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Deconstructing Hikikomori: from Literature to Reality

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Deconstructing Hikikomori: from Literature to Reality

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
and
The Division of Language and Literature
of Bard College

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter I: What Is Hikikomori?	8
Chapter II: Media and Literary Representations of Hikikomori	21
Chapter III: The Underground Man's Life in Japan	34
Chapter IV: The Debate	48
Chapter V: Mental Health Stigma in Japan	55
Chapter VI: On Two Reclusive Authors	63
Conclusion	71
Bibliography	73
Appendix	80

Introduction

In early March, 2019, as I was beginning to work on my Senior Project, I attended a talk by the scholar Jordan Smith on the topic of poetry in Japan. At this event, Smith mentioned one Japanese author in particular that caught my attention. Before reading a poem by Tahi Saihate, he framed her poetic perspective by giving a few facts about the author. Notably, he mentioned that she is known for not showing her face in public. All of her interactions with publishers and translators occur online, and even then, one can only contact her through her agent. Smith spoke of his difficulty negotiating translations of Saihate's work, as her responses were inconsistent. At the same time, Smith expressed that she had very particular requirements for her translators, making her lack of accessibility even more of a challenge. This biographical information is incredibly helpful in understanding Saihate's work for one important reason: while she lives the withdrawn life of a borderline-recluse, her poems themselves reflect the increasing sense of social isolation among the youth in Japan. While listening to a reading of Saihate's work, I was shocked to find an author who seemed to perfectly exemplify the intended topic of my research. At the same time, her perfectionism and lack of reliable communication with outsiders illustrated the difficulty I had found in discovering translated literary works by reclusive individuals. The social recluse, it seems, is not the easiest subject to engage with.

During the spring of 2018, in my "Anthropology of Japan" class, I was introduced to the related Japanese phenomena of school refusal and hikikomori, the latter of which went on to become the main focus of this senior project. "Hikikomori" refers to the growing number of

socially withdrawn adults in Japan. Specifically, hikikomori are people who have essentially shut themselves in their home—or even just in their rooms—disengaging entirely from the outside world for six months or more.

This topic immediately interested me for a variety of reasons. On an academic level, it seemed like a perfect way to explore the global contexts surrounding social isolation. The directions that such a study could take seemed endless—how do issues of gender, socio-economic status, mental illness, or cultural practices influence young people to hide away, I wondered. On a more personal level, it immediately engaged my own struggle with self-isolation in my younger years. While I had grown to understand my own actions, which I will describe momentarily, in terms of mental illness, the conversation surrounding mental health that exists here in the U.S. quite simply does not exist in Japan. As such, hikikomori are often considered outside of that framework, and the cause of their withdrawal is given no firm explanation at all. My experiences with and preconceptions of my own mental state made it difficult for me to accept Japanese society's reluctance to label the underlying cause of the hikikomori as any one thing in particular—a difficulty that I later determined to work past through an in-depth study. However, the first step was to acknowledge the origins of my resistance.

As a child, I was exceedingly shy, preferring limited exposure to people outside of my immediate circle of family members. As I grew up, I always wondered why it was that I would feel my heart race when I entered a crowded room, why I would cry in the car on the way to my first summer job, and why I would find any reason at all to cancel plans with my friends. In high school, these feelings came to a head. Due to the 2008 financial crisis, my family was no longer

able to pay for extracurricular activities, relegating less of my time to social activity. At the same time, I was unable to return to my summer job, and I started online schooling. As someone who had been traditionally homeschooled her entire life, online schooling seemed like the natural technological evolution that one would expect me to follow in my high school career. However, little did I or my family know, it would exacerbate my unaddressed struggles with the expectations of the outside world.

Suddenly my curriculum was decided by an outside body, and deadlines brought with them the threat of judgement and a numerical valuation of my work from someone who did not know me. I had to do well, I thought. I had to do well in everything. I had to make this unknown outsider see my worth in any way possible. But how could I do that? What exactly was my worth to other people, and how could I make this anonymous judge believe that such worth existed? There was no way for me to know what the teachers on the other side of that website thought of me—their anonymity only worked to turn my own judging gaze in on myself. Without their input, I tried desperately to fill in the blanks. In this way, my interactions with the world outside my home were limited to the judgments I received on the basis on my academics. This dynamic began to take over my life. In my mind, the outside world at large became more and more a representation of potential valuation from strangers—a constant opportunity to make mistakes to be seen by everyone.

Just like that, I broke. I stopped leaving the house, even at the request of my family members. I feared windows and doors, any place where I could be seen by others. This continued for more than a year. As the final step in my isolation, I stopped submitting assignments to my online teachers for several months. When my mother received an update on

my academic progress, one that proved that there had in fact been no progress at all, I knew that I could no longer live in that way. The judging gaze was now right in front of me, asking me why I struggled with living a normal life, and I had no answers. I did not know. All that was certain was that changes had to be made, and they were.

I began attending therapy and struggled to maintain it, finding any excuse to drop one therapist and “handle things on my own.” Even a professional can be the judging Other, I thought. How could I trust them? Beyond that, though, it was just incredibly difficult to put words to my feelings. Was my problem that I hated people? Or, perhaps was it that I very much liked people but was unable to ensure their love for me? Even then, what value was there, really, in their acceptance? These and other questions continued begging to be explored, and while searching for answers I eventually settled into the routine of weekly therapy sessions, received a variety of diagnoses, and eventually I started taking medication. My life changed slowly, yet somehow dramatically. Over time, I caught up on my schoolwork, managing in the end to graduate high school on time. By the time I was 19, I was ready to go to college, and by 20 I was ready to hold a job again. Now, I have written my senior thesis at Bard College, the final step in my undergraduate career.

Given my history and the trajectory of my progress, it may come as no surprise that my instinct toward analysis of hikikomori was to push back against the lack of consensus regarding the phenomenon’s cause. In many ways, I wanted to believe that there was a “right” way to examine this issue. In my mind, these withdrawn individuals were just like me, and that meant that they needed help and recognition of what I thought to be evidence of mental illness. That was as far as my thought process went, relying solely on my past experience and refusing to see

the many dynamic sides to such an issue. To not label the cause, it seemed to me, was to ignore the pain hikikomori may have been feeling. The strength of my reaction surprised me, and I took a greater interest in the topic as a result. I knew that this was no way to approach an academic inquiry, and I wanted to challenge myself to move beyond my established perceptions. I wanted to give a thorough picture of the ways in which society's expectations and interactions with others may affect one's internal world. While I will not denounce the undeniable good that comes from speaking openly and destigmatizing mental health concerns, it is important, I believe, to acknowledge the potential complexity of social isolation as an act.

Thus, I began conceptualizing my project. My original intent was to study the literary works by hikikomori themselves, as they are known to advocate for themselves, often using online platforms. However, given the challenges of direct communication that accompany the lifestyle of someone isolated from the outside world, this proved to be a difficult task. As expressed through the story of Tahi Saihate, it is not easy to interact with a reclusive individual at all, let alone gain permission to translate their work. As such, very few translated works actually exist in the Western world.

So, I began thinking about cultural perceptions of social isolation. With the focus on and proliferation of the image of the sensitive, misunderstood, alienated soul during the era of romanticism, the Western idea of both social isolation and, more generally, a tortured soul have been elevated to include a dramatic, almost charismatic aura. While Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* exemplifies this tortured, misunderstood soul, authors and thinkers like Rousseau attribute an almost acetic, spiritually pure quality to isolation. Meanwhile, *Note from Underground* offers an existential look at the interiority of a social recluse. In all cases,

interaction with the Other inevitably leads to pain. Thus, in the West, the images of such individuals and choices have been shaped by the adventures of Werther, Jean-Jacque, Holden Caulfield, and more. To this point, such a tortured image has almost become a cliché.

But every culture has its own genealogy of isolation. As such, what is happening in Japan, and what appears to be spreading around the world in the age of globalization and global capitalism, seems to have different dimensions than one might expect. Can we really apply Romantic clichés of social isolationism to the phenomenon of hikikomori in Japan? Or do we, perhaps, need both old and entirely *new* tools and references with which to analyze and understand this issue? In a new cultural age and in a different cultural space, can we call these individuals mentally ill or simply eccentric and leave it at that? It seems altogether too unlikely—such simplistic analysis is lacking. As such, I wanted to continue to explore these questions in greater depth.

While the complexities of this issue remain ripe for analysis, and any attempt at representing such complexity can only account for a small morsel of the truth. The act of self-isolation is not new, nor does it exist solely in one place. However, even though at their cores there may be common sentiments, the varied contexts of isolation are considerably distinct from each other. While there are somewhat universal expressions of pain in the form of solitude, there are also culturally specific aspects to hikikomori in Japan that have given rise to the phenomenon. It is these similarities and differences that I explore in this project with the goal of better understanding the act of isolation itself, the rhetoric surrounding it, and its justifications.

This project begins with a dive into the meaning of hikikomori—what does the word mean, how did it come to be, and how is the phenomenon perceived? From there, I look at some of the most relevant representations of hikikomori in media and literature, both in Japan and internationally, before exploring the rising popularity of *Notes from Underground* in Japan over the last few decades. My analysis continues with a consideration of the most heated debate surrounding the phenomenon, namely the question of whether or not hikikomori can be considered a mental illness. I expand upon the seemingly opposing viewpoints through an in-depth look at how mental health stigma functions in Japan. Finally, I close with a demonstration of an existing precedent for hikikomori’s social critique as it is established in the literature of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Henry David Thoreau.

