

## **Exploring the Individual in Exile: A Study on Individualism in Oliver Bowden's Assassins Creed.**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the individualism portrayed by the lead character, Altair Ibn La'ahad, in Oliver Bowden's novel Assassin's Creed: The Secret Crusade. The discussion revolves around the protagonist's quest for self-discovery, which leads to his transformation through a series of incidents. In this exploration of individualism, much has been taken from the definition of Ralph Waldo Emerson, a towering American transcendentalist, whose terms such as "self-reliance" and "non-conformity" carry universal and timeless messages. Examining how individualism is integrated into a fictionalized society in Bowden's novel, the study first looks at the story's protagonist as the archetype of individualism and identifies the individual qualities established as a product of the chaotic environment. Additionally, this study attempts to show how the theme of exile is used to further character development and how it encourages Altair to rely on his individual intuition, even when he is required to function within a society.*

**Keywords:** Oliver Bowden, *Assassin's Creed: the Secret Crusade*, Individualism, Self-reliance, Exile

### **1. Introduction**

Literature of the twenty-first century is the homeground for hordes of celebrated novel series and video games that attract countless teenagers and adults alike, each year. One example from the ranks of top fictional material is the Assassin's Creed novel saga that was based upon its namesake video game franchise. The plot centres around the "Assassin" who belongs to an organization that is involved in a feuding rivalry with the legendary "Knights of Templar", while the storyline is narrated from a first person view of Altair –usually a member of the Assassin group– in the neverending war against Templar ideology and world domination. As a story that features a human protagonist, this paper is interested in expounding the relationship between individualism and romantic exile by observing the changes in personality and attitude which occurs when a character undergoes self-exile for extended periods of time.

Another purpose of this study is directed at exploring how individualism is actualized by the protagonist character and also to include findings from past researches in order to generate adequate discussion as well as provide supporting facts. Individualism is a study which aims to pinpoint the reason of existence from an "individual" perspective. Although the theory itself came into the foreground by a wider philosophy known as "Existentialism" which in general, is concerned about existence as a "whole", the topic also shares certain ties to humanism, starting from the Renaissance era. The idealism of "individuality" is a concept that takes into consideration of autonomy, non-conformity, and freedom for a person regardless of status, race, or culture to be in control of themselves in certain aspects of life.

In fact, this train of thought is nothing alien to the world of philosophy, as Geoff Baldwin (2001) in his article, "Individual and the Self in the Late Renaissance", stated, "Twentieth-century scholarship of the early modern, or Renaissance, period has been dominated by a notion of individualism" (Baldwin, 1). The article further discussed that modern studies on individualism have evolved from arguments regarding interpretations of literature to debates concerning social analysis based on historical data. Bearing in mind that a majority of these discussions are centered upon man-made "ethics" and "morals", other authors like Christian Smith (2014) and Slavika Jakelic (2014) have shown supporting facts that the two elements mentioned are key players that not only influence the "nature of humans" but also aid in masking its originality. From the study done by Jakelic after careful critique of Smith's past researches, Jakelic also discovered additional information that helped define the comparison between "personalism" and humanism. She added, "...suggesting that the latter might possess both the normative robustness and comparative potential needed for contemporary sociological theory and practice" (2014:156).

Humanism as defined by Encyclopædia Britannica (1911), is Mankind's rejection of using the divine to explain anything –more specifically, reality– external, internal, or even to put it as a position which is superior to mankind. In contrast, personalism places society in orbit around the belief of a Supreme Being and that our perceived reality is not something that owes a debt to materialism but rather, it is a product of the mind and human consciousness (Burrow, 1999:86). One can clearly differentiate where these two schools of thought have centered themselves into two separate items: "Individual" and "Self" respectively. Throughout the ages, individualism has become somewhat of a champion for liberal humanistic thinking in modern society although hypothetically, the existentialist way of thought stretches back as far as the time people started conceiving their first creative ideas and individual values.

