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Pride and Self-Improvement in American Literature

Vanity has historically been perceived as a characteristic fault, which was perhaps encouraged by the condemnation of vanity in the Bible. Only recently has recognizing one's own achievements been more widely acknowledged as a constructive activity. However, vanity has always been present, whether apparent or hidden within motives. Vanity can take many forms, including pride in oneself and pride in what a person is a part of. Americans are known for their patriotism and this pride can be traced back to the early 1600's, before America was even established. A key element of this pride is the need to be the best and to improve, both personally and nationally. This theme can be traced through literature from John Winthrop's sermon "A Modell of Christian Charity" (1630), to Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1791), to Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853). These three pieces of literature depict the pride in oneself and in one's country characteristic of Americans; revealing the importance of self-improvement within American culture.

The early settlers at the Plymouth Plantation and the Massachusetts Bay Colony came to America primarily to escape religious persecution in Europe. In Europe, Catholicism was the main, and the only, accepted religion. However, Puritans believed in predestination, providential history, had a typological view of the world, and believed that the Catholic Church of England was corrupt. However, their relationship with England remained strong and they considered the

royal family of England their sovereign leader. Most of the colonist's literature was printed in England, as the colonists did not have a printing press until the 1640's, and widespread printing did not occur until the 1700's. While not all of the settlers were Puritans, the Puritans were dominant and therefore religion was prevalent throughout all aspects of life, including literature once they obtained a printing press. Only religious and didactic literature was accepted; texts written for pure entertainment such as plays and novels were frowned upon. Puritan literature began as orature and sermons to be given and written down by the congregation, as is the case of John Winthrop's sermon, "A Modell of Christian Charity."

John Winthrop was the leader of the colonists that came over to America on the *Arbella* in 1630 and he later became the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He gave a sermon while aboard the *Arbella* that detailed the way the Puritans should conduct themselves in the new world. He advocated for a strong community, as relying on each other was the only way they could survive in the New World. If they relied on God's teachings and treated others as though God were observing every action, it is proof of them being among the elect and of future peace and prosperity. The Puritans believed that they were God's chosen people and America was their "promised land;" equating themselves to the Israelites leaving Egypt with Moses. They believed that they would serve as the perfect religious example to the rest of the world, as John Winthrop said, "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God [...] we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world" (Winthrop 47). The New England Puritans were always concerned with maintaining their image and improving themselves in order to fulfill God's will. The desire to be a perfect demonstration of piousness for all the world to see and the belief that they are God's

chosen people reveals a sort of vanity, which is a contradiction to the biblical principle of humility and meekness. This pride in themselves was not American patriotism, but still a recognition of themselves as a separate entity from England and a pride in their distinct mission with a desire to be better than the country from which they came.

During the 18th and early 19th centuries, the Enlightenment altered American values and religion was somewhat neutralized by reason. Both American and European society shifted from monarchical, traditional, and faith-driven, to democratic, scientific, and rational. Literacy and rhetorical power became the keys to success in America, partly in response to new communications media. Literacy was seen as a representation of humanity, so life writing and first-person narratives were popularized as evidence of worth. There was a new emphasis on the individual and the humanity of the individual, which drove a desire for self-improvement.

Benjamin Franklin is often the model of a self-made man, as he became successful despite his humble origins, and he is determined to make this apparent in his *Autobiography*. The image of a self-made man was much admired during the Enlightenment, as it proved one was making wise use of his life to improve himself and society, and therefore proved one's worth. Being successful and rising through society's ranks had its roots in practicality, as contributing to society was encouraged in the newly democratic nation. Franklin was deepy proud of his image as a self-made man and claimed this vanity and the vanity inherent in writing an autobiography was not necessarily a poor quality one can have. He claims vanity is innate and credited God, writing, "it would not be altogether absurd if a man were to thank God for his vanity among the other comforts of life" (Franklin 69). Franklin also intimates that this pride in oneself can lead to self improvement, as "the privilege of recounting freely our own good actions might be an

inducement to the doing of them" (70). As mentioned above, self-improvement leads to an improvement of America, as they are now a "valuable member of society" (70). This importance of contributing to society and the importance of the individual continues into the American Renaissance of the early 19th century.

The American Renaissance took place during the Antebellum period before the civil war, a time of reform movements (i.e. abolition, temperance and women's rights), economic instability, population growth, and the revolutionary appearance of new communication technologies. Before the American Renaissance, American literature often mimicked European texts. However, the Renaissance was characterized by three literary movements that were purely American: Transcendentalism, Sentimentalism, and Romanticism. All three dealt with moral development, whether in connection with nature, charity and immediate social problems, or human frailty, respectively. Transcendentalists, unlike Benjamin Franklin, were interested in getting rid of their own ego by spending time in nature, which reveals aspects of humanity that cannot be seen when occupied with societal and materialistic distractions. They were also interested in self-improvement, but by abolishing the idea of the self altogether. Sentimentalism was concerned with the plights of minorities and the oppressed and their potential ability to contribute to society. Romanticism tended to discuss bigger existential questions that do not have immediate social outcomes and examined human frailty, the loss of faith, and the inevitability of death.

"Bartleby, the Scrivener" by Herman Melville was a Romantic short story and was perhaps a response to sentimentalism through discussing the failure of the narrator to sympathize with Bartleby or to understand how to sympathize with someone who lacked humanity or the

desire for self-improvement. The short story details the relationship between the narrator, a successful lawyer, and a scrivener he hires named Bartleby. Whenever the narrator asks Bartleby to complete a task, Bartleby replies with, "I'd prefer not to." The narrator, a man with an easygoing demeanor, was increasingly frustrated by Bartleby's refusal to do work and his refusal to contribute to society. He said that his original pity turned "into repulsion" and that "this is owing to the inherent selfishness of the human heart" as "common sense bids the soul to be rid of [pity]" (Melville 68). He claims that since pity cannot provide "effectual succor," it is not necessary as it does not help one contribute to society (60). Since contributing to society is such an integral part of society, the narrator cannot understand why Bartleby has no desire to do so. Bartleby does not wish to further himself, so the narrator goes so far as to strip away Bartleby's humanity. In response to Bartleby's phrase, "I'd prefer not to," the narrator asks, "how could a human creature, with the common infirmities of our nature, refrain from bitterly exclaiming upon such perverseness - such unreasonableness" (61). The narrator establishes a distinction between himself, a human creature, and Bartleby, who he refers to as an "apparition" or a "ghost" on numerous occasions (62, 90). When Bartleby does not comply to society's standards or demonstrate any pride in who he is or what he is doing, he is not human. This again illustrates the pride of Americans in themselves and in their society, and their wish for the betterment of both.

Pride and self-improvement have a crucial place in American culture, and it is present throughout several centuries of American literature. In the colonial period, it is under the guise of religious devotion and religious betterment. The Puritans had the desire to be theologically better and to serve as an example for the rest of the world; taking pride in their self-improvement. In

the Enlightenment and American Renaissance periods, self-improvement is embodied in the idea of contributing to society. Benjamin Franklin directly states in his *Autobiography* that there is a chain-like relationship between vanity, improvement of the self, and the furtherance of society. This may have been controversial at the time, but it accurately portrays the patriotism prevailing during the time of the American Revolution and the emergence of the importance of the individual. The American Renaissance advanced the idea of the individual and their input to society, particularly through moral development. Melville illustrates this idea of personal and societal betterment, making it seem unnatural to have no pride in oneself or in one's society.