It is my hope that this project offers some insight into social isolation as an expression of pain. My goal has been to respect the complex humanity of those suffering in withdrawal as well as to identify some of the core societal factors that may contribute to phenomena such as this. Such a widespread cultural phenomenon cannot be “solved” in simple terms, but the first step toward a better future is, as always, to shed light on the issue. That is, ultimately, the objective of this project.

Chapter I: What is Hikikomori?

Imagine, if you will, a dark and dusty room at midday. The blinds are shut, blocking all access to the outside world. Comic books and clothes litter the floor, and all the while a young man sleeps fitfully. He stirs only when his mother knocks on his door, telling him his lunch is ready as she leaves it on the floor for him to retrieve at his convenience. He doesn't respond, though he notices her presence. After she leaves, he rises slowly and cracks open the door to his room, the light trickles in as he reaches for his meal and draws it to his side. He shuts the door. All is silent once again.

For the past several decades, there has seemingly been a substantial increase in socially withdrawn youths in Japan, known as hikikomori. This occurrence has raised a multitude of questions about Japanese socio-cultural norms, governmental regulation, economic outlooks, and more. Attention paid to the issue has increased exponentially, with it being noted that while "hikikomori" was mentioned only once in major Japanese newspapers in 1985, by the year 2005 that number increased to 794 times (Furlong 2008). The concept and experience of hikikomori has also attracted the attention of experts around the world, prompting an influx of study and analysis (Kondo et al. 2011). However, very little about this growing part of the population is truly known due to the nature of social isolation and the likely small percentage of total hikikomori who seek treatment. As such, many analysts make do with forming educated guesses at the most likely causes and potential treatments. How, then, can we begin to understand such a complex phenomenon?

The term “hikikomori” comes from the latter half of the Japanese “shakaiteki hikikomori” which is a direct translation of the English term “social withdrawal.” While in the past the label was used only to describe the phenomenon—the act of withdrawal itself—nowadays it can just as easily be used to describe the person experiencing withdrawal (Angles 2013). Many withdrawn individuals will even refer to themselves as hikikomori, adopting the term without shame and using it as a form of identification, especially on the internet. This trend reflects the growing acknowledgment of hikikomori experiences in Japanese society and the growing legitimacy of such an identity.

While there are many slightly varied definitions and criteria for hikikomori both within Japan and internationally, the term usually refers to a young adult who has spent 6 months or more in a state of acute social withdrawal (Saitō 2013; Furlong 2008; Kondo et al. 2011). These individuals generally spend little-to-no time socializing with others, instead preferring to spend their days safely in their homes or their rooms. When they do venture outside, it is often at night when they have less of a risk of running into people, especially those who may know them personally (Furlong 2008; Kaneko 2006). As a result, their schedules may become reversed, with many hikikomori spending most of the daytime sleeping and becoming more active during the night (Saitō 2013).

There are a wide range of estimates on the current number of hikikomori living in Japan, with Tamaki Saitō, a leading voice in the study of the phenomenon, venturing the highest guess at one million individuals (Saitō 2013). The lowest estimate comes from the sociologist Akio Inui, who suggested that the number may be closer to 200,000, at least when considering the hikikomori population between the ages of 15 and 35 (Furlong 2008). This estimate has been

found to be exceedingly low, however, given that recent government surveys have found 613,000 reclusive individuals between the ages of 40 and 64 and at least 541,000 hikikomori between the ages of 15-39. (Kyodo 2019). This lends credit to Tamaki Saitō's estimate of around 1 million total, which he made at first in 1998. The claim was seen as incredibly bold at the time, but more and more data suggests that he may have been correct.

The wide variance of these estimates stems largely from their methods of extraction. For instance, Tamaki Saitō draws upon his experience in psychological treatment, noting that he sees similar numbers of hikikomori and schizophrenic patients, leading him to guess that the total number of hikikomori is likely similar to those living with schizophrenia. Meanwhile, the lowest estimate from Akio Inui stems from an analysis of labor market participation, given the assumption that we cannot assume that anywhere close to 100% of unemployed individuals are hikikomori (Furlong 2008).

This discrepancy may also point to the slight difference in how people understand hikikomori, or, for instance, who self identifies on a survey, seeks treatment, or manifests certain symptoms. We may wonder, for instance, if hikikomori can be defined as having a "mild" to "severe" spectrum of experiences. If so, how would this affect the statistics? Throughout my research, it has seemed that severity is largely measured by the length of withdrawal, rather than the accompanying attitudes, ideals, and pathologies. With this in mind, I suppose it's fair to ask, "who gets to be considered a hikikomori?" Considering that Tamaki Saitō seemed to venture the most accurate estimate for total hikikomori population 20 years ago, we may also wonder if there has truly been vast growth in this population or if methods of

data collection have simply become more accurate. Unfortunately, these answers don't seem to exist in the current landscape of hikikomori discourse.

This elusive standard also takes form in the demographic data. For instance, as mentioned earlier, it is assumed that the largest population of hikikomori is between the ages of 15-34. However, the 2019 government data showed fairly massive numbers for a much older section of the public. Many of these older individuals had lived seemingly normal lives until they had enough funds (through inheritance or other forms) to withdraw, at which point, they did (Kyodo 2019). Hikikomori are often also assumed to be men, but the Japanese Cabinet Office's 2016 Survey showed that, while the majority of those actually experiencing withdrawal were men, the majority of sympathizers and those who claimed to wish they could withdraw were, in fact, women (Tajan et al. 2016). This speaks once again to the question of who is truly allowed to adopt both the lifestyle and the title of hikikomori.

This demographic information also engages a critical talking point when it comes to hikikomori: is the withdrawal a choice or a symptom of mental illness? While I will explore this topic in more detail at a later point, I believe that it is worth acknowledging that a certain degree of choice will always be present. While some women do, of course, become hikikomori, it is apparent that many more resist the urge to withdraw from society. Furthermore, while the older generation may have wanted to withdraw sooner, it was not until financial stability was a reality for them that they made the change. This points to an element of choice—a knowledge that the hikikomori lifestyle is either not accessible or is somehow even less acceptable for certain groups than others. In some ways, it might seem that fully withdrawing from society is a privilege that not all individuals can afford. The ability to withdraw is predicated on well

accepted social norms, such as financial support from parents, dichotomized gender expression, and more.

There are also a broad range of explanations for the hikikomori phenomenon. For his part, Saitō argues for a psycho-medical understanding of social withdrawal. While he does not believe that hikikomori youth can be accurately diagnosed using modern psychol-analytical methods, he instead proposes that they represent a new category that must be explored and given a distinct diagnosis. Saitō was certainly responsible for popularizing the psychological view, which has helped frame the governmental policies regarding social withdrawal (Furlong 2008). However, given the government's focus on the psychological aspects of the hikikomori phenomenon, it is perhaps unsurprising that economic and educational spheres, which have likewise often been implicated in the rise of withdrawal, have not been the focus of much policy reform.

Japan's economic positioning is, in many ways, quite unique. In the aftermath of WWII, Japan's economy experienced unprecedented economic growth. From around 1945-1991, there was exponential expansion of the market, with Japan's productive capital stock doubling in the years 1965-1970 alone (The Brookings Bulletin 1976; Kiprop 2019). This economic growth carried with it many cultural changes in the workplace, with many salarymen being offered nearly guaranteed lifetime employment (Allison 2013). This all changed, however, with the bursting of the bubble in the 1990s. While Japan still boasts the third largest economy in the world, Japanese citizens have experienced a troubling downturn in job security, with cultural expectations enforcing pressure for a lifestyle that no longer exists in the same way as it did during the years of economic growth.

This process has created a large population of unemployed individuals and perpetual part-time workers. These youths do not fit into the traditional workplace roles that became popular during the period of economic expansion, with the salaryman (“sarari-man”), office lady (“offisu le-di”), and traditional housewife (“sengyo-shufu”) being the far more respected and, in many ways, expected paths (Miller and Toivanen 2009). With fewer of these jobs being available, the expectation to find those jobs remaining salient, as well as a “single track, rigidly organised [*sic*] and highly pressured” (Furlong 2008, 314) educational system, Japan’s youth have found themselves in a highly precarious situation.

With this information in mind, we may assume that the gendered aspect of hikikomori is likely a reflection of larger gender-based social expectation. For one, hikikomori is often seen as a failure to be economically active—to be a drain on society, your family, and your community due to a lack of productivity. The concept of economic viability has, however, historically been seen as a masculine aspiration. As mentioned earlier, Japanese men are still often expected to take on the role of salary man, while Japanese women are expected to either become office ladies or housewives. The role of office lady, though, is often seen as temporary—a job that one does until she has gotten married and chosen to have children (Ogasawara 1998). In that sense, the housewife is still considered to be the ultimate aspiration, the end goal.

This is complicated by the increasing wishes for economic vitality among Japanese women as well as later marriage ages on average. In an interview with Asian Boss entitled “What’s the Ideal Age for Women to Get Married in Japan,” which was posted to YouTube in October of 2019, several Japanese women expressed the wish to hold off on marriage in order to achieve financial independence. Thus, it would seem that women have been engaged in a

larger social movement to escape the household. Hikikomori, on the other hand, is cast as a way to escape economic expectations and uncertainty. For women, economic legitimacy has been something for which they have had to fight, and for which many strides have been made in recent years. As such, women as a group may have much more to lose by engaging in hikikomori lifestyles, as their needs with regard to protest may be quite different. To account for the demographic differences, perhaps more men may be trying to escape the outside world, while women have been trying to escape the inside world.