It may come across as selfish, however, the curiosity to question one's very own mind, body, environment, and even concepts such as life and death are all parts of basic "existentialist attitude". Theoretical as it may sound, "Individualism" as a study has very practical uses in manipulating the way we see ourselves as human individuals as well as how we view our leaders and society today. It is ever present in our minds since childhood and has remained as a hidden factor that controls the aspect of performance in life that we may not ever grow old enough to realise its importance; yet, individualism holds the power to convert seemingly ordinary citizens into remarkable or even fearsome leaders of society. However, merely possessing traits of a "strong" individual is like an unignited wick because it lacks other variables that are powerful enough to stimulate psychological and personal change. The term "growing pains" may be more appropriate to label the process in which the fictional protagonist endures before reaching a higher level of maturity and understanding of life as well as its purpose although said "purpose" is one that can never truly be defined by science alone, and to truly unravel more from this configuration of ideas, one would have to understand it starting from the basic philosophy of humanism that became ever so popular during the Renaissance era of Italy.

This paper aims to achieve said understanding on how individualism can be used to guide modern society as it struggles against the non-pluralist way of "living" or more specifically put, "to blend with the crowd". With the goal of showing how this may be achieved in theory, the analysis will be based on a literary examination of a selected novel series. The characters and storyline have all been thoroughly scanned in order to determine its suitability to be used as a simulated example and besides that, the fact that this particular series was chosen is because it satisfies the research's criteria which is to conduct an analysis of literature that is based loosely of historical data including reconstruction of historical event, individual, society, and so forth. Since the series is also a work of fiction, it is unavoidable to have fictional but human antagonists as well as protagonist and other supporting characters that may be based on real-life individuals.

## 2. Analysis

In the novel *Assassin's Creed: the Secret Crusade*, the lead character, Altair Ibn La'ahad is a highly overconfident master assassin who was brought up in the difficult times of war, death, and deceit. He is the embodiment of individualism without restraints of spirituality but instead, is a soul overwhelmed by arrogance and hatred. Only two situations of exile appear most clearly in Altair's story arc which seems to describe a great change in the character that was significant in unfolding the plot. Starting with the character's downfall in chapter 7 of the book *Assassin's Creed: the Secret Crusade*, Altair is overcome by his own ignorance and arrogant behavior with results in the failure of his mission, the death of an apprentice, and subsequent demotion of his rank as a master assassin.

Following the string of events, he is sent out on a quest to redeem his honor but finds that he knows little of the true meaning behind the assassin's ideology, which is actually a subtle clue to the theme of exile. Here, Altair is

not exiled in the literal form but it represents social banishment from the group which he once related to himself. The exile from his peers and past achievements initially awoken deep, lost feelings of excitement within the character's self, quoting "he had missed the thrill of what it really meant to be an Assassin"(Assassin's Creed...64)and soon after referred to the feeling as something "to be found inside", an obvious note on the psychological or spiritual-nature of this re-awakened connection within that the character feels in reaction to his predicament. Compelled by determination to reach redemption, the newly established confidence in himself drives the character forward.

The essence of Romanticism that inspired the theme of exile taught philosophers to value their inner instincts and intuition via some form of isolation from the general populace. This practice of self-isolation is believed to amplify "inner connections" to the human psyche which is highly relatable to the form of individualism that played a role in the founding of American transcendentalism during Ralph Waldo Emerson, a towering American transcendentalist. "Emerson an Individualism" would be the suitable term in which to describe an interpretation of Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay titled "Self-Reliance" that he had presented himself at a series of lectures in 1836 – 1837. "Individuality", in his perspective, is a harmonious blend between religious spirituality, trust in oneself, and intuition (Buell, 2003: 59). It is this interaction between the soul of man and God that when applied in one's daily life can shield the quality of a person from corruption and costly egoism. To put it in greater detail, this way of interpreting individualism is one that prioritizes a balance between humanity's faith towards God and the understanding that God is purely abstract compared to the reality of daily life that is then further broken down into types of 'choices' made by people, ultimately affecting the outcome of events that predetermines whether or not a person is "good" or "bad". Incorporated with his personal upbringing as a Unitarian, Emerson had strongly believed in 'intuitive reason' that was closely connected or partly influenced by a divine element within the human *self* which he referred to as the "over soul" that makes an individual self-reliant. In regards to this "intuitive reason", Patrick J. Keane writes, "But just as there is both continuity and differentiation between understanding and reason, so there is a significant overlap and sub distinction within reason itself, between discursive and intuitive"(Keane, 2005: 48).

