

Edward Everett Hale “The Man without a Country”

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I. About the Author

It is probably no accident that Edward Everett Hale (1822–1909) was a lifelong American patriot. He was the nephew of Edward Everett, renowned orator and statesman. And his father, Nathan Hale, was the namesake and nephew of Nathan Hale, executed by the British for espionage during the Revolutionary War and famous for his last words: “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.”

As a Unitarian minister in Boston, as chaplain in the United States Senate, and as a prolific writer of essays and short fiction, Edward Everett Hale was a devoted activist, championing especially the causes of the abolition of slavery and the advancement of public education. “The Man without a Country,” his most famous story, was published anonymously in the *Atlantic Monthly* during the terrible days of Civil War, in 1863, the same year that President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

II. Summary

The plot of Hale’s story is straightforward: Seduced, “body and soul,” by the charm and grand vision of Aaron Burr, young Philip Nolan, an ambitious artillery officer in the “Legion of the West,” becomes a Burr accomplice (2–3). Tried for treason, “Nolan was proved guilty enough” (3). Still, no one would have heard of him “but that, when the president of the court asked him at the close, whether he wished to say anything to show that he had always been faithful to the United States, Nolan cried out, in a fit of frenzy,—

‘D—n the United States! I wish I may never hear of the United States again!’”

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His judges, half of them veterans of the Revolutionary War, are stunned. They decide to give him precisely what he has asked for: From that moment, September 23, 1807, until his dying day, May 11, 1863—nearly fifty-six years later—Nolan is literally, and figuratively, put out to sea. He never again sets foot on American soil; only as he is dying does he again hear anything about the United States. Yet during—and perhaps because of—his enforced separation from his native land, Nolan’s attitude toward her changes dramatically. The rest of the story powerfully shows how his transformation comes about.

III. Thinking about the Text

The story has a historical setting, but it is almost entirely fictional. Hale tells us his purpose both in the story proper and in the introduction he wrote for it twenty years after publication, to correct public misperceptions of the story’s historicity. In the text, the narrator, Fredric Ingham, says that his purpose is to show “young Americans . . . what it is to be A MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY” (2). In the later introduction, Hale reports that he had hoped the story would be published before the 1863 elections, as he intended it not only “as a contribution, however humble, towards the formation of a just and true national sentiment, or sentiment of love to the nation,” but also as “‘testimony’ regarding the principles involved in [the election].” He had especially in mind the notorious activities of Clement Vallandigham, an ardent antiwar, pro-Confederate Ohio Democrat, then running for governor of Ohio from his exile in Canada. Some people believe that Hale’s story was in fact inspired by Vallandigham’s widely publicized assertion that he did not want to belong to the United States.

Only a couple of historical facts inform this otherwise fabricated tale about a purely fictitious character. After Aaron Burr left the vice presidency in 1805, he did make two trips down the Mississippi. Also, he and his accomplices were tried for treason. Burr was accused of a conspiracy to steal the Louisiana Purchase lands away from the United States and to crown himself as king or emperor. Despite the fact that US President Thomas Jefferson threw his full weight against Burr, the evidence available did not hold up in court, and Burr was acquitted. Not so for Philip Nolan, the fictitious protagonist of Hale’s story. Appreciating Nolan’s story requires us to try to understand, from the text alone, the young Nolan, the fate he was made to suffer, and his responses to it, from beginning to end. We need also to reflect on Hale’s stated purpose for writing the story.

A. Philip Nolan’s Early Life, His Crime and Punishment (1-6)

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1. Describe young Philip Nolan. What is he like as a young officer in the Legion of the West?
2. Why do you think he is attracted so quickly and completely—“body and soul”—to Aaron Burr the man and, later, to his cause?

IN CONVERSATION

In this conversation, Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass discuss Hale's story with Wilfred McClay, the SunTrust Bank Chair of Excellence in Humanities at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Amy Kass: Aaron Burr probably represents to Philip Nolan everything that Philip Nolan wants to be. Burr is ambitious. He is interested in glory and honor—and so is Philip Nolan. I think it is Nolan's ambition that draws him to Burr, but it's also the fact that Nolan is *in* the United States, but is not *of* the United States. He grew up in the Wild West without any real attachments, and though he currently owes his entire life to the army of the United States—he's a member of the Legion of the West—there's no land that he can really identify with.

Leon Kass: He's not attached to anything. And he might even have some imperial ambitions, which would make someone like Burr especially attractive. But how can they gain great glory founding the United States? It's already been founded! Whereas if there is some other nation that they could found, their names would be sung forever, like those of Washington, Hamilton, Madison, and Jefferson.

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

3. Does the punishment he receives fit his crime?
4. What is Nolan's initial attitude toward the punishment he receives? Do you understand it?