On the other hand, hikikomori is also considered a failure of sociality in general. The role of women in Japanese society has, historically, been that of the caretaker—as seen in the housewife expectation—which is an innately social role. To be a woman in Japan is, perhaps in many ways, to be a social being. More so than with men, women's roles are defined by the people with whom they engage: first their parents, then their husband, and then their children. They must exist in company with others to fulfill their social expectations. Rather than sociality being something they enact, it is a state that they are expected to innately inhabit. Male hikikomori, on the other hand, have failed to engage economically, which is notably a failure of action. For women, becoming a hikikomori may be seen as something else entirely. Perhaps for women, social disengagement is a failure to be rather than a failure to do. Within that framework, the stakes may be entirely different for females who wish to withdraw.

For Japanese youth as a whole, the ontological crisis produced by large-scale economic instability is in many ways pervasive, driving some young people toward drastic ideologies or beliefs. In 2007, an essay written by a 31-year-old perpetual part-time worker caught the attention of many for this very reason. In this piece, Tomohiro Akagi describes the plight faced

by today's Japanese youth by expressing that "in modern society, in which becoming a regular employee after graduation is viewed as the proper path, only newly minted graduates are accepted by decent employers" (Akagi 2007). He argues that, while his post-bubble generation faces unending uncertainty, those with steady employment before the bursting of the bubble continue to live happily and comfortably. His suggested remedy to this inequality and unrest is severe: he argues that Japan should go to war. War is an equalizer, he contends, because those who have plenty now are set to lose it in wartime. Meanwhile, for those who have nothing, "war is not tragic. Rather it offers a chance" (Akagi 2007). To engage in war would, Akagi believes, lead to a Japanese society in which everyone would suffer equally—a welcome change in his mind from the modern inequality and generational blame. His assertion is powerful not least because of what it reveals about the crisis that faces the economically unfortunate young people in Japan.

This crisis extends far beyond the economic realm. As is evident from the extreme prescription offered by Akagi, economic precarity often feeds into a more general social precarity. Anne Allison Explores this dynamic in *Precarious Japan* as she focuses on what some Japanese social activists have coined "ikizurasa (the hardship of life)" (Allison 2013, 65). As Japan has faced large social upheaval in the wake of the economic bubble bursting, the social bonds that once held society together are no longer as salient, she argues. According to sociologist Michiko Miyamoto, Japan's youth are becoming increasingly more nonsocial and non-active (Allison 2013). This is a symptom of the "hardship of life" which, while directly related to economic uncertainty, is noted as first and foremost an issue of human connection. In the modern Japanese context, it is the economically precarious youth, the "precariat" as

Allison calls them, that are most highly susceptible to social disconnect. This stems from a lack of success in the workforce leading to a lack of “recognition or acceptance by others” (Allison 2013, 65). As such, the economic downturn in Japan has threatened the very fabric of Japanese sociality, pulling apart the threads that once held people together. While these trends are noticeable in society at large, it is also within this context that the extreme of nonsocial behavior, the extreme of nonactivity, is found in the large and potentially growing hikikomori population.

However often these aspects of Japanese society get implicated in the rise of social withdrawal, it is generally non-state-sponsored institutions that have created rehabilitation mechanisms that take these pressures into account (Miller and Toivonen 2009). As Miller and Toivonen note, these organizations tend to be “critical of state-sponsored education” (2), which lends itself to their choices to remain outside of the mainstream context. Public education, many in these sectors contend, does not address so-called “problem youths” in effective ways. For this reason, rehabilitative institutions for marginalized young people have cropped up across Japan, forming their own pedagogies separate from the mainstream.

However, this does not mean that cultural ideals and preconceptions are absent from such rehabilitative organizations. For instance, in an online interview entitled “Inside A Rehab Center For Japanese Hermits [Hikikomori]” posted by Asian Boss in June of 2019, one counselor from such an organization explained away the hikikomori phenomenon by simply describing them as “spoiled,” which is a common social critique of those experiencing withdrawal along with similarly loaded descriptors such as epidemic, dysfunctional, unmotivated, maladaptive, cultural dropout, parasitical tendencies, and more (Berman and Rizzo 2019). The

aforementioned rehabilitation center also functions in a highly regimented way, with early wake up times, set work hours on a farm, meetings, and more. As such, it is helpful to remember that while the rehabilitation techniques often involve a separation from the mainstream Japanese educational experience, such environments will always be reflective of their cultural contexts. After all, the ultimate goal of these institutions is to find a way to prepare these troubled youths for success—or at the very least normative functionality—in Japanese society.

This dynamic is inherent in the very concept of rehabilitation, which pre-supposes a return to “acceptable” behavior. It is corrective by nature, precluding any and all attempts at dramatic structural change. Rehabilitation is therefore prescriptive rather than holistic in its analytical capabilities, which reveals its potential for reductive application. This is not to say that rehabilitation as a whole is problematic, but that much may be lost if we, as a society, never think beyond it. In relation to hikikomori, the focus on rehabilitation silences structural critique, making social withdrawal solely the responsibility of the individual.

The focus on normativity and the belief that withdrawal in general is worthy of criticism may stem from several root causes. For one, as I will discuss in a later chapter, it may be reflective of the social stigma surrounding mental illness in Japan. This stigma is well documented, with some experts attributing the hikikomori phenomenon to a failure to address mental unwellness in a high-stress social climate as well as the substantial social barriers that to mental healthcare in Japan (Kondo et al. 2011; Furlong 2008; Tajan et al. 2017; Ando et al. 2013; Kanehara et al. 2015). There may, however, be another factor that accounts for the ample blame and, at times, disgust that is targeted at hikikomori. That is, the existence of

hikikomori acts as a threat to the structural norms of society by very nature of existing outside of them.

This is not a new supposition. On a few occasions, hikikomori, and the post-bubble generation at large, have been associated with the concept of a “moratorium” (Furlong 2008; Heinze and Thomas 2014). A moratorium in this case refers to the act of taking time during confusing transitional periods to reorient oneself toward the future, to settle into one’s identity, and so on (Furlong 2008). This is especially common among young people entering adulthood, as they are expected to shed the norms of childhood and take on a more active role in society with many more responsibilities. Even Tamaki Saitō argues that the state of being a hikikomori is, in many ways, a prolonging of adolescence (Saitō 2013). These associations evoke a sense of liminality that appears to be innate to hikikomori experience.

In “Liminality and Communitas,” Victor Turner explores the dimensions of liminal existence, stating that “the attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (‘threshold people’)—are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in a cultural space” (Turner 1969, 95). Here he points to the in-between nature of liminality. If we are to attribute this to hikikomori, it may account for why they appear so difficult to place within an acceptable social mold. This may be why they seem to be neither child nor adult, neither ill nor entirely well, for instance. They exist within both categories and none of them at the same time. Their existence is a challenge to structure as it stands—they demand a reimagining of society by virtue of resisting assumptions of what constitutes a citizen and a person in modernity.

So, why is liminality so innately threatening to those who perceive it, as it would seem when hikikomori are referred to as “parasites?” Turner addresses the discomfort that stems from this provocation, stating “from the perspectival viewpoint of those concerned with the maintenance of ‘structure,’ all sustained manifestations of *communitas* must appear as dangerous and anarchical, and have to be hedged around with prescriptions, prohibitions, and conditions” (Turner 1969, 109). Of course, liminality can only exist alongside structure, as its existence depends on the subversion thereof. Structure, then, cannot exist without anti-structure. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, the idea of a moratorium is not new—it is been noted within a psychological and social framework since 1968 (Furlong 2008). However, a moratorium is, by definition, temporary. The experience of social withdrawal as a hikikomori, on the other hand, is not often accompanied by assumptions of a known end. It is a prolonged state which exists outside the realm of accepted liminal experience, and it is therefore more threatening. It may appear that hikikomori are taking advantage of the liminality that must exist alongside social structure, hence seeming parasitical. Hikikomori challenge the social structure by indefinitely inhabiting a liminal space, and the established structure of society requires their existence to be challenged in turn; this oftentimes presents in the form of harsh criticism toward the younger generation, assumptions of laziness, being spoiled, and so on.

Another dimension of the distaste that society may feel for liminal people lies in the concept of purity and/or corruption. Mary Douglas addresses the act of distinguishing the pure from the corrupt in her piece “Purity and Danger” in 1966. In her analysis, it would appear that anything that does not fit into preconceived notions of proper categories is determined to be a pollutant. It is for this reason that animals such as pigs, which do not fit into perfectly

standardized categories of appearance and behavior, have been denoted in Levitical law (and therefore historically seen) as “unclean” and therefore unsafe for consumption (Douglas 2003). The defiance of category provokes discomfort and fear in the minds of many, as humans are predisposed to an appreciation for consistency. Thus, seeing as hikikomori defy all consistent groupings, they are met with fear and judgement by those that encounter them.

Chapter II: Media and Literary Representation of Hikikomori

Failing to be even recognizable as human—by one’s employer, by society—is a “hardship of life” all its own and a problem difficult to address. This is existential vulnerability or ontological precariousness: a situation where even sensing oneself is up for grabs. And if feeling socially dead already, the option of suicide may not be much of a jump. (Allison 2013, 67)

To purposefully live out a life devoid of connection to others may seem exceedingly unappealing or even senseless to many. However, what happens when social disconnect becomes culturally normative? When all eyes are watching, how do the socially precarious manage to represent their seemingly unspeakable dilemma? With the hikikomori phenomenon, we face an extraordinary moment in which the socially marginalized have suddenly found themselves at the forefront of media representation. This effect is most striking in Japan, but remains quite remarkable in nearby nations as well, especially those with similar socio-cultural norms, such as South Korea. In recent years, references to the phenomenon have even made their way to the West. These diverse representations of social isolation and, more specifically, hikikomori, have taken form in poetry, music, news media, and more. In both Japan and internationally, the socially precarious have made their voices known.

