

Interpretation

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Elizabeth Amato's study focuses on four of America's many excellent novelists: Tom Wolfe, Walker Percy, Elizabeth Wharton, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Her book is a fine addition to the steadily growing body of probing scholarship on what American literature can teach us about the American regime and, more broadly, about the critical question of human happiness. Amato reads these American novelists as political thinkers.¹ She explains how each illuminates one of the central ideas that lie at the heart of the American regime. That regime is founded on the philosophic credo of the Declaration: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, amongst which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The "self-evident truth" that all human beings are endowed with the unalienable right to "the pursuit of happiness" calls us to ask the questions: What is human happiness? How is it to be gained? Is happiness in fact the goal of human life? Amato shows how American literature provides a way to thoughtfully consider these questions.

The liberal democratic regime is one that provides "no guidance" as to what constitutes human happiness. To what is a liberal democrat to devote his or her life in the belief that such a path will make him or her happy?

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville famously observed in 1835 that America had no literature of its own. It has developed a literature along the lines he foresaw, a literature that is democratic. The four novelists Amato has chosen for her study nicely epitomize this fact.

Commerce? Family? Politics? Fame? Wealth? Philanthropy? Virtue? Art? Charity? Pleasure? Religion? Science? Philosophy? The range of possibilities is even greater than the smorgasbord of programs and pursuits offered at a contemporary big university or in a community college.

Amato ventures down the trail established by Catherine Zuckert in her book *Natural Right and the American Imagination* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1990). The late Peter Augustine Lawler has written some of the very best interpretations of Walker Percy, and the excellent collection of essays by Christine Dunn Henderson deals with a number of the authors covered by Amato.² But Amato's book is distinctive in that it provides a sustained analysis of one specific idea: the natural right to the pursuit of happiness. And the focus of her book is on the pursuit, and hence the nature, of human happiness more than the question of its being a natural right.

According to Amato, "American novelists are guides on the pursuit of happiness who with a critical eye can present the shortcomings of pursuing happiness in a liberal nation but also present alternatives and correctives compatible with liberalism" (165). Moreover, they are "more comprehensive guides than either contemporary 'happiness research' or liberal theory." Her introductory chapter provides a useful sketch of both "happiness research" and liberal theory on the question of what constitutes happiness. She argues that both provide some interesting insights into the problem, but that neither provides much in the way of comprehensive answers. The liberal democratic regime confronts us with a problem: its liberal element allows us the freedom to pursue happiness in our own way. We are individuals and each of us should be free to pursue happiness as unique individuals. But what if the pursuit of individual happiness puts us on the path of individualism, thus closing off the alternative—that happiness requires a devotion to community and to family, and friendship?

Amato begins her studies of American authors by providing "thematic analyses" of Tom Wolfe's first three novels: *Bonfire of the Vanities*, *A Man in Full*, and *I Am Charlotte Simmons*. Wolfe's novels focus on the problem of seeking happiness through acquiring greater social recognition or status.

² See Peter Lawler, *Aliens in America: The Strange Truth about Our Souls* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002); Peter Lawler, *Postmodernism Rightly Understood: The Return of Realism in American Thought* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999); and the concluding essay "Walker Percy, Alexis de Tocqueville, and the Stoic and Christian Foundations of American Thomism," in *Walker Percy: A Political Companion*, ed. Peter Augustine Lawler and Brian A. Smith (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013). See also Christine Dunn Henderson, *Seers and Judges: American Literature as Political Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001).

America is not a rigid class society but more an ever-shifting set of social groups from which status can be derived. Amato explains how Wolfe's novels illustrate the problematic nature of searching for happiness via social status. What that search typically demands is that we forgo our own individuality and conform to a particular set of status markers. Are we to act morally and in keeping with our own free choices, or do we do what is necessary to gain recognition from others? The focus of the chapter is thus on the failure of courage and the thoughtlessness involved in chasing happiness as status. Wolfe is critical of "liberalism's incomplete understanding of human beings" (38) and points to ideas drawn from preliberal thinkers that can educate us about the courage necessary "to counter society's misleading pursuits that fail to satisfy" (32). In *Bonfire* and *A Man in Full*, this alternative is provided by Stoicism; in *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, it is provided by the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. The relationship between self-knowledge and intellectual courage is thus brought to light.

Turning to the novels of Walker Percy, Amato places Percy in an interesting dialogue with Wolfe. She develops Percy's line of thinking by way of her analyses of *The Moviegoer*, *Lost in the Cosmos*, and *The Thanatos Syndrome*. Where Wolfe turns back to Stoicism and ancient political philosophy as providing a remedy to the problem of happiness, Percy draws upon the very modern existentialist perspective and the problem of the "self." *The Moviegoer*, for example, opens with an epigraph from Kierkegaard. Percy rejects Stoicism, but embraces the search for self-understanding. According to Amato, Percy's view is that Stoicism "shies away from discovering what unhappiness tells us about ourselves. It evades the self-understanding that comes with reflection on human discontent" (64). Human unhappiness, especially in the context of contemporary material prosperity, provides us with an awareness that there is something missing from our lives. It can thus put us on the road to searching for what exactly is missing. Posing a clear and present danger to this search is science, and particularly the "science of happiness," as *The Thanatos Syndrome* illustrates. For this science, which would surely include contemporary "happiness research," can provide us with new ways to feel contented with life lived in "the haze of everydayness" (67). Distraction and self-forgetting allow us ever-more powerful means of avoiding unhappiness and hence never taking up the search. Amato argues that Percy is especially concerned with the power of science to relieve us of our discontent: "As the world becomes more known and grasped by our principles and techniques, these reductionist principles and techniques are the prime suspects that prevent us from knowing ourselves. We remove ourselves from the

world we seek to understand, and so the self becomes a leftover” (74). To put it another way, the searching journey out of the cave is made more difficult if not impossible when we take up residence in the scientifically constructed pit beneath the cave. Modern liberalism seems to both allow for the search and at the same time promote an understanding of, or faith in, progress that makes the search unnaturally problematic.