B. Charting Nolan's Changing Attitude toward Home and Country

About each of the following incidents, please consider these two general questions:

1. What has happened?

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2. Why does it have such an impact on Nolan?

In addition, consider the following incident-specific questions:

1. **Reading “The Lay of the Last Minstrel” (8–9).**

- a. What does Sir Walter Scott’s poem mean? Why and how does it affect Nolan? See, specifically, Canto 6:

*Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,
Who never to himself hath said,
This is my own, my native land!
Whose heart hath ne'er within him burn'd,
As home his footsteps he hath turned,
From wandering on a foreign strand?
If such there breathe, go, mark him well;
For him no minstrel raptures swell;
High though his titles, proud his name,
Boundless his wealth as wish can claim,
Despite these titles, power, and pelf,
The wretch, concentred all in self,
Living, shall forfeit fair renown,
And, doubly dying, shall go down
To the vile dust, from whence he sprung,
Unwept, unhonor'd, and unsung.*

IN CONVERSATION

Wilfred McClay: Why does it turn out to be the case that having the United States never being spoken of in his presence is such a searing punishment for him?

Amy Kass: If Nolan is the man we were characterizing—that noble, ambitious man who craves honor and glory—then this punishment drives home to him that he will be unwept and unsung.

Leon Kass: The punishment makes Nolan, perhaps for the first time, confront his extreme egotism. And by so doing, he realizes that his atomistic individualism is in

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fact going to make him wretched; the honor that he craves can only be had by people who have a country that will honor them.

Wilfred McClay: So to enjoy enduring honor, one has to have a country, and be of it, and live in it.

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2. **Rebuke from his dancing partner, Mrs. Graff (10–11).**
 - a. Does Nolan’s acquaintance with a person like Mrs. Graff, back in Philadelphia before her marriage, shed any further light on Nolan’s former life? What kind of person do you think Nolan was back then? What kind of society did he belong to?
3. **Nolan’s receipt of the “sword of ceremony” for his splendid and courageous action in the frigate duel with the English (11–12).**
 - a. What do the tears Nolan sheds here tell us about the state of his soul?
 - b. Why might the receipt of the “sword of ceremony” be both especially meaningful and especially painful for Nolan?
4. **Nolan’s confrontation with the newly freed African slaves (15–17).**
 - a. Nolan’s fitness to take on this job is due to his knowledge of Portuguese. Does his knowledge of the language surprise you? What can we infer about the type of upbringing and education Nolan had growing up? What kind of family do you think he came from?
 - b. What role does Nolan play in their emancipation?
 - c. Why is Nolan’s agony especially poignant here?
5. **The speech to young Fred Ingham (16–17).**
 - a. What significance does Nolan here attach to “home and country”?
 - b. What really has he come to long for?
6. **Nolan’s deathbed exchange with Danforth and the “little shrine” in his stateroom (20–23).**

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- a. Why did Danforth, so forthcoming in many other ways, decide not to tell Nolan about the Civil War?
- b. Why did Nolan take such pleasure in discovering that the then-president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, was a man of the people, not a man of privileged birth?
- c. Nolan dies with his father's badge of the Order of Cincinnati pressed to his lips. (The Order of Cincinnati is an eagle-shaped badge to be worn by veterans of the Revolutionary War.) What is the meaning of this gesture?
- d. Was Nolan a man without a country? Why or why not?

C. Hale's Purposes

1. Despite Hale's insistence that the story is fictional, as noted earlier, we do know when it is written—during the height of the Civil War, in the year of the Emancipation Proclamation. Is its Civil War background important for understanding the story's meaning?
2. If you regard the background as key, is the story anything more than a piece of wartime propaganda? Why do you answer as you do?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: In the story, the naval vessel that Nolan is on encounters another ship that is ferrying African slaves. Since this is after the United States signed the treaty against the further importation and trading of slaves, the American ship stops the slave ship, and in the process the sailors try to tell the slaves that they're free—but nobody understands a word. The captain calls out, "Does anyone here know Portuguese?"—and it turns out that Nolan is the only person aboard who does. So he goes down to the slave ship and translates.

Somewhat anachronistically, in this story told in the year of the Emancipation Proclamation, Nolan is able to play Abraham Lincoln to these slaves. Here is Nolan, as far as the slaves are concerned, the universally speaking representative of the United States, giving the slaves their freedom. And he does this partly because he knows Portuguese, but partly because he's aboard a ship bearing the flag of the United States. So Nolan has been put in the position of embodying the

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American principle of freedom and the American principle of equality.

Wilfred McClay: I'm persuaded there is something to this sort of "Lincolnian" moment. Even though in some ways he is a fraud in doing so—because he is the one person aboard his ship who cannot represent the United States.

