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The Road Often Taken

by Lauren Stull

(English 1102)

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And perhaps having the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

—Robert Frost

Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken" epitomizes nonconformity in its finest form: independent thinking and reasoning. His first description of "two roads diverged in a yellow wood" (1) symbolizes the choice the traveler in his poem must make. Frost's poem leaves no indication of which path was chosen, and while it remains unknown if the narrator regrets taking the road less traveled by—or if his decision had negative repercussions, it is quite clear that in doing so it "has made all the difference" (20). There have been many stories and poems written about rebellion, conformity, obedience, and compliance. These stories can be found in almost any culture, and each culture has its own adaptation reflecting its region's morals and beliefs. The poems "The Unknown Citizen" and "We Wear the Mask" as well as the stories "Orientation" and "The Bridegroom" very evidently depict how conformity often yields a uniform etiquette and instills an adequate sense of overall satisfaction in people, but never leads to personal happiness or fulfillment.

"The Unknown Citizen" is a poem that drastically contrasts "The Road Not Taken" content-wise, yet surprisingly complements the themes of rebellion and conformity in both works. Where Frost's poem emphasizes nonconformity, W.H. Auden's "The Unknown Citizen" features elements

of conformity. The unknown citizen was completely compliant with the norms of society. As the poem indicates there was a lot of documentation on how he lived his life: Union reports, Health-cards, conduct reports, and researched studies are all mentioned throughout the piece (Auden 3-22). None of these reports and studies found anything out of the ordinary. The narrator even states that “he held the proper opinions for the time of year; / when there was peace, he was for peace; when there was war, he went” (23-24).

It is depressing that certain people could seemingly find out everything they could ever want to know about how this “unknown citizens” lived his life, but would never really know who he was or if he was truly happy. The irony behind this poem is that the narrator uses quantitative research – the comparison of this man’s lifestyle to those of other citizens– to find a qualitative answer to the question of if he was truly happy. The role conformity plays in this poem is that while the “unknown citizen” completely conformed to societal standards –the standards that are perceived to result in a happy life– it was unknown whether or not his life of conformity was in fact a happy one. This implication is reinforced by the last two lines of the poem, in which the narrator writes, “Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd: / Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard” (29-30).

According to Alice Eagly, the definition of conformity “consists of stating an attitude or belief or engaging in a behavior that is consistent with that of other members of a group or with other people in one’s social environment” (Eagly 263). In order to be labeled as conformity, the belief, attitude, or behavior must indicate a change from a previously-held opinion that would have remained held in the absence of the influence of other people (Eagly 263). Two types of conformity are normative influence, defined as “influence to conform with the positive expectations of another” and informational influence, or “influence to accept information obtained from another as evidence about reality” (Eagly 264). Normative influence is most often found in manipulative behavior and the desire to gain positive outcomes such as liking and approval and avoid negative outcomes like rejection and personal embarrassment are why people respond to this specific type of influence. Informational influence occurs more often when people rely on others’ actions and attitudes as a valid or potentially valid source of information in regard to the nature of reality (Eagly 264). It is often found that people feel inclined to conform to social pressures due to fear of rejection, regardless of whether or not the individual is opposed to the behavior, attitude, or belief. Social Comparison Theory states that “our search for guidance strongly influences our self-esteem” (“Conformity” 600). Furthermore, our search for guidance has a major impact on our self-image. If an individual publicly conforms, it does not necessarily mean that he or she also agrees privately, or internally. This disagreement leads to inner conflict and unhappiness, an implied theme in “The Unknown Citizen” and the main idea that fuels Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, “We Wear the Mask.”

In his poem, Dunbar personifies a “mask that grins and lies” (1), or conceals our true emotions from our peers. He explains how people can be in pain and agony on the inside, and that their ability to disguise their actual feelings is the “debt we [people] pay to human guile” (3); in other words, it is the price we pay to artful deception in order to appear normal. The second stanza of “We Wear the Mask” ironically asks readers why the rest of their peers should need to know that they are in pain and why other people should see them in their most vulnerable state by inquiring “Why should the world be overwise / in counting all our tears and sighs?” (6-7). This is Dunbar’s justification as to why we wear the mask.

