The Story in Kierkegaard and Newman

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Both Kierkegaard and Newman use the story as a means to validate religious belief. More specifically, the stories described by Kierkegaard and Newman are used to understand both the function of faith and the concept of the ethical life. (One exception, however, is Newman’s use of Socrates’ apology as a means of structure, which will be discussed later in this paper.) Nevertheless, they differ in their approaches. Kierkegaard takes a highly individualizing and individualistic approach, while on the other hand, Newman uses his sense of narrative to focus upon the collective/cultural experience. It is very interesting to look at how both of these men approach the same figures in biblical history and their interpretations of them.

Before taking a look at Kierkegaard’s approach to each story and its function within his writing, we must understand his definition of the validity of a story. For Kierkegaard, it isn’t adequate to say the validity of a story should be attributed to God. Nor should the story, he believes, be attributed to the culture or be validated by it. To
understand modern culture's concept of the story, for Kierkegaard, is to listen to the language of the church and reverse it. Therefore, the only story that modern culture validates, denies the story of Jesus. Consequently, the individual is the only person who can validate the religious story. Kierkegaard uses stories of religious life to derive a religious commitment from subjectivity. However, he does not claim that one should believe in divine revelation outside his own experience for religious belief. Again, any justification for belief will be based on human experience only. The difficulty with this viewpoint then, is by what means a collective experience can be reached.

One idea that lead Kierkegaard to his individualistic approach was his belief that almost from the beginning, Christianity was corrupted by its adaptation to Hellenistic viewpoints. He believed also in an urgent need to find a justification of religious belief. Ultimately we ought to return to a single entity or individual before God which is the classic subject confronting an object of belief that makes no sense whatsoever. Therefore, Kierkegaard uses stories of individual experience to explain the religious commitment and life; through reflection upon them they lend meaning the individual existence.

A common theme played throughout Kierkegaard's stories is the operation of desire. Desire constantly plays a major role in the narrative. For instance, in the Diary of a Seducer, the seducer creates Cordelia. She has no substantial existence except as the object of his desire. Comparatively, in religion, true religious life has a real existence because it has a real object of desire (Jesus). The argument for Christianity is its absurdity. Kierkegaard contrasts Jesus as the tragic hero. The body of Jesus can be described as the object of faith. The fundamental absurdity in Christianity is that God became man. Kierkegaard reiterates this idea by suggesting that God is a concrete experience available to the people. Each story is a reflection of the problem of desire as iterated by Kierkegaard; in turn, desire is a reflection upon the problem of boredom.

For Kierkegaard, Socrates is the highest example of an ethical life. He has fallen in love with the choice of leading his life in an ethical way (which is Socrates' own creation and is not influenced by the outside). But, Socrates presents a problem for Kierkegaard in that he fulfills all the dimensions of a religious life.
(he is willing to die for religion — one criteria for religious existence), but yet he really does not live a religious life; instead he leads an ethical one. Kierkegaard solves this problem by rewriting the Symposium, bringing together all the characters of his synonymous writings. So doing, he indirectly shows that the difficulty of Socrates can be dealt with. He indicates that Socrates is teaching a life that is committed to a single purpose is the best possible to live because it can ascend to a higher existence. However, after the ascent is made, there is nothing present, which is the Socratic irony. The great problem of Socrates is his tremendous example of an ethical life, but it was a life of pure irony. He asked to ascend to a life in reality, but was presented with nothing when it was achieved. The aesthetic is not a life of choice between good or evil or a life of reflection, the desiring itself is the meaning of this life.

The function of the story of Abraham in Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling is to illustrate one man’s faith in God, a faith that goes beyond human comprehension. Abraham’s story is that of the single man before God, which is typical of Kierkegaard. “It is purely a personal undertaking.” (A Kierkegaard Anthology, 133) In the beginning of Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard describes the Knight of Faith and the Knight of Infinite Resignation. These sketches can be seen as the personalities of Abraham and that of modern man, respectively. In the description of the Knight of Faith, Kierkegaard explains the reasons behind Abraham’s actions and his willingness to kill Isaac. It is merely a function of living “by virtue of the absurd” in hopes that he may regain it in the end. (A Kierkegaard Anthology, 117) The test to which God puts Abraham is seen as a paradox. God gives Abraham his only son Isaac by a miracle but by the same token asks Abraham to sacrifice him. One might suggest that Abraham can be seen as the tragic hero. But for Kierkegaard, this view is incorrect since Abraham is willing to commit the unethical for God, which puts him into a higher reality. However, he is “ethical in the sense of morality.” Kierkegaard then asks the question “Why then did Abraham do it?” (A Kierkegaard Anthology, 133) This can be explained by the function of desire in this story: Abraham desired to prove to God the actuality/verity of his faith. This is what leads him ultimately to the willing sacrifice of his son, Isaac. Only this story shows the reader man’s willing faith in God, and it may be used as an
example to others of the function belief within society.

Job is another biblical figure used by Kierkegaard to describe "the plea of man spoken against the judgement of God." (Points of View, 89) His experience also is singular. It is a story of a man who endured much undue suffering but still had faith in God. The theme in Repetition can be the fight between faith and despair comparable to that of the story of Job. The repetition experienced by Job was only presented to him after his loss of his family and home and his trials and tribulations had been faced. Thus it can be concluded that repetition cannot be present without the ethical. The story of Constantine Constantius Revisits Berlin is one of repetition that fails "because it is an attempt and because it is pursued." (A Kierkegaard Anthology, 136) This story suggests that repetition is the reward for living an ethical life based on God; not a life based upon looking for a reward for one's actions. Repetition is not something to be pursued but something instead to be achieved. It has a base of faith within since it must be achieved. This can be seen in the story of Job; he endures the unjust calamities of the devil in hopes of achieving double his previous fortune by maintaining his faith in God. For Kierkegaard, the story of Job is a function of repetition based upon faith. If the story of Job were to be interpreted by Newman, it may be suggested that he would state that the ground of acts of faith are not to be determined by us but they are predestined. This view is somewhat similar to that of Kierkegaard's in that repetition cannot be achieved by pursuit but rather by means of a predestined reality.

