Solitary Confinement

Have you ever found yourself longing for solitude to find your piece of mind? It is interesting how something that seems as undesirable as loneliness would be the one of the best ways to find answers to difficult questions. Solitude is often thought of as a synonym for loneliness; however that does not quite hold true. A person can be lonely within a group of multiple peers, just as it does not necessarily follow that someone that is by their lonesome is always lonely. The writers of the Romantic, Victorian, and Modern periods often focused on this topic in their poems. While each period had its own ideas, many of the poems have similar points and themes of how there is much to learn from being in solitude. Poems such as “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and “Prometheus Unbound” by Percy Shelley from the Romantic Period, “The Lady of Shalott” by Alfred Lord Tennyson, “Uphill” by Christina Rossetti, and “Lines Written in Kensington Gardens” by Mathew Arnold from the Victorian Age, and “The Walk” by Thomas Hardy and “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” by William Butler Yeats all feature themes of solitude, but sometimes the solitude leads to different realizations.

The Romantics were the first to center on solitude of the three periods, and their ideas seemed much different than future authors. Romantics focused more on the negative aspects of solitude, and the idea of solitude as punishment. “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is the masterpiece of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and is often considered one of the greatest poems, not just of the Romantic Period, but of all literary history. Coleridge suffered from addiction most of his adult life, and as a result he was a somewhat melancholy spirit. This could be seen in lines 464 to 467 in which he says “We drifted o’er the harbour-bar (sic)/ And I with sobs did pray --/ O let me be awake my God!/ Or let me sleep alway” (Coleridge 455). The man in the story was sailing alone after killing an albatross, and got so distraught from the loneliness he prayed either to be relieved of the pain or just to die. He was cursed with the death of his shipmates, who one by one cursed him as they passed. In this case, the ancient mariner was sentenced to solitude as a punishment. More evidence from this story is through lines 496 to 499 where Coleridge states “This seraph-band, each waved his hand/ No voice did the impart --/ No voice; but oh! The silence sank/ Like music on my heart (456). A seraph is a shining celestial being, highest in the ranks of the angels.
He heard no voice, no music, yet the band made his heart sink, more than likely because he realized there was really nobody there with him. Sailing in the middle of the sea by your lonesome would be bad enough, but being haunted by the memories of the lives you cost would be absolute torture. This instance could be compared to a stay in solitary confinement at a penitentiary or a detention center. Solitary confinement causes so much mental distress that there are debates today to see if it is a truly just practice. One article cites an instance where a prolonged stay has deteriorated a man’s entire psychological well-being. The source states “A New York psychiatrist testified Thursday that Jose Padilla, a U.S. citizen accused by the government of being an “enemy combatant”, developed so many mental ailments during three years of solitary confinement in the Navy brig in Charleston, S.C., that is he is not competent to stand trial” (Parker). The prolonged isolation has caused this man to develop so many mental ailments that he cannot even compose himself enough to stand trial. This is more evidence to further the Romantics’ idea that solitude was, in fact, a punishment.

More evidence from the Romantics that their view of solitude was punishment can be found in the works of Percy Shelley. Shelley’s “Prometheus Unbound” details the suffering of the Greek God Prometheus, who was chained to a mountain on Earth by himself as punishment. Prometheus is assumed to be the speaker and he says “No change, no pause, no hope! – Yet I endure/ I ask the Earth, have not the mountains felt?/ I ask yon Heaven—the all-beholding Sun/ Has it not seen? The Sea, in storm or calm, Heavens ever changing Shadow spread below/ Have its deaf waves no heard my agony?/ Ah me, alas, pain, pain ever, forever! (798 lines 24-30). This long quote shows the suffering of Prometheus in his own words. No one can truly tell of feelings of loneliness besides the self.

Prometheus felt he would suffer by himself for all eternity. Prometheus also says “torture and solitude/ Scorn and despair, -- these are mine empire” (Shelley 798, lines 14-15). Prometheus laid it out in black and white, that he was sentenced to torture and solitude as punishment for his actions against Zeus. It was said that Prometheus created mankind out of clay and water, and then when Zeus mistreated mankind, he stole fire from the Gods, and was thus punished (Prometheus in Greek Mythology). Straight from the myth, Prometheus was sentenced to solitude, chained (or nailed) to a mountain forever. Based on these two works by Romantic authors, it would appear that the Romantic idea of solitude was one of torture and punishment.

The Victorian Age would also feature several themes of solitude, but some in a slightly different context. Alfred Lord Tennyson would continue the idea of solitude as punishment in his poem “The Lady of Shalott”. This poem states “Four gray walls, and four gray towers/ Overlook a space of flowers/ And the silent isle imbowers/
Lady of Shalott (Tennyson 1161, lines 15-18). This passage alone will not allow much to the idea of solitude, but combine that with what is states in lines 24-27 and it is clear what is happening. In those lines, Tennyson writes “But who hath seen her wave her hand? Or at the casement seen her stand? Or is she known in all the land/ The Lady of Shalott? (1162). The woman is in a tower by her lonesome, and no one knows she even exists. Later in the story, she catches a glimpse of Lancelot (but only in a mirror), and realizes that she is truly being tortured by the curse that has been put upon her. This piece from Tennyson is similar to Socrates’ Allegory of the Cave. In the allegory, prisoners are chained and unable to move, and all they see are shadows of people passing by a fire that is projected on the wall in front of them. Socrates explains “And do you see men passing along the wall, carrying all sorts of vessels and statues and figures of animals made of wood, stone, and various materials, which appear over the wall? Some of the men are talking, others silent” (Allegory of the Cave). This goes to further Tennyson’s point that solitude cannot bring truth and peace, and that solitude is a punishment rather than a blessing. The real truth, according to both Socrates and many Romantic authors, like Tennyson, cannot be found from isolations, and that you have to go out and interact with the world to discover it.