Origins: Representation in Japan

In Japan specifically, the experience of social precarity and isolation is felt and recognized by many literary artists. One such individual is Tahi Saihate, a young poet who employs a deceptively casual style in her work. A common theme in her poetry is the palpable

disconnect among Japanese youth, shown in her explorations of “isolation, depression, and downright bewilderment about love of all kinds” (Smith 2017, 109). Her focus on these topics likely stems from her personal experiences as part of the precarious post-bubble generation. In one short poem, translated by Jordan Smith, she addresses the topic of isolation through the imagery surgical masks, which have become a common fashion statement in Japan. The work aptly titled “Mask Poem” begins by revealing her dark interiority. Saihate writes

I have this I wanna die, I wanna disappear,
 I only want to go to an aquarium feeling, and
 It’s time to go walk around town. Christmas, illumination.
 The world seems to have nothing to do with me, such a bright,
 cheerful era.

(Tahi Saihate, “Mask Poem”)

By invoking the imagery of Christmas, which is often associated with warmth and joy, the speaker draws a dramatic contrast to her own feelings of coldness and pessimism. She continues with this contrast by expressing that the “bright, / cheerful era” has nothing to do with her. The abrasive light and warmth of such an atmosphere seems to alienate her due to her own internal struggle with darkness.

Tahi Saihate continues with these harsh oppositions throughout the piece. She expands upon this disparate sense of self by writing, “I should exist, though I feel like I don’t. / I’m

walking, though I feel like I'm not" ("Mask Poem") highlighting a disconnect not only from the people around her, but also from herself. She goes on to repeat earlier lines, writing

I have this I wanna die, I wanna disappear,

I only want to go to an aquarium,

Just for some bubblegum-like misery, for me, there is no need to

die.

("Mask Poem")

This repetition reinforces the sense of helpless detachment that runs throughout the piece. In moments like these, to die, to disappear, or to do something innocuous such as go to an aquarium, are all interchangeable. When you feel separated from the world, what difference does it make? But for her, she says that death is unnecessary—she has another option. She finishes the poem by saying "Hiding my mouth, hiding my nose / Just got to slip away from the world's gaze / In this easy suicide" ("Mask Poem"). Here she refers to covering her face with a surgical mask as she walks through the crowd. Through this action, she is able to disappear from the world, to hide herself. To disconnect physically in this way, to erase her face from the minds of others, is the easiest way to die.

Saihate's "Mask Poem" exemplifies the experience of social precarity, i.e. the "hardship of life" discussed earlier. As economic precarity has facilitated a sort of social death for the young precariat, Saihate's poetry illustrates a preemptive foil to the exercise; rather than

allowing society to dehumanize, isolate, and socially kill the speaker, she instead takes that responsibility on herself. Society can no longer kill her, because she does kills herself first.

This pessimistic response to social death is emblematic of the everyday sense of uncertainty that pervades Japanese society—the very uncertainty that has fed into a culture of detachment. No longer is such a disconnect simply felt, but it can be worn as an accessory as well. Saihate highlights the sense of hopelessness, distance, and resignation that accompanies social precarity in modern life. By using the imagery of the mask, she creates a link between the internal sense of disconnection and the visual cue offered by covering her face. In this sense, the mask acts as a barrier between her and the outside world, as it does for many young people in Japan who have adopted the surgical mask as a fashion statement.

While Saihate's poetry is illustrative of the experience of social precarity at large, there have also been a number of more explicitly hikikomori-related media pieces produced in recent years. Perhaps most notable was the 2002 manga *Welcome to the NHK*, which was adapted into an equally popular anime series in 2006. This series' plot follows the life of a young, jobless man who openly refers to himself as a hikikomori (Heinze and Thomas 2014; Angles 2013). In the opening of the series, he reveals that he has spent the last four years of his young life in a state of withdrawal. He is severely depressed, even going as far as attempting suicide. His life is then changed, however, when he meets a young woman who makes it her mission to rehabilitate him.

While *Welcome to the NHK* engages many classic anime tropes, its unique choice of protagonist highlights the growing relevance of the hikikomori phenomenon in Japanese

society. It may seem as though the manga and anime series capitalized on the frenzy surrounding hikikomori's expressions of emotional distress, but there is another element involved. That is, the original manga artist has identified as a recovered hikikomori (Angles 2013). He has even claimed that he first began working on the story as a way to make money without leaving the house (Heinze and Thomas 2014; Allison 2013). This insight may inject a sense of authenticity and relatability into the story, as the creator was able to draw upon first-hand experience and fashion it in entertaining ways for mass audiences. The narrative entering the mainstream gave many hikikomori a chance to feel seen and heard, as it delved into many of the stereotypes and assumptions that the general public may have about these individuals. Beyond this, by making the protagonist a hikikomori, it automatically begs the audience to offer their support; the character becomes sympathetic through the medium of entertainment. Thus, the series may seem, in many ways, to be subversive, challenging the negative preconceptions of hikikomori and recasting them in a sympathetic light.

The series' focus on rehabilitation, though, also actively reinforces the mainstream narrative of social withdrawal as one's own personal responsibility. As the author has identified with this phenomenon, it is likely that his experience of rehabilitation, and his current ability to reach wider audiences due to re-engaging in society, is behind this framing. According to common clichés, it would seem that one *can* find their way out of the hikikomori lifestyle, be it through sheer willpower, counselling, rehabilitation centers, or, in the case of *Welcome to the NHK*, a fortuitous meeting with an empathetic human savior (if the plot can be simplified to that extent). But, none of these options include dramatic restructuring of society. As such, the root cause of many hikikomori's strife is left unresolved, even in this fantasy representation.

This is not to say that *Welcome to the NHK* shied away from the difficult realities and pathologies of hikikomori life. Indeed, as I mentioned earlier, the main character's unfortunate mental state, with his deep depression and copious obsessive tendencies, were amply illustrated. It has been noted that this character's relatability through both his withdrawn lifestyle and his attempts at recovery through part-time work makes him "a good object character for young males to identify with" (Heinze and Thomas 2014, 162). As such, we can see that *Welcome to the NHK* contained several elements of social critique; it just did not follow them through to a vastly reimagined future, one that would have been easily accessible in fictional representation. By presenting the trajectory of hikikomori experience in this far more accessible way, it is possible that the narrative was able to entice a broader audience, making the story palatable to everyone—not just the socially withdrawn. *Welcome to the NHK* is ultimately about entertainment, after all, as is exemplified in its description as "non-stop hikikomori action" (Allison 2013, 3).

This paradoxical tagline works to establish a dichotomy between the reality of nonsocial or non-participatory behavior and the fictional representation that highlights drama and commotion. Often, fiction allows us to overcome the self and represent emotional truths as if recording one's soul. Fiction can, in many instances, be more real than reality. However, *Welcome to the NHK* does not always achieve this feat. The marked distinction between reality and fiction, in this case, has been noted by some hikikomori viewers. One such individual, who goes by the name of Higana, wrote of his reaction to *Welcome to the NHK* that he could not relate to the main character despite being in very a similar state of withdrawal. The reason cited is simple: "even if the subject matter is withdrawal, fiction is still just fiction" (Higana

2017). Higana argues that in reality withdrawal is a much more hopeless state of affairs. He writes that in withdrawal “there is no beautiful girl who will try to help you, no kind and understanding parents, no friends that you can comfortably speak to, and no senior¹ that you can rely on” (Higana 2017). As such, because *Welcome to the NHK* offered a prescriptive—and largely unrealistic—vision of hikikomori progress, there were those that were unable to see themselves in the main character.

Hikikomori Neighbors: South Korean Representation

Representation of the hikikomori experience has also spread to nearby countries, namely South Korea, which Tamaki Saitō notes as having a strikingly similar withdrawal problem to that of Japan (Saitō 2013). In January of 2019, a Korean hip hop artist by the name of Yongguk Bang released a solo piece entitled “Hikikomori.” In this song, his lyrics take on the first-person perspective of a hikikomori, revealing the inner turmoil and distress one may experience when in a state of withdrawal. The lyrics span from general introspection to more direct pleas to the outside world. He sets the stage by saying

I want to avoid the world

In my own world

I don’t want to be disturbed

I keep trying to avoid it

¹ In this instance, Higana uses the word “senpai,” which refers to those who have entered the school or workplace before oneself. Another common translation is “upperclassman.”

(Yonggukk Bang, “Hikikomori”)

which he then expands upon, diving more deeply into the specific thoughts and feelings that are commonly associated with the hikikomori experience. The next lines continue with “I see myself in the mirror as a good-for-nothing / I want to run away / Darkness is my light” (“Hikikomori”). These lines highlight a couple of key elements having to do with hikikomori individuals—those being the negative self-image that they are generally considered to have as well as their relationship to light and darkness. By saying that darkness is his light, Yongguk Bang could be referring to the more literal experience of days and nights becoming reversed for many hikikomori. Alternatively, the line offers a double meaning: what many people consider to be unseemly (isolation or loneliness) is the very thing that becomes my salvation. For a hikikomori, isolation and darkness are safe; they offer cover from the judging eyes of society. Throughout literary history, darkness—in the form of the night—has been romanticized. For the artist, night is linked to “imaginative life,” that is, a life that one simply cannot live during the day (Abdel-Hai 1975, 107). For the speaker, and perhaps for many hikikomori, the night offers similar freedoms. As such, the only way the he feels a sense of light is, somewhat ironically, alone in the dark.

