Liberation And The Immoralist Essay, Research Paper

Image Patterns:

Liberation in the Immoralist

The Immoralist by Gide is a novel that takes you through a series of events in the life of a man named Michel. The biggest issue seen in the novel is that of egocentrism. Everything done in the book is done to pleasure Michel and only him. I looked at the novel differently. I saw it as being about a man who is trapped in many aspects of life and is trying to get out in order to find his true self. The capacity to get free is nothing; the capacity to be free, that is the task. (Gide, 7) What this line is saying is that freedom is attainable but to remain free without reverting back to the old ways, that is the hard part. This paper will look at the examples of this self-liberation through different situations in the book. There are four main layers of liberation that will be discussed in the body of this paper. The four layers involved are liberation from material possessions, liberation from society and culture, liberation from the past (memories) and emphasis on the present, liberation from the self. The layers will be examined and peeled off as the road to self-liberation is completely traveled

The first topic in the discussion of liberation will be that of material possessions. In the novel, Menalque reminds Michel about how the possession of material items is a downfall of man. I have a horror of comfort; possessions invite comfort, and in their security a man falls asleep; I love life enough to try to live wide awake… (p.99) Menalque uses this to show Michel how possessions distract a persons interests in the world around them. Possessions make a person worry about what they have, their whole world revolves around what they have and they miss out on everything else this world has to offer to them. The infatuation with material items is what causes the most pain and aggravation in one life.

Furniture, fabrics, engravings, everything lost its value for meat the first blemish-things stained, things infected by disease and somehow marked with morality. I longed to protect everything, to put it all under lock and key for myself alone…It s because I save things that I have to suffer. (Pg. 102)

This quote shows the realization that material possessions do not bring happiness to a person. Liberation begins when you realize that possessions are nice to have but they are arbitrary to our lives. These possessions are just like us, they get old and worn down, then eventually die. There is no sense in wasting one s life in watching their possessions when their life is becoming old and worn down.

Material possessions is the first step in liberation for Michel. The next thing that Michel is liberating himself from is that of culture and society. Menalque is like the conscience of Michel. He is sort of a spiritual guide in the process of liberating Michel. Menalque has already freed himself from the grasp of society and culture. He has become the antithesis of society. Menalque is the antisocial, antiestablishment figure. He is an anarchist. This time the trip will be longer and more dangerous than the others; I don t know when I ll be coming back…no one knows I am leaving so soon. (pg.106) Menalque talks to Michel about society and culture s ability to conform its members without it actually being considered conformity. People naturally conform to society.

If there s one thing each of them claims not to resemble it s…himself. Instead he sets up a model, then imitates it; he doesn t even choose the model-he accepts it ready-made. (Pg 104)

People don t want to be themselves. The norm in society is to look and act like somebody else. This conformity only leads to the entrapping of one s soul. People are afraid to find themselves alone, and don t find themselves at all. (Pg 104) Michel s part in this topic is a quite hypocritical. In the lectures he gives Michel states, I said that Culture, born of life, ultimately kills life. (Pg 93) Michel is talking how culture can enthrall a persons whole life than eventually take it from them. He doesn t practice what he preaches though. Up until Michel meets Menalque after his lectures, he lives the life of a man who reeks of the upper class, the people that set the standard for culture.

Menalque and Michel seem to liberate themselves from the ethical and moral standards set forth by society when they perform homosexual acts with one another. Prove you re not a man of principles-can I count on you to spend that last night with me?…Of course, then, I ll keep that vigil with you. (pg.106) This act was looked upon as a don t in society. Times weren t as open as they are now. These two go against the highest standard in their culture. This rebellion is a definite way of liberating or casting one s self out of the cultural and social grasps.

The next layer of liberation found in The Immoralist can be described as moving on by forgetting. Throughout the novel, the characters refer to forgetting about the past in order to move on in the present time. Menalque resumes his role as being the little voice in the ear of Michel. Menalque shows Michel that live for the day is the best way because you experience everything new.

