about, and that is the phenomenon that leads to not being able to understand the mind of a genius. A genius is able to see connections that no one else can, like the man who escaped the cave. That is why so many psychologists have a difficult time evaluating Will, and not even Virginia Woolf’s own husband can fully comprehend what goes on in her mind. Genius is something that often just has to be accepted instead of dissected. But the nature of genius, as convoluted as it is, deserves more understanding for the sake of those with this gift.

Expanding on Plato's allegory, if the man who escaped and was enlightened by the real world came back to his friends in the cave, it is likely that he may submit himself back to the world of shadows in order to feel companionship and assimilate with the people around him. He could also try and break them free, as Plato mentioned, but when it comes to the topic of genius, it is nearly impossible to force others to see the world the way a genius does. Therefore, it is common for a genius to desire to fit in with others; Will is a perfect example, because he is drawn to an "ordinary" life. He does not want to stand out or be viewed as different or better than anyone else, and he lives this philosophy by choosing friends he can laugh with and are loyal to him and working humbling jobs such as being a janitor or construction worker. His excuse for continuing to live an ordinary life is that "there's honor in that" (*Good Will Hunting*), but one of the true reasons is that he is afraid of becoming like Professor Lambeau or any other world renowned intellectual due to the increased ego or social stigma. Similarly, in *The Hours*, Richard plays down his own genius which keeps him from accepting one of the most prestigious awards in literature, saying "I got a prize for having AIDS and going nuts and being brave about it, it had nothing to do with my work" (Cunningham 63). Stephen follows this pattern as well; while being confined to the church hinders his artistic genius, he still ends up being drawn back to it and even considers becoming a priest. Plato believes that the enlightened prisoner would think it is "better...to endure anything, rather than think as they do and live after their manner" (Plato) but humans desire to fit in and this narrative is consistent with many geniuses in literature.

However, it is not always simple for a genius to assimilate. For instance, people tend to classify traits out of the ordinary as some type of illness, and genius can share similar traits with

insanity. Virginia, for example, does show signs of serious mental illness, but when it comes to being able to conceive ideas for her writing, her mannerisms seem unorthodox to many, and even a bit crazy. As her sister tries to make conversation about her children, for instance, Virginia is thinking about her novel and how “someone else will die...someone with sorry and genius enough to turn away from the seductions of the world, its cups and coats” (Cunningham 154). As her mind wanders, she thirsts to think deeper than of the superficial aspects of life those around her seem focused on, even if she is read as morbid to some. She also desires to live a simple life in London, where she can live freely and inspired to create her novels; the agony of not being able to live the life she desires drives her to suicide. Stephen, while “daydreaming” about various connections in the universe and pondering the world around him, exhibits behaviour similar to someone who is dissociating from reality. Similarly to Virginia, he cannot find himself to concentrate on something as mundane as “the names of places in America” but would rather think about how “they were all in different countries and the countries were in continents and the continents were in the world and the world was in the universe” (Joyce 27). Albert Einstein is also famous example; as genius as he was, many people believed him to be insane since he did not know how to care for himself properly and lived his life in an unusual way. Genius and insanity can go hand in hand, if someone feels they have to always conform to society, there is never any room for new, brilliant ideas.

For kids such as Stephen, having the mind of a genius, or even being intelligent, leads to bullying and disapproval from peers. It is a result of these key traits: the perceived arrogance and social ineptness. This is why kids of any type of intellect tend to be easy targets, why jocks are praised and nerds are harassed. Stephen was attacked by his classmates and pushed into a

“cold and slimy” ditch as he was clearly guilty simply by being different than his peers (Joyce 26). This is not limited only to children; geniuses have the tendency to feel alone and isolated throughout their lives due to not being understood and being seen as different. All aspects of the nature of genius end up pointing to an inevitable loneliness, and each character handles it in their own way. Stephen chooses to accept the isolation and use it to create art as he leaves Ireland and his family. Virginia and Richard are both eventually driven to a suicide in part fueled by loneliness. Will distances himself from others emotionally because he fears of abandonment. If geniuses are on a completely different cognitive level than that of their peers, how could it be easy for them to make meaningful connections? It is difficult for a genius to relate to others or for others to relate to them, which easily leads to some sense of isolation.

While Plato would it is the responsibility of a genius to try and enlighten the rest of the world, it is important to question whether or not that is really possible. Artists, such as James Joyce, Matt Damon, and Michael Cunningham, do their best to spread the understanding of a genius’s mind, but there is still the complexity and mystery behind it. However, a genius does have a moral responsibility to use his or her brilliant mind instead of suppressing it. Where would the world be today without Mozart, Newton, or Shakespeare trying to use their full potential for the betterment of society? Most people at the end of their lives do not wish that they had done less. Virginia and Richard both desired to write more before their lives were cut short, and that is why Will’s friends and Sean believe that Will needs to use his gift instead of throwing it away for a more ordinary, or even honorable life. Stephen realizes that he cannot live to his full potential where he currently resides and decides to drop everything and leave in order to pursue his talent. Artists fantasize over capturing every part of life, because “there’s the

weather, there's the water and the land, there are the animals, and the buildings, and the past and the future, and there's space and there's history" (Cunningham 66). The consequences of genius are incredibly real and often discouraging, but brilliant ideas can bloom in spite of the isolation.

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