Shortly thereafter, he cuts straight to the divide between individual experience and societal expectation. He asks,

Why? Why do you ask me why I hide?

Hey! Why? Why is it so important?

Why? Why if you and I are different from the blood?

Why are you forcing me to do the same?

(Yongguk Bang, “Hikikomori”)

Here he begs the question: why does it matter so much that some people choose to live in isolation? Why, if one cannot relate to the hikikomori experience, does one assume that a hikikomori must rejoin society? Why does society enforce rehabilitation, and ultimately a forgoing of isolation entirely, as the only acceptable option for many hikikomori? He criticizes society for the tendency to “differentiate between normal and abnormal” (“Hikikomori”) in such a way. In this instance, Yongguk Bang manages to illustrate a sense of being different from the norm—different down to one’s bones, or in his words, down to one’s blood. If hikikomori feel as if they are different by nature, it is to be expected that they would question why such a difference is delegitimized.

This delegitimization often stems from an essentializing of hikikomori experience. One often wants to assume that one knows the truth of another’s pain. If one were to argue that they can truly understand the hikikomori experience from the outside, Yongguk Bang’s lyrics bring that into question. During the song’s bridge, the speaker addresses the listener, saying

Hey! Don’t assume you know

When they force you to breathe without rest

I know how it feels

It doesn’t matter how much I hit, eat, or drink

Everything is ruled by pain

I know how it feels

(“Hikikomori”)

These lines seem reminiscent of someone responding to criticism. For instance, if one were to criticize hikikomori by calling them lazy or spoiled, it assumes their perspective, assumes an understanding of their pain in a way that Yongguk Bang argues is impossible. However, he notably essentializes hikikomori experience as well by stating that “everything is ruled by pain,” which can either be read as a first-person expression of suffering or a description of hikikomori in general. In either case, his cultural critiques are hard to ignore. He refers here to being forced to “breathe without rest,” a choice that likely offers commentary on the intolerably high pressures of society. The effect of such a strained existence is that it turns the most simple and natural of our human inclinations into a chore.

Travelling Narratives: Hikikomori Representation in the West

While both Japanese and South Korean societies have been recognized as having large populations of withdrawn individuals, it is perhaps more surprising to see evidence of hikikomori discourse in other parts of the world. For instance, while Europe and North America do not offer the same level of visibility to the phenomenon as both Japan and, to a lesser extent, South Korea have, acknowledgement of hikikomori has still found its way into news media and literary representation. These representations often revolve around the particulars of the Japanese socio-cultural dynamic, but some studies have discovered hikikomori in the Western world as well.

Japanese specificity is implicated in the BBC's first mention of hikikomori, which occurred in a 2001 news article about a series of violent crimes in Japan (Balasegaram 2001). The article points to Japan's growing anxiety surrounding deviant young people. While speaking of the rise in violent behavior, they note that "Some attribute the problem to the 'hikikomori' - young people who have shut themselves off in their rooms, and who may be victims of bullying" (Balasegaram 2001). The 2001 article is short and to the point, but it is certainly not the last article the BBC ever wrote about the phenomenon. Indeed, the coverage has changed dramatically in focus, with one 2019 piece—a video detailing a "rent-a-sister" business aimed at coaxing hikikomori out of their rooms—taking a more sympathetic approach.

The first mention of hikikomori in American news similarly appears to have taken place in 2001, with a New York Times review of a theatre piece the Japanese director Shinjin Shimizu. The piece engages the experience of precarity in Japan through "mastery and being mastered, compulsion, restriction," and intense bodily violence (Martin 2001). Here, hikikomori is referred to as the "claustrophobic result" of Japan's attempts at globalizing their market (Martin 2001). The theater piece attempts to critique the very factors creating and enforcing the precarity experienced by hikikomori and Japanese society as a whole.

More recently, hikikomori have also made an appearance in North American literature as well, as seen in the novel *A Tale for the Time Being*, wherein the main character's father falls into a state of withdrawal. Yet again, the story focuses on the particulars of Japanese experience, with the narrative being centered around a Japanese family. More surprising, perhaps, is the presence of psychiatric studies that have found and named hikikomori in the United States as well as in countries all over the world such as Spain, India, Hong Kong, and

more (Kato et al. 2018). Researchers posit that the shift toward being considered a transnationally relevant condition is likely due to “the evolution of communication from direct to increasingly indirect and physically isolating” (106). While this explanation seems entirely too simplistic, is it nonetheless quite possible that international standards of sociality are veering dramatically toward the nonsocial.

Given the growing presence of hikikomori narratives around the globe, we may wonder what it is that makes the term “hikikomori” so widely applicable. The English language, for instance, has its own word for social withdrawal, as well as the term “recluse” for the individual experiencing withdrawal. Why, then, are the socially isolated individuals named in the aforementioned study being labeled as hikikomori? The answer may lie in the changing nature of the intersections between economy and society, given that the societies implicated in the hikikomori phenomenon are those that are more industrialized (Tajan et al. 2017).

Karen Nakamura, in her work entitled *Disability of the Soul*, argues that “mental illness is a disease of modernity” (Nakamura 2013, 35). She notes that this is true for three distinct reasons. First, she establishes that “the regimentation of daily life and increased stressors of modernity have led to a rise in various types of mental illness,” (Nakamura 2013, 35) which highlights the connection between accepted lifestyles in modern industrialized nations and the increased reports of mental unwellness that accompany such lifestyles. Next, she contends that researchers know more about mental illness now than ever before, leading to new diagnoses, interventions, and more. Finally, she asserts that there are “complex interactions among individuals, their illnesses, and the larger social contexts in which these are all embedded” (Nakamura 2013, 35). Mental illness, then, is entirely contextual; it is something that has only

recently been seen in a medical light, the structure of modern society lends itself to the development of mental health concerns, and our cultural norms and identities shape our understandings of our own mental state constantly. This perspective, it would seem, encompasses many aspects of the “hardship of life” expressed by Japanese youth. Society and the individual are not entirely separate entities; rather, they inform and influence each other in a multitude of ways, at times detrimentally.

Just as mental illness can be seen as a disease of modern life, so too can hikikomori be seen as referring less to the act of withdrawal itself and more to the social ecosystems in which such nonsocial sentiments are being cultivated. In other words, a “recluse” can be any old person living in a cabin in the woods. What pushed them into a state of withdrawal does not matter in that context—a recluse is a recluse. Hikikomori, though, speaks to the modern plight of economic and social precarity. Increased social pressure has led to not just one or two reclusive individuals, but an entire movement of nonsocial behavior. As such, the title speaks to the phenomenon, the sentiment of non-sociality, and the individual all at the same time, rather than simply describing the act of social isolation. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the term “hikikomori” has become an increasingly useful word to describe modern reclusive youth.

Chapter III: The Underground Man's Life in Japan

Framing "Notes from Underground" in a Japanese Context

A book never lives the same life twice, but it does live infinitely. By this I mean that every reader brings parts of themselves to a literary work—their personal background, social context, moral beliefs, and more. They imbue every page with pieces of themselves, crafting a unique experience as they read. Depending on what aspects of one's self and experience a literary work coaxes from us, the experience is deeply individualized. However, this is not to say that certain understandings of literature are not shared, especially within a community. While there are many aspects of the self that we assume to be unknowably unique, there are also aspects of identity that we assume to be shared among groups, such as cultural norms. As such, while every reader experiences a story individually, individuals within a society might share some important understandings of the same work.

This commonality allows literature to experience a new cultural life wherever it goes. While it certainly carries with it the norms and values of its originating society, these elements at times get translated and reconfigured, receiving new meaning in a different context. This is emphasized by Suzanne Keen when she states that

Readers' empathy for situations depicted in fiction may be enhanced by chance relevance to particular historical, economic, cultural, or social circumstances, either in the moment of first publication or in later times, fortuitously anticipated or prophetically foreseen by the novelist. (Keen 2006, 214)

Here Keen also engages the concept of empathy as it relates to storytelling and consumption. It has long been believed, and has recently been pursued scientifically, that reading literature helps us cultivate empathy for the other (Keen 2006; Chiaet 2013). As such, it would seem that literature and literary representations of the other, especially those which engage societal contexts in the ways Keen described, may allow individuals who have traditionally been offered less sympathy to be increasingly understood or, at the very least, empathized with.

If we consider the hikikomori's presence in literature and media, we can see substantial growth in representation since the late 1990s. As has been established, hikikomori characters have been featured in anime, manga, novels, movies, and music. Hikikomori themselves have also taken to the internet, blogging their societal grievances as well as sharing their experiences, thus creating their own literature highlighting their own voices. Each form of representation, both the personal and the fictional, has its limitations. That is, the fictional representation will never encompass the vast array of hikikomori experiences outlined in more personal blogs, and the hikikomori blog posts may never reach the wide audience or achieve the narrative empathy response that a deeply engaging fictional work is able to. As such, highlighting the overlap between these two worlds may offer greater insight into the experience of withdrawal.

