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## The Cave Man As Illustrated by Steven Millhauser's collection of short fiction *And Socrates*

"Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds" (Albert Einstein). When encountering the inexplicable, people's visceral reactions often oscillate between fear and awe-nevertheless establishing the subject in terms of "otherness." Steven Millhauser's collection of short fiction, *The Knife Thrower and Other Stories*, explores this realm of otherness in terms of familiar human emotions. The title character of "Kaspar Hauser Speaks" illustrates the struggle of taming great spirits (and normalization of otherness) by mediocre minds in a plot that harkens to a distorted reflection of Socrates' Allegory of the Cave. Various descriptions of Kaspar's life stages echo scenes of the cave dweller, though they are often tainted by societal involvement. From existence within the cave, to painful exploration in transition, to the awe-inspired desire to learn in the world of light, Kaspar is a reflection of the allegorical cave man in many ways. While Socrates illustrates the challenge of first cave dweller's progress into the light and the opposition encountered on his return to the cave, Millhauser highlights the plight of the last cave dweller entering the light and, in turn, the conflict against the rest of "enlightened" society. Beyond mirroring the Allegory of the Cave, Millhauser's goal in writing this fictional account is to ask: What is lost when one is removed from the cave and "civilized"? Is it worth the trouble?

"Is it possible for you...by the deepest, the sincerest, and most sustained effort of imagination, to understand what it means to have the sensations of a worm?" (Millhauser 204) Socrates creates a world in which all of humanity is chained to the ground, staring constantly at the wall and blankly at shadows that play before them. This is what they are created to be and serve, the reality established by their creator. Millhauser depicts a similar world in which Kaspar is also "shackled to the ground" and living "in the dark," but unlike the cave dwellers, he lives "seeing no light, no face, not a voice" and "without even being able to feel the loss of such things" (203, 205). In sharp contrast to the cave dwellers, Kaspar is guarded by a man whom he has never met but who nightly comes to his prison to bring him meager sustenance. Essentially, he is kept in his condition of darkness, a "creature jabbering unintelligibly," by human hands as a scientific experiment (201). Although this stark and animalistic treatment appears cruel to the observer, Kaspar is at the time "content, or if not content, then not discontent" (205). Although the solitary confinement seems brutal in hindsight, Kaspar is ignorant of his self-image and is therefore blind to the negatives tied with comparing oneself with one's peers. In the darkness, he knows only peace and neutrality, desiring nothing more because he, wormlike in existence, knows nothing else.

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"I knew nothing except terror and pain" (203). The transition from darkness into light is not without its pains and challenges. Once Kaspar is forced out of the cave, he is exposed to rigorous and sometimes painful socialization/education. Like the cave dwellers newly exposed to and subsequently blinded by the sun, Kaspar discovers that "for many days, [he] couldn't endure light...symbol of knowledge" because his "eyes burned" to the point that "when he looked away, everything was white" (205, 207). Acclimation to and education in this new life prove challenging and perplexing. Whether encountering a candle (the stick that "bit" him), viewing a landscape ("ugly! a word [he] had recently been taught"), or a black hen (at which "terror seized" him and he "tried to run away"), Kaspar embodies the hardships of exposure to reality (203, 204). Both Kaspar and the cave dwellers are hesitant about seeing forms in the realm of enlightenment after having only known shadows. They long for the simplicity and familiarity of cave life, not immediately recognizing the benefits of knowledge and experience. Confusion, anger, fear and violence are the prevailing sentiments surrounding Kaspar's first introduction to society. Still not recognizing enough of reality to draw many connections, Kaspar maintains a neutral self-image. Although at this point unable to recognize a sense of self, Kaspar is all too familiar with the torture and hardship of exiting the cave.