Newman perhaps describes the function of story in his work best when he states: "The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description. Persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us." (Apologia Pro Vita Sua: The Structure of Newman's Apologia, 441) Therefore, for Newman, stories awaken the senses in such a manner that they inspire one to a greater existence. Through reflection upon a story perhaps one can see the life of others as well as oneself in a new perspective in relationship to God. In regard to the function of the story in his works, Newman drifts slightly from Kierkegaard. Newman, like Kierkegaard, uses his experiences/identifies himself as the truth. However, Newman's experiences are meant to reach a collective
truth. As he radically identifies himself as the truth, Newman becomes the great defender of tradition. Tradition validates the story and should not be reduced as an element of culture. The validity of the story, for Newman, should be attributed to the culture, which is a more traditional view than that of Kierkegaard's.

Newman also uses the story/life of Socrates in his writings but for a somewhat different purpose. In writing the *Apologia Pro Sua Vita,* Newman uses Socrates' apology as the model for the structure of his work. Imaginatively, he portrays himself at trial, and the apology presented is his defense. Newman is charged with purposely lying and deceiving people. Kingsley, the man who charged Newman on this count, accuses him of being secretly convinced of Roman Catholicism while still having a prominent position in the Anglican Church. Therefore, according to Kingsley, Newman had the power to lead people away from the Anglican church as he had been himself. Socrates never denies that he is corrupting the youth of Athens (impiety) perhaps because he is absolutely guilty of that charge; certainly his other dialogues tend to incriminate him. The theme of impiety also runs through the *Republic.* Socrates redefines impiety and states that he is not guilty by his own definition. Socrates states that he will not use traditional defenses; yet he does by bringing in his family.

Newman is part of the revival of classical study and rhetorical style and sensitive to the ironies of Socrates' defense. He justifies his behavior by recreating the various stages of his thought. However, Newman does not intend this to be an autobiography. He recreates the development of his thought and the important issues regarding the accusation. One profound and important concept carried by Newman is that life and change are interrelated experiences; This concept is shown by both the *Apologia* and the *Grammar of Assent.*

Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* can itself be described as a story of the development of faith. Newman carefully details for us his conversion from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism. His lesson can be taken and used by others, which it may be pointed out was not his original intention. It also has been suggested that Newman's *Apologia* can be seen as a "drama of Newman’s conversion, carefully and skillfully planned as such." (*Apologia Pro Vita Sua, The Structure of Newman's Apologia,* p. 446) This
suggestion refers to Newman's conversion as a battle in which he is a soldier struggling first against the ideals of Roman Catholicism. He is seen as a warrior fighting the truth of Anglicanism. Soon, however, he is weakened by the truths of Roman Catholicism. And "for Newman: a convert to him is a man subdued by the word or 'the force of the truth'." (Apologia Pro Vita Sua: The Structure of Newman's Apologia, 447) In the end, Newman suggests that he is on his "death-bed", as regard to his "membership with the Anglican church." Therefore, he lives, fights, dies and then is reborn again.

Thus throughout his work, Newman takes the traditional story of Jesus as central in faith or the definition of its comprehension. For Newman, the story of Jesus and his relation to the Holy Trinity has behind it "the motives for devotion and faithful obedience." (An Essay in Aid of A Grammar of Assent, 122) Only through reflection upon Jesus as the son of God and an understanding of this concept can belief be apprehended. It must be understood that the story functions both as a separate unit and yet also as a whole in the development of faith.

Newman also interprets the story of Jesus in another manner in regard to faith. He believes that even before the beginning of Jesus' life on earth, the rumors of his coming or arrival inspired people to have faith. This faith was apparent in the generations of Abraham as well as the stand made by the Jew Josephus against the Romans. In this train of thought, Newman infers the miracle of the story of Jesus. He maintains that modern culture is possible only through the coming of Christ. This idea validates the notion of how culture confirms the truth of the story.

We have considered above are merely a few examples of how story functions within the works of both authors. Both Newman and Kierkegaard use the story to achieve an understanding in religious belief in regard to faith. But while Kierkegaard approaches the concept of faith in his stories as a function of desire, Newman's faith is seen as a problem of cognition. They differ also in that Kierkegaard's story as well as his faith is highly individualistic while Newman's is one of a collective experience. Newman's stories are also his own in which he shares his experiences in order to define concepts of faith. "Every volume Newman gave to the world has reference to and is a reflection of, takes its source in and derives its strength from, his
own most private, secret, religious experience.” (Metaphors of Self: the Meaning of Autobiography, 203) On the other hand, Kierkegaard uses the stories of others such as Job and Abraham to show the function of faith in other people’s lives (perhaps in relation to his own.) Newman’s stories are to be shared and reflected by a group while Kierkegaard’s stories infer a more individualistic experience based on inward reflection. Nevertheless, both authors used stories in their works perhaps to gain a better understanding of the concept of faith for themselves as well as others.
Works Cited