Given that societal and cultural norms invariably find their way into literature, it seems pertinent to explore the growing popularity—and, indeed, the second life—of one of the most famous reclusive characters in literary history, that of the Underground Man. In literature, of course, such reclusive characters are often quietly charismatic, deeply thoughtful, and sympathy-evoking. They tend to radiate an air of mystery and complexity, drawing readers in

and filling them with unanswerable questions. The Underground Man is no exception, as his internal world is endlessly convoluted, inspiring far more questions than answers. Dostoevsky's 1864 novella, *Notes from Underground*, portrays this highly critical, frantic, and eccentric man who lives his life in a basement as both exceedingly perplexing and yet never entirely negative. His ruminations occur in a polyphony of voices, all of which are entirely his own, and all of which make up his singular character. Indeed, the Underground Man's relentless contradictions have fascinated readers all over the world, including those in Japan.

However, the presence of the Underground Man in mainstream Japanese society is a fairly recent development. While Dostoevsky's other works, such as *Crime and Punishment*, have been held in high regard consistently, it was not until the mid-to-late 1990s that *Notes from Underground* began to receive widespread recognition. This is illustrated by the fact that the first popular translation, as presented in Waseda University's library catalogue, was published in 1993, followed by subsequent publications in 2007, 2011, and multiple releases in 2013. This is notably right around the time that Tamaki Saitō wrote his groundbreaking psychoanalytical guide, *Hikikomori: Adolescence Without End*. It was this book from Saitō that brought knowledge and conversation on the hikikomori phenomenon to the mainstream. Since that time, hikikomori has held a constant presence in Japanese cultural vernacular.

This raises the question of *why* the Underground Man has become an important literary figure. Yes, he is reclusive, but is that enough to explain the simultaneous rise in cultural consciousness? Is it a coincidence? How deep does the connection between hikikomori and the Underground Man really go, and who is drawing the connections between them? By analyzing a variety of Japanese blog posts by hikikomori individuals, which I have translated for this

purpose, I have discovered that both those who are hikikomori and those who are not seem to be aware of the potentially sympathetic and cautionary use for the Underground Man's story.

One hikikomori blogger addressed the topic by acknowledging that many theorists have discussed the similarities between the Underground Man and the increasing number of socially withdrawn youth. They note that, for this reason, they purchased *Notes from Underground* and were surprised by the translators note, which reads as follows:

These days, there are an increasing number of otaku² and hikikomori who are sitting in front of the computer and on the internet all day long, craving connection with others. Similarly, the Underground Man truly wants to live life among other people. Due to the times we are in, it seems that the lived reality presented in *Notes from Underground* is becoming more common. After seeing that loneliness and pain are unavoidable in this kind of life, (we) hope that (you) will find a way to hold on to hope. (Quoted in Usami 2015)

From this we can see that the Underground Man's tortured life is being used as a cautionary tale for those suffering through withdrawal. The translator made the explicit connection between the growing cases of socially non-participatory behavior and the Underground Man's tragic state of unhappiness. The message is clear: don't end up like him.

However, that is not to say that the message is devoid of sympathy. Instead, it seems like a plea to those who are on a path of suffering. In this instance, the Underground Man's

² "Otaku" generally refers to anime-obsessed geeks. Similar to the title of hikikomori, "otaku" takes on a judgmental color when applied to individuals in Japan (Heinze and Thomas 2014).

circumstances—his pained reality—have elicited an empathetic response. Rather than saying “pull yourself together and stop being lazy,” this story is being invoked as a form of encouragement. It recognizes the pain of isolation, and rather than placing blame on the withdrawn individual, it asks them to “hold on to hope.” One’s life does not have to look like that of the Underground Man; if one holds on, the assumption is that life can be far brighter.

It is also worth acknowledging that the hikikomori blogger was aware of this connection before reading the translator’s note. In fact, they seemed to feel as though they *should* read the book simply because they are a hikikomori and the Underground Man, it seems, may be one as well. This direct link is reiterated in another post by a different individual, in which they outline the trajectory of the Underground Man’s life by concluding that “In the end, he chooses to become a hikikomori” (Shobou 2019). This writer also notes that “People who see themselves as dark and shadowy might relate to the main character” (Shobou 2019). This suggestion ties the experiences of hikikomori to feelings of darkness or inadequacy, a connection that I will expand upon later as it is an essential aspect of the Underground Man’s thought process. It also emphasizes the role of identification with the Underground Man’s interiority. As Keen notes, “the use of first person narration and the interior representation of characters’ consciousness and emotional states” as literary devices are theorized to have a role in “supporting character identification, contributing to empathetic experiences, opening readers’ minds to others, changing attitudes, and even predisposing readers to altruism” (Keen 2006, 213). As such, we may wonder if the structure of *Notes from Underground* lends itself particularly well to identification, as it is based entirely on one interior world.

A third blogger, also a hikikomori himself, states that Dostoevsky's novel is "one of the most necessary books for those living in withdrawal" (neat-work.com 2017). He writes that "Even though it is very old, when you read the book it feels as though it is written about your life" (neat-work.com 2017). For this person in particular, the story of the Underground Man struck a sensitive chord. He recalls feeling at a loss, supposedly for the first time in his life, after reading *Notes from Underground* due to its intense resonance. While he acknowledges that "for most people, the interior life of the main character might be annoying" he also contends that "for those who had humiliating or difficult experiences at school or in the workplace, the protagonist might seem like oneself" (neat-work.com 2017). Yet again, we see evidence of intense identification with the Underground Man. Interestingly, this individual points to his experience reading the book as his first truly intense life experience. This indicates that he may have felt truly seen in a way he had never experienced before, which points to the potential of literature to engage reality on a level that few other mediums can.

Through each of these examples, we can see that the correlation between the Underground Man's reclusive life and the lives of hikikomori across Japan is being noted by both outside observers and hikikomori themselves. If this parallel seems apt according to these individuals, we may begin to wonder what exactly is it that resonates so deeply with this seemingly new phenomenon. In what ways is the Underground Man similar or different, how comprehensively does he represent the diverse population of hikikomori, and can his thoughts give us valuable insight into the struggles of modern reclusive individuals?

Consulting the Underground Man

Twenty years deep in his withdrawal, the Underground Man puts his consciousness to paper, both for all the world to read and for no one at all. “I swear to you, gentlemen, that to be overly conscious is a sickness, a real, thorough sickness,” (Dostoevsky 1993, 3) he writes. Of course, any reader of *Notes from Underground* is immediately confronted by the Underground Man’s overly abundant consciousness. His constant, over-zealous analysis of his actions in relation to others, and theirs in relation to him, creates a palpable inner chaos from which he never manages to escape, nor does he always wish to. It is the tortured complexity of his inner world, his struggle for form and maintain strong bonds with others, and his general state of withdrawal that raises the question: is the Underground Man a hikikomori? If so, what can his convoluted series of ramblings illustrate to us about the life of someone in withdrawal?

In *Hikikomori: Adolescence Without End*, author Tamaki Saitō outlines the various traits or experiences common among many hikikomori cases in Japan. While the argument of the book is largely related to psychological diagnosis, how to go about it, and how to interact with a hikikomori family member, it is nonetheless helpful to analyze these commonalities alongside the Underground Man without assuming illness in either case. After all, to pathologize and ultimately diagnose the Underground Man would be to read his story as a roadmap of symptoms rather than as an opportunity for greater insight.

One of the most common traits among hikikomori individuals according Tamaki Saitō, is powerful self-judgement, self-hatred, or feelings of inferiority. The author writes that many times hikikomori will blame themselves for their shortcomings (namely their tendency toward

isolation), with many of them “saying things like ‘when I’m around others, I just wreck the mood’ or ‘I don’t have much to talk about so I’m a killjoy when I’m in the middle of a group of people’” (Saitō 2013, 38). While the Underground Man certainly never seems to be at a loss for words—instead being rather taken to rambling—he does engage in self-deprecation on a large scale.

The Underground Man’s self-judgement is clear from the opening words of the book. “I am a sick man...” he says, “I am a wicked man. An unattractive man” (Dostoevsky 1993, 3). His first words, then are a list of his negative qualities, as he sees them. While he definitely has a strong sense of pride and, at times, even a smugness about him, his image of himself is largely of someone who could not do well at anything. He even laments that he is bad at being bad. At one point, he seemingly sees himself unworthy of being truly terrible and insignificant, something comparable to an insect. “I’ll tell you solemnly that I wanted many times to become an insect. But I was not deemed worthy even of that,” (6) he shares. Interestingly, in this moment he sees himself as both above and below the status of an insect. Above, because he could not sink so low as to be one, and below because he could not succeed at being bad enough. He never allows himself to simply speak on a good—or even minimally acceptable—quality that he may have, but rather ties every somewhat-good thing about himself to a failure. In short, he is incapable of being noteworthy in any way.

This inability haunts him throughout the book, taking many forms along the way. In his wish for more established qualities, he hits upon another point of interest regarding the hikikomori connection—namely that, despite common perceptions of culturally non-participatory behavior (such as self-isolation), withdrawal has nothing to do with laziness. In

fact, the Underground Man *wishes* he could be truly lazy, wishes that he had an excuse for his personality and his behavior. “Oh, if I were doing nothing only out of laziness. Lord, how I’d respect myself then. Respect myself precisely because I’d at least be capable of having laziness in me; there would be in me at least one, as it were, positive quality, which I myself could be sure of,” (19) he laments.