Because I don t want to remember, he answered. If I did, I might keep the future from happening by letting the past encroach upon it. I create each hour s newness by forgetting yesterday completely… (pg. 111)

Menalque represents an old saying by an Italian man named Baccaria \*, Happy is the nation with no history. You live better if you know nothing but what you see. This is a key factor in liberating your self, it is a rebirth everyday of your life. Regret, remorse, repentance-they re all former joys, reversed. (pg.112)

Michel shows that throughout the book that he wants to free himself from the past. His biggest deterrent is his studies. His profession was to study the past and their philosophies, history, and teachings. That profession alone dwells solely on looking back on the past. The way to free himself from the constraints of the past is to give up his studies. …I tried to resume my studies, to immerse myself once more in the detailed inspection of the past, I found that something had if not suppressed at least my enjoyment of it: the sense of the present. (pg. 49) Michel realizes that his studies of history was holding back his present life. When he gets back into the job of lecturing his tone is different, he begins to go against what he preached earlier. This change caught the eye of Menalque. The lecture seen is where Michel and Menalque get together and Menalque s philosophy begins to enthrall Michel.

You re burning what you once worshipped, he said. Which is a good thing. You re catching fire late, but that means there s all the more to feed the flames with…you interest me. (Pg. 94)

Michel not only gets advice from Menalque but earlier in the novel he finds readings from the Bible. The thing about the reading is that it was very random. The Bible fell open to a page that contained a passage that has Christ speaking to Peter. This passage is a type of foreshadowing is given in this passage. The reading is about how children and adults differ in the ways they live. It shows the freedom that children have, more so, than adults. When thou wast young, thou girdest thyself and walked whither thou wouldst; but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands… (pg. 47-8) This quote was preceded by Michel writing down what he had seen that night so he could always remember it. He then read the passage. The next day they left. This passage is saying that a child knows nothing of what happened before, they go about where they want, when they want. Adults on the other hand, have doubts about what they are doing because of previous experiences, that knowledge makes a person think out everything they want to do before hand. The youth base action on spontaneity.

Liberation has been seen throughout the novel in various forms: liberation from society, possessions, the past and now, from the self. Michel is a very confused man, he isn t certain on what he wants from life. Michel hates who he is and was in the beginning of the book. This is evident on page 58, Michel states, …I gazed at myself in the mirror and disliked what I saw; I looked like what I had been up till now: a bookworm. Michel steps outside his body and begins to look inwards at himself. Michel thinks his real self is being hidden behind a mask that he has worn his entire life, and he despises it. Michel is dead-set on changing his appearance, taking off that mask, but he has apprehensions about it.

Feeling my beard fall under the scissors, I seemed to be peeling off a mask. Yet when I looked at myself afterward, the emotion which filled me-though I choked it back as well as I could-was not joy but fear…In compensation, I let my hair grow.(Pg. 59)

Michel makes the change, but it is too much for him to handle. He begins to think irrationally, unlike his normal rational demeanor. He believes that his body has been opened for all to take from what they want. He doesn t have the strength to make this change in his life.

The image pattern that was chosen for this paper was that of liberation. Michel makes stride to do this but always seems to come back to the beginning. What alarms me, I confess, is that I m still quite young. Sometimes it seems to me as if my real life hasn t begun yet. (Pg. 169) With everything that has happened in his life throughout the novel, he feels that his life is just starting. Michel has gone back to the beginning, everything will have to be done over once more. Rebirth, as Gide refers to it several times, is a liberated feeling, a feeling that all has changed for the better. This is not so for Michel. His liberation cannot take control of him because his mind hasn t been completely freed from his old beliefs and rational thinking. I have liberated myself, but what does it matter? This useless freedom tortures me. (Pg. 169) Michel will never be free, spiritually. Everything he tries to change comes back to him, because he is a thinker, he is alive. The only true liberation is death.

\* Passage taken from the Webster s New World Dictionary, Pg. BT-78.

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