In her subsequent examination of the novels of Edith Wharton, Amato demonstrates how Wharton would fundamentally reject the alternatives being suggested by both Wolfe and Percy. They still focus on the individual and her quest to overcome, and perhaps dispense with, societal restraints. Both still too highly value the liberal idea of “autonomy.” Amato’s analyses of Wharton’s *The Custom of the Country* and *The Age of Innocence* focus on the idea of finding the mean between the unrestrained pursuit of individual gratification and the unreflective adherence to social structures and opinion. One must strike a “delicate balance” here, and it depends largely on coming to understand the ways in which social traditions can provide “beneficial constraints” on the kinds of vulgar hedonism and selfishness liberalism allows, if not promotes. One must learn “when to honor social conventions” (113). In truth, there is no “spiritual well-being free from the consequences of social duty”; we are social beings with duties and obligations that we fail to meet at our peril. We learn that our individual good requires that we live morally and hence maintain the trust of those we care about (117). The protagonists in these novels both serve as lessons—in Undine’s case how *not* to pursue happiness, in Newland Archer’s case how to overcome the thin and selfish understanding of happiness at the center of the new progressive liberalism of the early twentieth century.

Amato’s examination of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s fiction focuses on two “literary sketches” and two novels. The sketches help to illuminate key themes in the novels. The “Custom House,” which serves as the portal to *The Scarlet Letter*, portrays a society much like the one we find in the twentieth-century America that provides the setting for the three previous novelists. The relationship between individuals is thin, and there is little sense of obligation. There is a profound lack of any real community, and we are tied to others via the relatively weak bonds of self-interest (127). The problem central to this kind of society is that it leaves us profoundly unable to deal with “the mystery of the human heart.” Friendship, which involves the meeting of sympathetic hearts and like minds, is hard.

The Scarlet Letter presents a cautionary tale of a society that makes community the highest value, but at the cost of our “inner freedom.” Puritan society is based on the view that the human heart is easily read and can be made public. It thus fails to see how the heart’s “mystery and freedom are the basis of individual freedom” (134). Hawthorne points us towards finding the balance between the excessive individualism of modern commercial society and the kind of morally strict society that provides little protection of individual freedom. Amato points to the ways in which the truths promulgated in the Declaration of Independence provide a healthy corrective to the Puritan origins of America. The pursuit of happiness can, we discover, lead to happiness. But we must learn that this is a “happiness within horizons and mindful of our limitations” (148). We learn of the “fragility” of happiness, which makes it even more valuable. “Happiness on earth is fragile, imperfect, and subject to the vicissitudes of life” (149). Happiness cannot be brought under “human control”—a warning with regard to modern science and our quest to conquer nature. According to Amato, Hawthorne illuminates this fact in *The House of the Seven Gables*.

One sees here an interesting parallel between Percy and Hawthorne. Both point to the need for friendship, understood as common quest. Happiness involves finding others with whom one can share one’s heart. “The happy life is the life shared with friends engaged in the search to find out how we should live.” In the concluding chapter of her study, “Sharing the Pursuit of Happiness,” Amato elaborates on this theme.

America is the regime that proclaims that we each have an unalienable right to the pursuit of happiness and that the business of government is to secure such rights. One is left wondering how such a regime fares when compared to its European counterparts. The novelist who provides one of the most sustained and insightful investigations into this comparison is no doubt Henry James. What Tocqueville accomplished in works of political philosophy, James seems to have done in literature. One wishes Amato had included James in her study, for he seems such an obvious candidate. I have no quarrel with the inclusion of the four novelists she chose, but an explanation of why these four and not others would be useful.³

³ Amato does make the claim that the four novelists she examines are “representative” (2), which in turn supports her claim about American novelists in general and what they can teach us about the pursuit of happiness. Whether these four novelists are in fact representative of American literature when it comes to the novel is, one imagines, open to great debate.

What Amato's book clearly demonstrates is that a serious reading of the quartet of novelists she has chosen for her study amply rewards the time and effort required. They offer a good deal for any thinking person to contemplate if they have the good fortune of living in a democratic regime devoted to the protection of one's rights to life, liberty, and property. Locke would no doubt be happy that the political order fundamentally based on his political philosophy would produce the kind of authors represented in this study. They make it possible to educate Americans, at least insofar as their inclinations and abilities allow, about the profound problem of happiness. Liberal democracy provides us with the freedom to pursue happiness according to our own lights. That freedom leaves us nonetheless facing the permanent question we are forced to consider as human beings: What constitutes a good life?