One of the most common assumptions about hikikomori and social isolation itself is that the individual is simply lazy. This is usually phrased along the lines of “you don’t want to work,” “you don’t want to earn a living,” “you just want to ride off the coattails of the more successful or more affluent,” or “you want the world to take care of and coddle you.” As in the case of the Underground Man, though, this is rarely if ever the reality. Tamaki Saitō even argues this case, asking the reader to think more deeply about the act of withdrawing and the pain it must involve. “[...] Is it correct simply to call hikikomori ‘lazy’” he asks. “To understand their feelings, one should try to imagine the circumstances that caused them to feel forced to continue this life behind closed doors doing nothing for years. A withdrawn lifestyle typically involves a great deal of anguish,” (Saitō 2013, 32) he continues. Indeed, if we look to the Underground Man, we can see evidence of this anguish. His every thought is tortured, his every memory of the outside world tainted, and his wishes for himself and his life are lost. He has settled into a life that he both despises and feels safest in, and that feeling of safety is itself another source of pain.

One may wonder then, if hikikomori individuals are suffering in isolation (and they have not withdrawn out of laziness), why do they stop trying to re-enter society? Again, we are faced with the complexity of human consciousness and its ability to work against one’s own benefit. As the Underground Man states, “[...] Man, whoever he might be, has always and everywhere

liked to act as he wants, and not at all as reason and profit dictate; and one can want even against one's own profit, and one sometimes even *positively must* (this is my idea now)" (Dostoevsky 1993, 25). Truly, who can argue that human actions are *always* undertaken in one's best interest? It would be a difficult case to make because, well, it's not true.

Looking deeper into the psychology of those who get stuck in withdrawal, we find that both The Underground Man's thoughts and Tamaki Saitō's analysis again converge. Saitō asserts that one's life in a state of withdrawal inevitably leads to the deepening of said withdrawal. He outlines the process as follows: "Individuals see their withdrawal as the 'behavior of a loser,' and this makes their feelings of self-hatred all the worse, leading to a deeper withdrawal—a vicious circle" (Saitō 2013, 86). If this is true, then it supports the supposition that to withdraw at all is, indeed, to get *stuck*. This sentiment is also expressed, though much more complexly, by the Underground Man. He recalls his process, stating

The more conscious I was of the good and of all this 'beautiful and lofty,' the deeper I kept sinking into my mire, and the more capable I was of getting completely stuck in it. But the main feature was that this was all in me not as if by chance, but as if it had to be so. As if it were my most normal condition and in no way a sickness or a blight, so that finally I lost any wish to struggle against this blight. (Dostoevsky 1993, 7)

Here, again, The Underground Man reveals his ideals and his complicated relationship with them—that being a dichotomy that he can never fully satisfy. The more aware he was of what it meant to be good—to be deep, intelligent, kind, humorous, romantic, etc.—the less capable he was of achieving it. His great wish to be the embodiment of the "beautiful and lofty," created

such pressure within him that he instead acted perversely. His repeated failures to live up to his own expectations, and his habit of ruining relationships while trying, trapped him in an endless cycle of self-doubt and self-hatred. The more he failed, the easier it was to give up trying, and in the end it felt natural to him to cease all attempts.

This sense of failure and subsequent self-consciousness has been with him since his youth. In fact, his early memories of school are tainted by similar feelings of discontent which boils to the surface when he goes to visit an old school friend who he believes likely “found me quite disgusting” (60). Upon arrival, when his presence is at first ignored, he thinks to himself that “I had not been treated that way even at school, though everyone there hated me,” (61) leading the reader to assume that his personal afflictions had been long in the making. Notably, Saitō also argues that the triggering moment for a tendency toward withdrawal is most often associated with negative relationships with one’s peers at school, sometimes continuing into the workplace.

Saitō returns to this theme many times, but he first introduces it with a case study of a young man—a university student who had “wanted to win at everything,” (Saitō 2013, 19) and had largely been successful. Successful, that is, until he was not. Quite suddenly, after his freshman year of college, he stopped attending classes. Saitō writes

When his parents asked him why, he just responded that he had trouble in one particular class, and he did not get along well with his classmates. (...) After that, he gradually began to pay more attention to what people thought of him, and it became

difficult for him to get on trains when he thought lots of people might be looking. (Saitō 2013, 20)

Not getting along with his classmates, then, was the trigger for this one man's withdrawal, prompting self-conscious thoughts on a broader scale than just in the classroom. These thoughts, of course, eventually became debilitating, leading to a hikikomori state.

The Underground Man, however, did not withdraw during his schooling years, as he was quite unable to, financially. Once again, we see evidence of the limited accessibility of a life in withdrawal. Instead, he got a job and lived in society with his unchecked thoughts for quite some time. He writes the following of his later experience in the workplace: "I noticed very well that my colleagues not only considered me an odd man, but—as I also kept fancying—seemed to look at me with a certain loathing. It used to occur to me: why does no one except me fancy that people look at him with loathing" (Dostoevsky 1993, 43). His feelings of persecution from his earlier days of education, then, carried on into his workplace life, making it difficult for him to make or maintain healthy relationships. By assuming himself to be hated and accordingly isolating himself from his peers, he blocked all possible interactions that would prove counter to that assumption. Even the "friends" from school that he managed to hold onto over the years were not exempt from his projections. He says of them that, "of course, I understood that they must scorn me now for the unsuccess of my career in the service and for my having gone too much to seed, walking around badly dressed, and so on—which in their eyes constituted a signboard of my incapacity and slight significance" (61). Again, he returns his judging gaze to himself and his supposed smallness in the eyes of others.

At this point it may not seem strange at all that the Underground Man eventually gave up on the outside world, preferring instead to live an isolated life in a basement. When he argues that man sometimes must act against his own benefit, we see evidence of that in action throughout his story, and through the experiences of hikikomori individuals. After all, while a life of happiness among others is easy to wish for, it is much, much harder to achieve when one can seem to do no right (or no true, undeniable wrong, for that matter). To see oneself as insignificant or incapable of living among others creates an abundant pressure to act against one's own simple hopes—those of comfort and happiness within society. More than that, it may not be the established form of happiness that a reclusive person longs for to begin with. After all, the Underground Man writes of the more common people, “Though I did say that I envy the normal man to the point of uttermost bile, still I do not want to be him on those conditions in which I see him (though, at the same time, I shall not stop envying him...)” (37). This speaks to the status of normalcy as it stands, and the checkpoints one must pass in order to be considered part of its order. Do those who suffer in isolation want a “normal” happiness, or rather a type of happiness that cannot be offered by the current society? Perhaps they desire something else entirely.

It is this complexity of interest that the Underground Man allows us to see. One may want to be around others yet feel incapable of action to the point of no longer wanting that at all! They may hate isolation yet love it for all its comforts. They may want to be part of the larger society but not one that simplifies them, placing them into pre-set, acceptable life trajectories. They can be all of these things at once. After all, when describing himself—under the guise of describing the eccentricities of a friend—the Underground Man writes “I warn you

that my friend is a collective person, and therefore it is somehow difficult to blame him alone” (22). Indeed, we are all collective people, yet some collections are valued above others. Some needs are heard above others, and some pain is acknowledged above others. In societies such as this, who is to say whether one’s true benefit lies among the masses?

Chapter IV: The Debate

For many in the West, hearing an explanation of hikikomori may immediately bring to mind assumptions of mental illness, much like it did for me. However, in Japanese society, not only is mental illness not often spoken of due to a high level of stigma, but the hikikomori phenomenon is rarely if ever assumed to be related to mental health. In medical circles, though, both in Japan and internationally, there is a disagreement on this point. Many psychologists dispute the possibility of acute social withdrawal coming from anything other than a diagnosable illness. Even among themselves, psychologists cannot agree on the best methods of treatment for such cases, as every hikikomori seems to have different triggers and symptoms. This lack of consensus is incredibly important in building an understanding of the cultural and transnational aspects of the hikikomori phenomenon. Meanwhile, thousands of individuals, both young and old, are suffering while the rest of the world argues over where to place blame. Perhaps, after exploring the many facets of these arguments, the true complexity of hikikomori may be brought to light.

The term “hikikomori” was popularized in the late 90s by the author Tamaki Saitō in the book *Hikikomori: Adolescence Without End*. This psychoanalytical work positioned hikikomori as a cultural phenomenon more so than a biological one. Saitō argues in this book that the many traits associated with hikikomori cannot accurately be diagnosed using common psychological categories. Rather, he argues that hikikomori must be considered its own pathology, one that is largely culturally bound and influenced, as Japan and nearby nations such as South Korea have cultural norms that have allowed this phenomenon to grow and be maintained.

Saitō supports his argument in a bold way—by claiming that if a hikikomori existed elsewhere in the world with different cultural norms, they would not present as a hikikomori, but rather as a homeless youth (Saitō 2013). He suggests this because, according to him, countries with lower instances of social withdrawal, like America, tend to have higher numbers of homeless individuals. The social structure of Japanese society, in which it is not unusual for a child to live with their parents until marriage or beyond, and in which financial support of a child is expected until the point of such independence, seems to make the progression of withdrawal more feasible. Seeing as the western states with which Saitō compares Japan tend to be more individualistic culturally, his argument raises some important implications. That is, Saitō seems to argue (though he never spells it out) that a hikikomori in a non-Japanese (or largely non-East-Asian) context is more likely to be pushed aside and forced into independence—an independence which, if the core struggles of withdrawal are not addressed, they will not have the emotional and mental resources to sustain. Thus, for Saitō, hikikomori existence is deeply tied to social structures within Japanese society.

Saitō's claim is never substantiated, but rather positioned as an educated theory, indeed one that he is incredibly confident in. The majority of his book is, in actuality, devoid of citation and complex, comparative analysis, but this seems to be largely due to the purpose of the book itself. *Hikikomori* actually functions as a guidebook for families with children in withdrawal. The first half of the book Saitō lays out the various symptoms and common experiences of hikikomori individuals as he has noted during his treatment of them. Meanwhile, the second half of the book outlines the prescribed steps for parents and siblings of hikikomori to take in an attempt to reintegrate the individual into society. As such, it is very likely that Saitō never

intended his book to be the core text for understanding the phenomenon. Nonetheless, the book's influence has shaped many understandings of the hikikomori condition and has triggered a massive influx of often conflicting responses and analysis.