Without disputing the existence of God nor claiming that man is in any way superior, Keane discusses the topic of intuition based on the analysis of the well-known passage *Paradise Lost*, and further segregates "Reason" into several categories which clearly states the difference between human-level reasoning with more "angelic"-type of intuitive reason (Ibid.,48). The depth in this relationship of God and man is no doubt still a mystery but neither can we disagree that the belief in an omnipotent divine being is a "...natural attribute shared by human beings of every religious persuasion..." (qtd. In Siegfried & Sarasohn 2014: 27). As we continue on the seemingly endless discussion to unbridle the meaning of our individual existence, perhaps it would be extra consolation to know that our predecessors from ancient times had encountered similar experiences, and that so called 'modern' individualism actually began with Renaissance humanism. Towards the end of fourteenth century Italy, the Renaissance movement had grown hugely popular especially in regards to revolutionizing works of literature and art at that time although most would agree that the full effect of Italian Renaissance truly blossomed during the mid-sixteenth century.

The term "rebirth" or as it is called *Rinascimento* in Italian became synonymous with the revival of classical antiquity that played an important role in highlighting many well-known artisans and philosophers like Michelangelo, Petrarch, Leonardo Da Vinci, Dante, and so forth. Certainly these names were not graced by fame merely due to their popularity with society but rather their works of art and ideas like Dante's extremely detailed description of Hell's fiery infernos, Michelangelo's life-like sculptures, Da Vinci's unique contraptions and astounding fascination with biological anatomies as well as various other contributions from different personalities of the time that truly stood out in the name of classical antiquity, humanism, and the liberal arts. With the growing trend that stems favorably towards classical antiquity, it provided the optimal environment for teachings of humanism to be cultivated through observing Nature and the human body before moving on to deeper ideas inspired by emotions such love, anger, sadness, and so on. Therefore, this paper supports the idea that the Renaissance movement had effectively promoted higher sense of appreciation for humanistic values, morals, and social cultures.

Morality, ethics, mercy, and tolerance are among the few traits tied to the subject of humanism that often come into play in building up the hero. As the story progresses, individuality is birthed within the character called Altair when he begins to question the meaning of his quest and instructions issued by his mentor. He sees the blindness

that ensues when soldiers obey the commands of their superiors without word or doubt, even when it meant that they would have to kill whoever was made a target of assassination (*Assassin's Creed...*, 241). In regards to this, the blooming Altair would question his mentor by asking, "Can you really be so sure?" (Ibid. 144). Altair's curiosity and tolerance grows in time which is reflected by his accusation that the mentor, Al-Mualim, who only "...speaks in circles" (145) and it slowly exposes deep contradictions created by twisted ideology used by Al-Mualim to manipulate the Assassin's Order. He is able to show sympathy for his slain enemies (201) on numerous accounts and even display feelings of empathy for his comrades, especially his rival, Abbas (119). The novel portrays Altair as character with many non-physical attributes apart from the previously mentioned high level of ethics, moral, and tolerance but throughout the entire novel, he is also highly intuitive and intelligent.

Theoretically speaking, the values passed on from humanism to modern individualism become a positive determining factor in the production of good personality and character within a person. But, as we have learned from real historical events, the rising popularity in favour of honoring said humanistic values also meant that people soon became aware of equality in terms of human rights and that also indirectly sparked numerous incidents of riots, wars, and revolutions especially in sovereign countries like France and England. In 1793, the monarchy of France suffered a devastating blow when its citizens broke down the castle gates and stormed away with King Louis XVI of France. Prolonged years of war, poverty, starvation, political unrest and public executions had turned society into a ravaging mob bent on revolution, quelled only when their king was dragged and presented upon the guillotine. The French Revolution of 1789 is an example of how humanism deserves a role in educating the people in order to guide society to a better understanding of "equality" and "rights" even though the consequences were indeed dire. Aside from politics, the need to incite notions of free nation, education, and hopes for a better future in times of chaos actually shows us how humanism can divert society from traditional mentality and positively impart the necessary values that would later on aid in developing individualism.