Also focusing on solitude, but in a much different manner, is the work “Up-Hill” by Christina Rossetti. The work entails a solo individual talking to what may be a sub-conscious or God (which can assumed to be the Christian God based on Rossetti’s background as a religious fanatic). In “Up-Hill”, Rossetti writes “Shall I meet other wayfarers at night? Those who have gone before/ Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?/ They will not keep you standing at the door (1495, lines 9-12). This passages does reference meeting others, however, the speaker is, at the time, by themselves. This work shows a different theme involving solitude. Its theme is that through solitude, one can find true peace and knowledge. “Up-Hill” is about continuing to press onward, no matter the hardships you face, and that there is rest for the weary at the end. This is discovered through the conversation that the speaker (who is making the walk) and either themselves or a higher being a having. The solitude of the speaker that is taking the walk gave the power of knowledge and led them to realize what the true purpose in life was.

Also from the Victorian Age, “Lines Written in Kensington Gardens” by Mathew Arnold also focuses on the idea that solitude brings peace and serenity. The first passage in the work establishes the speaker’s solitude with the line “In this lone, open glade I lie” (1379 line 1). The speaker is in awe of the beauty of the world around him in this work. He states “Here at my feet what wonders pass/ What endless, active life is here!/ What blowing daisies,
fragrant grass! An air-stirred forest, fresh and clear (1379 lines 13-16). The speaker of this poem has found a place of Zen and serenity within Kensington Gardens. Victorians admired the aesthetic beauty of nature almost as much as the Romantics, and viewed nature as the number one place to find peace of mind and just relax. After the speaker has this experience, he believes that he has only just begun to live. He says “The will to neither strive nor cry/ The power to feel with other give!/ Calm, calm me more! Nor let me die/ Before I have begun to live (1380 lines 41-44).

While in the gardens, the speaker had an epiphany that life may have been passing him by. The peace and quiet he experience by himself in Kensington Gardens led him to this epiphany, and that life and nature were truly too beautiful to stand by and just be alive, not live. The Victorian Age poets began the swing from isolation being punishment to solitude being the most effective form of thinking.

The Modern Era is really when poets began to use solitude as a useful tool. Thomas Hardy had an interesting take on the idea of solitude in his poem “The Walk”. His idea in the poem was that even though the speaker was on this walk by himself, he was not alone. In lines 7 and 8 the speaker notes “And I went alone, and I did not mind/ Not thinking of you as left behind” (Hardy 1944). The speaker can be assumed to be talking to either a friend or another loved one, who usually made the walk with him but could not this time. However, he did not feel alone, because the memory of the one who would walk with him would always remain. His idea was that as long as you hold a memory in your mind, the person whom you miss is never really gone. Hardy also states “I walked up there today/ Just in the former way/ Surveyed around/ The familiar ground/ By myself again/ What difference then? (1944 lines 9-14). In the passage he is saying that he went about the walk as usual, even though he was by himself. There was no difference in the feeling of the walk, or the importance, just the physical difference that the person whom he is addressing was not there. This serves to validate Hardy’s idea, among others, that as long as you do not view yourself as lonely, even if you are isolated, you are not alone.

William Butler Yeats also used solitude and isolation as a key focus of many of his works. In “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”, Yeats defines peace of mind to be self-attained. He states “And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dripping slow/ Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings” (2087, lines 5-8). Now, he does not literally mean if you wait in the morning, peace will drip over you. What he means is that you can attain peace whatever the place, and whatever the circumstances you are placed in. You develop a sense of peace of mind through self-evaluation, not through what someone else tells you or how you are perceived by society. Yeats also states in the same poem “While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey/ I hear it in the deep heart’s
core” (2088, lines 11-12). Here, he is explaining that it does not matter where you are, or what you are doing, you can find peace in your own heart, and nowhere else. An article written on how to achieve inner peace states “The secret to inner peace lies in understanding our inner core values—those things in our lives that are most important to us” (Smith). Even the author of a book studying different ways to obtain inner peace believes that the key lies in forming our own opinions, and discovering what is most important to us.

There are many different uses for the idea of solitude. Each the Romantics, Victorians, and the Modern Day writers had their own ideas about what effects solitude could have on the human mind and soul. The Romantics believed isolation to be punishment, as did some Victorians. Other Victorians focused on the fact that solitude did not necessarily mean you were alone, and the Modern Day authors often wrote of how solitude was the direct line to inner peace. While solitude may be just a simple word, it has many different connotations. How do you feel about solitude?