"I liked to look up at the brightness" (203). After much effort (and pupil contraction), Kaspar and the cave dweller become acclimated to the light and therefore learning. Objects become real, rather than mere shadows or enigmas. Kaspar, like the cave man, uncovers a sense of awe and fascination with the world, desiring to know more and feeling "bursts of curiosity" (206). No longer a source of confusion, light and its reflection become entities to behold and appreciate. Finding that "bright shiny objects pleased" him stands as a testament to Kaspar's admiration and pursuit of knowledge (204). Still freshly emerged from the black cave, he finds himself gazing with "childish wonder when [he] look[s] up at the night sky full of stars" (209). His desire to know and explore is insatiable. In sharp contrast to life inside the cave and transition into the light, actually being outside the cave presents a discernibly positive (though brief) circumstance. Learning is enjoyable, but at what point does the acquisition of knowledge breach boredom or, worse, cynicism? For the time being, life outside the cave is characterized by emotions and sentiments of liberation, awe, innocence and curiosity. While still lacking a defined self-image, Kaspar slowly recognizes his own limitations. Regardless, he embraces truth and light: "Sometimes I stumble into a pit or well of sadness, a deep pit, a long fall...there is no bottom, I stare up and see faces peering down at me, faces unimaginably high up" (202).

While Socrates' allegory addresses the passage from cave to light in grave detail, depicting the darkness, confusion and enlightenment, it neglects to explain the emotions surrounding the cave dweller's reflection on his past. Contentment and desire to learn can only last for a limited time until one realizes the futility behind this pursuit of knowledge. Slowly connections begin to form; awareness is no longer desirable because along with it comes jadedness. Kaspar gradually begins to realize that even his leap of progress toward civilization and away from

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himself is not enough to cover his "delicate lurch," control his facial contortions, give him the "fluency [he] long[s] for," or speed up his "unnatural slowness" (202). He discovers that this great advancement from the slobbering beast of his past is merely a "leap that leaves the bruise of [his] heels in [his] own sides" and "even this leap is no more that a sign of [his] difference" (208). Rather than focusing on all the advancements he has made in his lifetime, this "great spirit" is consumed with the awareness that he is and can never be wholly embraced by society. He feels as though his efforts have fallen short of their ultimate goal. Even the progress he has attained cannot be his alone to savor. According to his understanding, his thoughts, wants, desires, and wishes are all instilled by society. He is "always mindful how very much [he is society's] creation" (201). Furthermore after all of the conditioning he feels that he is "slowly erasing" himself "in order for someone else to appear, the one [he] long[s] for, who will not resemble" him (210). In realizing that all he knows and longs to be is attributable to society, he feels like he possesses no sense of self. Upon emerging from the cave, Kaspar is blind to reality and experience, and blind in the sense that he is now aware of all of his inadequacies. He cannot return to the cave because of his knowledge, nor can he easily assimilate into society because of his inadequacies.

Throughout this short story, Millhauser addresses what it means to be civilized. Kaspar, the man extracted from his life of simplicity in the allegorical cave of darkness, seems no better suited for life outside the cave. Cave life, while ignorant in hindsight, is a sort of neutral existence; in knowing no better or worse lifestyle, there lies no desire for change. Life in transition, however, presents challenge and hardships. Effort, pain and sacrifice are required in order to better oneself. In comparison with the ignorance of cave life, transition life seems to be much undue stress and confusion for an uncertain end. Life outside the cave initially seems blissful. Here lies an insatiable desire to learn in order to compensate for years past in darkness.

While Socrates holds that life outside the cave is where humanity's true potential and happiness lie, that only in knowing the truth can people ever attain perfection, Millhauser believes that life outside ignorant bliss is replete with unappeasable longing to fit the norm and integrate seamlessly into society. Those that are different become the "center of attention," an "enigma that cannot be solved" (202, 208). The collective nature of society breeds a desire to be "unremarkable" and "uninteresting" because with that comes a sense of fitting in with the crowd (209). With general knowledge comes self-awareness and with self-awareness comes a need to be accepted. Because Kaspar Hauser, poster child for the societal outcast, finds discontent in civilization, Millhauser is able to argue that knowledge and civilization are not necessarily where humanity's true potential, much less true happiness, lie. "To be Kaspar Hauser," he concludes, "is to long, at every moment of your dubious existence, with every fiber of your questionable being, not to be Kaspar Hauser" (209).

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