Old Habits

By Brett Peterson

Coming of age is a phrase that is often paired with a driver’s license, graduation, or finding a career. The phrase has been manipulated to apply to general events that nearly every person goes through in their life, and usually at a young age. Does learning how to drive or receiving a diploma automatically qualify someone as coming of age? And does coming of age usually occur at a young age? The writings of Plato and Khaled Hosseini suggest otherwise. Plato describes coming of age as being willing to leave everything that you have called normal and test the waters of reality, and Amir’s story in Hosseini’s The Kite Runner shows this transformation. The change in Amir’s life occurred at an age when most people begin to believe they have nothing more to discover about themselves. The Kite Runner is a story of Amir’s long journey crawling out of the cave of shadows and into a life of reality, truth, and forgiveness.

Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” portrays the uneducated human race in a dark cave, with only a dim fire as light that reflects shadows of puppets onto the wall of a cave. It shows how humankind can be deceived without an education, and an understanding of reality. “Men would hold that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of artificial things” (Plato, Republic 515b). Plato goes on to speak of the transition from the cave to the outside world, and describes their reaction to the bright light of the sun. Plato used light as a metaphor for enlightenment; once the person leaves the cave, they are finally exposed to the sun, which is reality. He also discusses a person’s ability to comprehend more and more of the world around them. The story ends with Plato’s message to his student that education cannot be taken for granted and it is the citizen’s duty to educate his or her peers.
So you must go down each in his turn into the common dwelling of the others and get habituated along with them to seeing the dark things. And in getting habituated to it you will see ten thousand times better than the men there and you'll know what each of the phantoms is and of what it is a phantom because you have seen the truth about fair just and good things. (Plato, Republic 520c)

Plato’s story is not intended to speak only to a limited audience of students and other young people, but was also meant for people just like Amir. Amir’s story was full of regret and pain. It was an experience that most would never consider, especially those his age because people tend to be set in their ways of life, and change is to be avoided whenever possible. But what separated him from most people was his decision to go through with it. Rahim Khan’s words, “There’s a way to be good again” haunted Amir because he had spent his entire life trying to put his betrayal of Hassan behind him (Hosseini 286). This was Amir’s time in the cave, where he refused to see the light, which was the pain it had caused to Hassan as well as Amir himself. Rahim Khan’s words, however, had succeeded in bringing the pain to the surface yet again.

What haunted Amir the most was Hassan’s unwavering loyalty him. “Hassan knew. He knew [Amir had] seen everything in that alley, that [he’d] stood there and done nothing. He knew [he’d] betrayed him and yet he was rescuing [him] again” (105). Amir chose to get rid of Hassan instead of face the truth and face the consequences of admitting his shortcomings to Baba, who had already found many weaknesses with Amir.
Amir’s life turned into a series of events in which he would temporarily find happiness, which can be seen as the shadows in the cave, but would be followed soon after by the realization that it did not provide him with the release from his pain. Amir would find that he was still in chains at the bottom of the cave. That is how it was with a new home. “America was a river roaring along unmindful of the past. [Amir] could wade into this river, let [his] sins drown to the bottom” (136).

For all of the pain it had caused Amir, he still refused to discuss his betrayal of Hassan. When Amir had decided to marry Soraya, she thought it was right to tell him all that had happened between her and the man that she had previously run off with. “[Amir] envied her. Her secret was out. Spoken. Dealt with. [Amir] opened my mouth and almost told her how [he’d] betrayed Hassan, lied, driven him out and destroyed a forty-year relationship between Baba and Ali. But [he] didn’t” (165).

As the novel progressed, it became clearer that Amir intended to eternally bury his secret until Rahim Khan called. “There’s a way to be good again” (226). Khan, in reference to the Allegory of the Cave, played the role of the enlightened citizen, attempting to bring the others out of the cave.

It was Rahim Khan who dragged Amir out of the cave, telling him the truth about his brother, and that it was no longer just an old friend he had betrayed. Also, the news of the deaths of Hassan and his wife, and his son becoming an orphan, was the bright sun hitting Amir in the eyes as he exited the cave. The few minutes Amir took to digest the information that Rahim Khan had given him was the first time that he had been able to see reality. That day long ago, was now not just a bad memory, it was his reason for retrieving Sohrab, Hassan’s son. “So you
must go down each in his turn into the common dwelling of the others and get habituated along
with them to seeing the dark things” (Plato, Republic 520c).

Amir could not justify making things right between himself and Hassan all of those years,
because of his inability to see the truth, the “dark things.” Once he saw the truth, it didn’t make
his situation any easier, it actually made it harder, which finally gave him the justification he
needed to make things right. What made Hosseini’s novel so successful was his ability to show
the irony in Amir’s story. His fight with Assef, and being beaten so badly he almost died, was
what finally set him free. “[Amir] laughed because [he] saw that in some hidden nook in a corner
of [his] mind [he’d] even been looking forward to [the fight with Assef]” (Hosseini 289).

It was a drastic transformation that took place in Amir after that fight; for the first time in
his life, he wasn’t the center of attention. He couldn’t ever erase what he had done to Hassan but
he finally felt free of the guilt, because he had done something that showed the ultimate form of
sacrifice to Hassan and his son. And beyond that, Amir had finally started to live his life in truth,
and though he and Sohrab had many things to work out, he could see the world as it was.

Plato did not intend his story for any certain age group or demographic, but to those who
had yet to find a way to recognize the truth about their lives, and the consequences that
coincided. Amir was out of school, had established his career as a writer, but had yet to find
himself and come of age, and it was Rahim Khan who recognized his suffering and brought him
up out of the cave. Once Amir had experienced truth for the first time in his life, it was his turn
to give the same gift to Sohrab.
Works Cited