The final stanza of the poem continues emphasizing how people can appear calm, collected, and even happy on their exterior regardless of the torment, misery, and woe they may feel inside: “We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries / To thee from tortured souls arise. / We sing, but oh the clay is vile / beneath our feet, and long the mile. . .” (Dunbar 10-13). The poem’s last two lines, “. . . let the world dream otherwise / we wear the mask!” (14-15) plainly state that the rest of the world need not concern themselves with any one individual’s personal pain. This poem clearly exemplifies

the potential inner conflict of a person forced to conform to an environment he or she morally or ethically disagrees with, further validating that conformity does not always lead to personal happiness or fulfillment.

Another example of conformity leading to unhappiness is the story “Orientation” by Daniel Orozco, which depicts conformity differently than Frost’s, Auden’s, and Dunbar’s poems. Written as a workplace orientation monologue, “Orientation” starts out as a bland and boring “first day on the job” tour. In the story, the company symbolizes society and a job position within the company symbolizes an individual’s role within society. The company policies represent society’s rules, and thus conforming to the company’s policies resembles conforming to society. The perks and benefits mentioned throughout the story –i.e.: the comprehensive health plan (Orozco 455), the Costco membership (456), and the “generous vacation and sick leave policy” (456) – all symbolize the benefits of conforming to society.

Hypothetically, these representative benefits would result in the happiness of the office employees because they adhere to their job’s standards. This resulting happiness symbolizes the satisfaction and fulfillment in complying with society’s standards. As the story continues, however, readers are exposed to more personal information about the office workers’ lives: details revealing that the employees are far from happy, and that any regular job orientation would never include. For example, when the narrator tells readers that office employee Barry Hacker steals other people’s food from the office refrigerator, he also casually adds that “his petty theft is an outlet for his grief” (Orozco 456), and then begins to tell a story about Hacker’s deceased wife. Another instance in which more inappropriate personal details are given is when the narrator points out the restrooms; he states that John LeFountaine occasionally uses the women’s bathroom, and that “his forays into the forbidden territory of the women’s room [are] simply a benign thrill, a faint blip on the dull flat line of his life” (455).

Readers also discover that there are two types of employees in this workplace. Both classes of employee appear to conform to the assigned workplace role but in fact do not. The first type of workers do their job effectively without their personal issues obtrusively intervening in their everyday work life. Examples of this class of worker include Kevin Howard, the serial killer nicknamed the “Carpet Cutter” (457), and Anika Bloom, the psychic who “fell into a trance, stared into her hand, and told Barry Hacker when and how his wife would die” (455). The second kind of employee is undeniably miserable because their personal problems affect their workplace roles, yet they choose to conform nonetheless. This type includes the characters Amanda Pierce, a woman with an autistic son and a sexually abusive husband (455), and Gwendolyn Stich, a considerate and generous employee that has an eating disorder and is depressed because Kevin Howard –the serial killer– has a “secret” crush on her (457). These character types potentially resemble two varieties of people who choose to conform to societal standards regardless of whether or not doing so is in their own personal best interests.

One of the many rules and regulations in this workplace environment is that if the office workers do not comply with the rules, they “may be let go” (455). This adds to the underlying theme of conformity because if any employee chooses not to adhere to these rules, they suffer the consequence of losing their position in the company. The same idea is represented through an individual choosing not to conform to societal standards and consequently being shunned from society. All of the employees follow these rules which are meant to enforce a sense of conformity and result in their happiness. Regardless of their compliant nature, the office workers instead find themselves struggling through their workdays, coping with and attempting to mask their own personal misery.

The irony behind “Orientation” is that to any outsider, this office workplace would appear normal because all of its employees conform to the same standards of workplace etiquette; at first glance the employees also appear to be happy with their work and personal lives. However, it is

obvious through the monologue of the employee directing the orientation that all of the office employees are either miserable or disturbed. This story adds to the idea that Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask" is formed around: the recurrent theme that conforming does not yield happiness and that those who conform and are still in agony suffer silently.