In contrast to real historical figures, the hero of the story still remains as a product of fiction; but it is fascinating to uncover such complex persona that the author successfully frames in his style of writing. One example can be seen in how the author presents Altair's keen intuition via a series of questions like when Altair ponders on "How many facets of the Brotherhood remained a secret to him?" (Ibid. 53), he realizes that the Assassin's Order possesses secrets that even he is not aware of even though he was the second highest ranked member in the group. The usage of emotions contained in this novel is vast because it is reflected in every dialogue of each character which is an effective strategy that not only helps the reader to connect on a psychological level but also to allow for deeper character development. For example, in the novel it is mentioned, "Altair took no pleasure from death—any death—and he was apt to look poorly on those who did"(Ibid., 310). That is why the reader can understand that Altair is appalled by acts of killing regardless of whoever it was that committed it. One would also instantly be able to recognize emotions like "disgust" or "shock" from reading that sentence but besides that, it also shows off the Altair's individuality in thinking because he is able to produce opinions.

The true test of self-reliance does not only depend on right intuition but also needs to be complimented by willpower. Similar to that of *Robinson Crusoe*, Altair wishes to make changes to defeat the chaotic world although he eventually realizes that it would be too much of a gargantuan task and therefore, devised a way for his successors to follow his methods. If we were to make a minor comparison in this aspect, Crusoe's survival on the island is a feat that demanded extremely high willpower that gave him the motivation to salvage from the wreckage, build a hut, hunt and raise livestock all by himself before he had saved Friday from the Spanish captors (Nikoleishvili, 2007: 170) while on the other hand, Altair was not alone in his quest as there were others who aided him but the element of willpower was present because he was motivated to redeem himself and often acted alone in order not to bring more harm to the people he cared for unless it was unavoidable. The addition of willpower as the lever that promotes change in the self now becomes really similar to Emerson's concept of "Self-Reliance" as Carbone II (2010) agrees, in order to preserve the "oneness" with the inner self, people must be willing to diverge from "external religion and religious and philosophical figures" (2010:1). Marching along this train of thought, this study explains the changes that help cultivate greater individualism in Altair using the theme of exile.

We initiate this discussion by quoting a passage from Foster (1973) on his analysis of *Robinson Crusoe*: On this island he is, at first, the same Crusoe—alone, acting according to fear and desire, sunk into a state of nature. But, it soon becomes apparent that he is growing out of this state, leaving behind his animal instincts, and become a

rational man. (104)“Exile”, in this context, becomes the crucial step for the character development because it isolates the protagonist Crusoe from society, and this prolonged period of non-companionship forces him to be independent in order to survive alone. Imparting the same outlook for the character of Altair in Oliver Bowden’s novel, the moment of exile immediately shook Altair away from the ego and arrogance that shrouded his inner self. At the beginning of Chapter 8 he experiences a faux rebirth. “And it was. For a few precious moments when he was dead, Altair was at peace. Then...then he was coming round, gradually recovering a sense of himself and of where he was” (*Assassin’s Creed...*, 58). After rebirth, the author makes it clearer that Altair is subject to social exile in the short sentence, “you have been stripped of your possessions... Your rank as well. You are a novice” (Ibid., 59). He becomes a “child” who signifies the beginning of his journey to redeem himself and to reconnect with his inner intuition because he had previously strayed from the right path. Hence, the need for “rebirth”. A process of reawakening self-identification that ensues the imposed exile seems to positively suggest that undergoing exile or alienation is the initial step to solidify emerging individuality of the character’s self. Alienation of some sort definitely gave positive changes to favor individualism as seen in the character Milton from *Amongst Thistles and Thorns*, “[A]t the same time as his short-lived ‘exile’ acts as a catalyst in his quest to recapture his blackness [;] it also throws him headlong into conflict with his unsympathetic environment” (Hunter, 1980:17). This is a suitable reference to demonstrate how exile would function in a setting like Bowden’s *Assassin’s Creed: The Secret Crusade* that takes place throughout the Holy Land, where complete isolation from other people would not only be irrelevant but also non-beneficial to the story line.

The conflicts faced by Altair are the battles which he is made to fight on behalf of the Assassin’s Order. As a righteous man in times of war, Altair obeys the command of the mentor who had instructed him to assassinate nine leaders of the Knights Templar who were plotting to enslave society using the hypnotic weapon called the Apple of Eden (*Assassin’s Creed...*, 60). After being exiled, Altair regains his position and respect from the Order but finds that he is betrayed by the mentor who had already been corrupted by dreams of absolute power (Ibid., 243), although he has been informed by intuition alone of what is yet to come. Altair shows much wisdom at the end of exile without the initial ignorance and arrogance that the author paints in the beginning of the story. Hence, this shows that the theme of exile has helped the character to develop into a more rational figure that is made ready through experience within the chaotic environment and becomes a figure of leadership and individuality.