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

IV. Thinking with the Text

Hale's story, the first entry in *What So Proudly We Hail*, appears under the first and overarching theme of the anthology: "National Identity: Why Should It Matter?" Since the story's first appearance, many people have been moved by it to patriotic feeling. But as many have rightly noted, throughout the story Hale uses the word "country," not "nation." Many have thus wondered whether, and in what way, the story is particularly about American national identity and how it works to promote it. These questions also arise when one notes that in the fourth and fifth incidents cited above—Nolan's encounter with the newly freed African slaves and his subsequent impassioned speech to Fred Ingham—the emphasis is on home as the place of *one's own*, not as the embodiment of *political* institutions devoted to the *idea or fact of freedom*. One's country is spoken of as *alma mater* (Latin: "the nourishing mother")—the source of one's life, love, and rearing, in a particular place, in a particular time—but not as a people looking up to particular ideals. What, then, is it that makes for national identity? How should one speak about it? What does it mean if one cannot speak or hear about it? These are among the larger issues that the story raises for our consideration.

A. Human Being and Citizen

1. Is there anything especially *American* in the identity and attachment that Nolan comes to desire? Or, more specifically, is there anything in the story that would have you believe that Nolan's newly acquired appreciation of *his country* embraces essential American principles (e.g., liberty, equality)? If so, where do you see it? Which principles?

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2. Does Nolan's longing for "home" differ in any way from the longing for home of the newly freed slaves?
3. What is the difference between belonging to a "country" and belonging to a "nation"?
4. Which is more important for making attached American citizens: the love of American principles or the love of our native land? Can love of principles suffice to make attached citizens?
 - a. If love of one's native land is crucial, what, then, about the national attachment of immigrants, who are Americans not by birth but by choice?
 - b. If love of American principles is crucial, what happens to one's attachment when the country's deeds are at odds with its ideals?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: There is something American in Nolan's longings. America, unlike other nations, is not simply built on shared nativity or common ancestry. We are a nation founded upon a creed: of liberty, equality, the rights expressed in the Declaration of Independence, religious freedom and toleration, minority rights, and the opportunity to make something of yourself without external constraint beyond law-abidingness. And while they are wonderful things and we enjoy the life that is built on living in a polity founded on them, the principles themselves don't produce the emotional attachment. So the question is, what do Americans need in addition to the philosophical principles that form the heart of our convictions? It seems to me that this story—told during the Civil War and set in the early part of the Republic—with its emotional power belongs to the poetry of the kinds of tales that we need.

Amy Kass: I think what a story allows you to do is to get inside of other characters, make the decisions that they are making, face the kinds of problems that they are facing—in a way that you cannot do simply by reading a treatise and analyzing it. Stories are also especially important in *American* civic education precisely because America is founded on principles—and stories help us to elaborate what those principles are. They enable you to see concrete examples of people who demonstrate what the abstract principles of liberty and equality actually are.

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5. Could a roughly identical story be written about a treasonous Frenchman or Briton who expressed a similar wish that he would “never hear” of his country again? Is this story not about American identity but, rather, about a primal human need to belong to some larger community or nationality?

B. Speaking, Hearing, and National Attachment (For these questions, consider the story in conjunction with Abraham Lincoln’s First Inaugural.)

1. Nolan’s punishment does not prohibit his speaking about the United States; it only prohibits others from ever speaking of it in his presence. Presumably, they must also ignore him when he speaks or asks about it. As we have noted, this punishment has a powerful effect on Nolan’s soul, demonstrated by his general transformation of heart, and, more visibly, by the shrine he erects in his stateroom. What is lost by the absence of shared speech about one’s country? What do we gain by talking with one another about the things we value? Would we still value them the same if we were unable to talk with others about them?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: So much of the way we understand who we are in the world in which we live comes through efforts to articulate it in language. And so much of who we are is also built up in terms of the memories of who we have been and who the people we love have been. But the “now” is fleeting. Who we are is built up over ages, decades—and in our case as a country, hundreds of years. Speech is the vehicle of memory. All of that is lost to a person who cannot speak of home. The punishment, even if he is in the midst of everybody else, is to make him homeless.

Wilfred McClay: Right, we need stories, speeches, and songs. And this story speaks to that, because it’s about what happens to people when they are story-less, when they can’t tell their stories, when they can’t sing their songs, and when they can’t speak their speeches.

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2. In his First Inaugural, Lincoln expressed the hope—forlorn as it turned out—that the “mystic chords of memory” would draw the Union back together. This memorable expression invites us to think about how and why speech about the things we share is important for forming and cementing our loyalties, our affections, our commitments, and our common memories. What are the “mystic chords of memory”?
3. Reflecting on your experience of reading this story and—we hope—discussing it with others, did it make you more aware of why your nation and your American identity matters?