Ha Jin's "The Bridegroom" is set in China, and contrasts the idea of people suffering silently due to submission to authority. Written in 1999 (Jin 413) –when homosexuality was banned by the Chinese government– the story's main characters Beina and Huang Baowen refuse to succumb to the pressures of conformity by accepting each other for who they truly are. Despite the discrimination and persecution that Chinese gays faced during the time the story is set, Beina accepts Huang as her husband regardless of his homosexuality, and Huang accepts and cares for Beina as his wife despite his attraction to men. An interesting fact that contributes to the hypocrisy of "The Bridegroom" is that homosexuality was once widely accepted throughout the Chinese culture (Elegant). What readers may find even more intriguing is that homosexuality is once again becoming more acceptable in China's society (Elegant).

"Historically, Chinese society was relaxed about homosexuality, which was tolerated so long as it didn't interfere with the Confucian duty to raise a family," writes Simon Elegant in an article for *Time Magazine* (Elegant). Elegant also writes that "although an imperial decree banned homosexuality in 1740 (probably under the influence of Christian missionaries), it was the Communists who first drove gays and lesbians underground" (Elegant). According to *The Encyclopedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories and Cultures*, the reasons why China shifted from a relative tolerance of homosexuality to open hostility are "complex and not yet completely understood" ("China" 187). The shift in perspective occurred in the twentieth century and was most likely influenced by western cultures, as "the Chinese reformers early in the century began to see any divergence between their own society and that of the West as a sign of backwardness" (187). This source states that it was in 1949 –when homosexuals were sentenced to "reeducation" in labor camps as punishment for their sexual preference and were penalized through anal rape and other forms of abusive behavior– that openly gay life in China came swiftly to an end (187).

More recently, the Chinese police have been preoccupied with the rising crime rate in China, and generally ignore the country's gay and lesbian citizens ("China" 187). China's policy on homosexuality has become one of a "don't ask, don't tell" nature, with more populated regions –such as Beijing and other major cities– carrying a similar "triple-no policy: no approval, no disapproval, no promotion" (Elegant). Beijing enforced this policy in 2005 by forbidding all theaters in the city from showing the film *Brokeback Mountain* (Hewitt). "The message: do what you want in your bedroom, but don't make a public issue out of it," wrote Duncan Hewitt in *Newsweek* last year. He concluded his article by writing that the city's reluctance to screen the movie is "yet another sign of how nervous Beijing is about any kind of activism it can't control" (Hewitt) and that homosexuals have a long way to go until they obtain a respectable level of tolerance and acceptance from the Chinese government (Hewitt). In 2001, homosexuality was taken off of China's official list of mental illnesses (Elegant), assuring that homosexuals will not have to tolerate treatments similar to those that Huang Baowen had to endure (Jin 407).

It is essential for Chinese homosexual activists and readers of "The Bridegroom" to realize that the nonconformity, in addition to the nonviolent forms of rebellion utilized throughout the story and the history of homosexual repression in the Chinese culture are what effectively achieved results. Though the story does not have a happy ending –Huang is ultimately sentenced to three and a half years in jail for committing the "crime" of homosexuality (Jin 412) –Huang and Beina's unconditional acceptance of each other not only shows tolerance for diversity, but also represents the significant element of nonconformity throughout the story. This element of the story is important because ultimately nonconformity and perseverance are what repealed the law banning sodomy in China in 1997 (Elegant). Beina and Huang's acceptance of each other for who they truly are also

symbolizes the hope of unconditional acceptance and understanding for people in a culture where there is none. This hope serves as an inspiration not to conform to society because it is appropriate, but to create a culture in which people are allowed to be whom they are without having to conform to or be judged by a general set of standards. Ideally, this level of acceptance has the potential of becoming present in any culture or society.

The underlying moral within each of these stories and poems is that conformity is an effective method of obtaining a uniform etiquette and adequate sense of satisfaction in a large group of people. However, in a diverse group of individuals, conformity is not always in the best interest of everyone. While rebellion without a cause is foolish, nonconformity for an unselfish and just cause – such as happiness and equality for a diverse group of people– is acceptable, and can be just as effective and appropriate as conformity. It is not only crucial for readers to comprehend this significant idea behind rebellion and conformity in order to better understand the collection of poems and stories referenced: it is also important for readers to realize because, in doing so, they become more open-minded and knowledgeable about the world they live in.

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