In terms of character development, Altair transcends from being a pawn that is controlled by his own loyalty to the Order into a righteous leader who overcomes temptations of power and wealth the so often victimized leaders of the modern world. We see the similarities of a corrupted leader in the character of the mentor, Al-Mualim, who succumbs to the evils of possessing absolute power given by the Apple of Eden, and in the Templar organization, there exists an understanding that they are the representation of a cult which relies on their unquestioning followers who are ever so eager to accept the illusion of peace that hides a more sinister intention. It is then justified to say that false peace creates conformity and fear towards individualism because people become afraid to be different, especially if they were told that by being different it will harm the peace in their time. This study believes that the author tries to alert people to the negative effects of conformity within society mainly because it kills the individualism within ourselves that is so crucial for societies of today if we are to raise a healthy generation of leaders and public figures.

Even though individualism may have been thought of as “a leftist ideal” (Brown, 2013: 10), it is now apparent that the general fear of it as portrayed in the novel has been the cause the allowed society to be manipulated by bad individuals and corrupt leaders. However, the struggle between the Assassin’s Order and Templar Knights should be seen as a metaphor to the wars and conflicts that plague the world today. The author cleverly depicts the chaos that follows in changing eras first, with the rise of Saladin during the Christian Crusades in Jerusalem followed by the end of King Richard of England’s conquest in the Holy Land. The end of one chaotic point in the history of humanity is soon broken by the coming of Genghis Khan as mentioned in the novel (*Assassin’s Creed...*, 366). As Altair aged, the later chapters of the novel depicts his fruitless struggle to end the conflict between Assassin and Templars but he finds it to be impossible because Good will be balanced by Evil, in response, he goes into a ten-year long self-exile to document a biography that is later inherited by his successors in hopes that they will continue the quest to find true peace (Ibid., 366).

The second experience of exile does little to sharpen his individuality because it gave him more time to think in depth. Bowden writes this off as a “ten year absence” from Masyaf, which is continued by the return of Altair only to find that he has been betrayed by his rival, Abbas (Ibid. 368).

This scene shows the ongoing conflict in the fictional universe of Masyaf that remains aflame even though Altair embraces individualism with hopes of leading his people into peaceful times. Although he fails to find peace, Altair has inspired the young generation of Assassins who have kept their individual qualities and became the ones who rebelled against the evil Abbas, who was set it as the replacement, whilst Altair was away for ten years. Individualism at this point in the novel, has enabled him to differentiate right from wrong, sharpen his intuition because he has become more self-reliant, and made him the object of jealousy as well as inspiration even though he is faced with ever-present conflict.

### 3. Conclusion

The aesthetics of individualism is the uniqueness of being different in non-physical aspects and the bravery to form constructive opinions that would either be debated healthily or benefit society in a good manner. Based on the evidences already given, Altair fits into the role as an individual because he stands out from the crowd with controversial opinions that challenges the rationality of the Order. He is an intuitive person who believes in justice for all, and last but not least, the hero of the story is self-reliant, righteous, and ethical in conduct. The study has shown how the theme of exile is used to further character development and how it encourages the hero to rely upon his individual intuition even when he is required to function within a society. In this sense, exile is not taken into literal meaning but should serve as a form of self-isolation away from being overly dependent on organized society and special groups like the hierarchy of the Assassin's Order. It aims to reveal people's fragile nature to being corrupted by power, greed, and lust that imbalances society and corrodes individuality.

This study has fulfilled the objective of exploring individualism in Oliver Bowden's *Assassin's Creed: the Secret Crusade* by assessment of the protagonist Altair and the main antagonist, Al-Mualim, the mentor, as well as the organization known as the Knights Templar. In conclusion for how individualism is portrayed through the characters, the study notes that individualism is presented as the inner qualities that forms the basic elements in the character's personality and adherence to certain ideologies that tend to favour either good or bad traits. The dormant nature of individualism is shown by how it is easily shadowed by the ego but due to exposure of being in exile, Altair awakens his individuality after inhibiting the ego. Other attributes such as ethics and moral are shown to empower individuality but if in excess, the over reliance on rules will ultimately deprive the self from freedom of opinionated thoughts and speech.

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