A large part of this response has been in regard to Saitō's argument that, as I mentioned earlier, a hikikomori's withdrawal cannot be diagnosed using the DSM-IV, a system which has since been updated. This is because the fears, behaviors, triggering events, etc. of a hikikomori are not consistent across all cases. In many instances the only consistency is the act of withdrawal itself, and many times any other symptoms begin presenting after the process has already begun. According to Saitō, social withdrawal causes feelings of fear, anxiety, and inferiority rather than being caused *by* them. For this reason, he argues that hikikomori should be its own diagnostic category allowing psychiatrists to specifically target the trend of social withdrawal. However, as his book was meant as a handbook for families of a hikikomori rather than as a scholarly exploration of the topic, it lacks significant citation, and his suggestion has not been adopted as of yet.

His assertions are also still hotly debated by psychologists. For one thing, many more modern psychologists argue that most individuals who identify as hikikomori can be diagnosed using the DSM-V criteria. In one study, out of 148 hikikomori individuals who were seeking rehabilitation, only 1 hikikomori was found to be definitively without a diagnosable mental illness (Kondo et al. 2011). From evidence such as this, many psychologists have come to see the hikikomori phenomenon as more than simply cultural critique and autonomous choice. Rather, they argue that "although discussion of the issue has focused mainly on the uniqueness of Japanese cultural-social perspectives, hikikomori is more than a social-cultural issue, and

inclusion of mental health problems and mental disorders is therefore necessary” (Kondo et al. 2011, 79). While this argument points to social-cultural issues as separate from perceptions of mental health, it seems perhaps to be more appropriate to acknowledge that these perceptions and manifestations of mental health phenomena are culturally bound in and of themselves. Of course, scientifically we can scan a brain and say whether something is not functioning optimally. However, how these neurological changes begin, as well as how they present, will never be consistent—they will always be influenced by the particulars of one’s environment, which includes common cultural perspectives. Given the tightly bound nature of these factors, it is also relevant to note that the proposal of Kondo et al. largely works against Japanese cultural norms regarding perceptions of mental illness, especially as it relates to stigma. This argument is therefore not that popular in the larger society.

These explanations of the hikikomori phenomenon are not necessarily the most common understanding that exists in Japan. Many hikikomori individuals themselves argue that their actions are an autonomous choice meant to critique the competitive and inflexible culture of modern Japan. Some hikikomori have argued that their withdrawals have more to do with rejection of norms and harsh time constraints than they have to do with emotional or mental unwellness. The hikikomori phenomenon then draws attention to the struggle of those whose natural rhythms fall out of step with the harsh speeds of late capitalist societies.

This focus on societal time constraints is explored in an anthropological article by Sachiko Kaneko. In this short ethnography, one youth described their experience of society as follows: “I felt as if I was in a car driving down a highway a maximum speed. We were expected to ‘speed up’ all the time, both at school and at work” (Kaneko 2006, 237). This pressure to

keep “speeding up,” as this person put it, eventually becomes too much. A particular car can only go so fast, and very importantly, not all cars are equipped equally. If we as individuals in a society are expected to maintain the speeds of a sports car while driving a minivan, eventually the car is going to break down. At that point we may wonder if there is a point in continuing to try. This is the battle that some hikikomori find themselves fighting.

More than this, many hikikomori reject the possibility of having a mental illness altogether.³ This argument against time constraints is ripe for sociological and philosophical analysis, as it is also largely contested. There seems to be the question of why, if hikikomori may in fact be suffering mental pains, they themselves reject the possibility of mental health issues as part of their struggle. To this effect, there are two possible readings. One, we may say is that they should be taken at their word. Though there may be multiple factors at play in their choices, the validity of their rejection of society should be respected in whatever way they wish to frame it. After all, not only are issues of mental illness highly stigmatized in Japan, but it is hard to argue with the idea that society has, in many ways, become too much or *too fast*. This sentiment is almost certainly not limited to Japanese youth, as levels of anxiety and stress have been documented as rising across many countries in the world. One study specifically points to the phenomenon having “spread to industrialized societies” (Tajan et al. 2017, 1), which potentially speaks to the changing nature of social wellness in societies that prioritize economic growth above much else.

³ This is not always the case, however, as I have discovered hikikomori bloggers who self-identify with a multitude of mental health conditions. One such example can be found here: <https://ameblo.jp/hikichanno/>.

The other explanation of their perspective again takes into consideration a documented psychological phenomenon, one in which cultural stigmas become ingrained in the individual psyche such that they refuse to regard themselves as existing within that stigmatized space. As one author puts it,

The psychological impetus behind denial of mental illness is readily understandable. Mental illness carries a huge stigma. Even people who do not purposely deny the illness they know they have may unconsciously do so for the very same reason as the conscious deniers. One brings shame upon oneself, so to speak, by admitting to the illness. (Saks 2009)

This is to say, the shame of having a mental illness can be so strong that one rationalizes their symptoms into their most innocuous form to avoid labeling them “illness”. Many people find themselves denying mental illness in themselves because to accept and adopt the label would be a sign of weakness—a sign that one is not in control.

Given that this stigmatization can inhibit the will to associate oneself with unwellness, it would seem that eventually choosing to identify oneself with a mental illness may carry with it the risk of delegitimizing the hikikomori’s voices. By this I mean that there is much at stake both for hikikomori and for society as a whole if a single label is placed neatly over the entire phenomenon. For one, hikikomori’s actions may then be seen as weakness rather than as conscious rejection of an overbearing society, meaning that their critiques are ignored regardless of possible validity. The larger society, then, is not pressured to acknowledge its part in creating these forms of pain and suffering, and therefore fails to enact meaningful change.

Those who can keep up the speed (as well as those who have constructed and maintain the track) get to absolve themselves of accountability toward the suffering of those who have fallen behind in the race. After all, why does it have to be a race, anyway? If hikikomori are forced to shoulder all responsibility for their struggles, this question never gets asked.

Again, we are drawn back to the assumption of mental health and cultural contexts being separate entities. Rather than acknowledging the need for both enhanced mental and emotional healthcare in fast-paced societies *and* social and structural change to relieve the immense pressure young people feel to succeed, we take these options as mutually exclusive. The issue becomes an us-versus-them dilemma, when it is in fact far too complex to be solved by simply placing blame and moving on. It is more productive to view the struggles experienced by hikikomori individuals as an intricate collective of causes and effects rather than a singular issue of personal responsibility.

Chapter V: On Mental Health Stigma in Japan

While mental health is often considered to be a personal affair, one that affects only the weak of mind or heart, the truth of the matter is that anyone can be susceptible to bouts of mental illness. Just as even those with the strongest immune systems can catch a new and powerful virus, so too can the strongest of mind be brought to mental unwellness by external stimulus. In countries like America, the rhetoric surrounding mental illness is shifting from the more traditional “fault of the sick person” paradigm to one that is more inclusive of the many possible causes for these illnesses. This comes at an important time for American youth, as millennials have been noted as the most anxious generation (Newman 2018) and reported rates of depression have been on the rise (Schrobsdorff 2016). While American mental health contexts are one thing, the Japanese context is another entirely, and it is worth looking more deeply into the culturally specific as well as the cross-cultural views that citizens have on the issue.

There is generally a lack of conversation surrounding mental illness in Japanese society. While the debate about the underlying cause of the hikikomori phenomenon has many facets, the unwillingness to consider hikikomori as related to mental illness may be due in part to this conspicuous silence. However, slowly but surely ailments like depression and other mood disorders are gaining visibility—a change that marks a potential wane in the more traditional inhibitions that kept such topics under wraps. The increasing legitimacy of these mental health concerns is undoubtedly a valuable development in Japan’s attempts to reduce its suicide rate, seeing as suicide is still the leading cause of death in young people in Japan (Wakatsuki and

Griffiths, 2018). As one BBC journalist notes, “Up until the late 1990s in Japan, ‘depression’ was a word rarely heard outside psychiatric circles. Some claimed this was because people in Japan simply did not suffer depression” (Harding 2016). Nowadays, thanks to robust advertisement campaigns for antidepressants, depression has become a more widely recognized ailment of ordinary Japanese citizens (Harding 2016). In 2006, the author notes, a suicide prevention law was put into place, which declared suicide to be “a social rather than just a private problem” (Harding 2016).

Coinciding with this rise in awareness is the event of the public having to face the large number of youths in that are struggling to make a smooth transition from school to the workplace. In the modern highly competitive, late-capitalistic environment, many youths have fallen by the wayside almost entirely. This trend is highlighted by the popularization of terms such as “freeter,” meaning someone perpetually engaged in part-time work rather than on a firm career path, and “NEET,” which stands for “Not in Employment, Education, or Training” (Miller and Toivanen 2009; Saitō 2013). While these terms undoubtedly have moralistic undertones, it is not uncommon to see them adopted by individuals such as hikikomori to use as a self-identification tool (Angles 2013). Still, the general public’s perceptions continue to be largely negative. As Miller and Toivanen point out, “behind the question of why such young people are unable to find steady jobs lies a moral debate about whether it is the young person’s fault individually or whether social circumstances that could be ameliorated are to blame” (Miller and Toivanen 2009, 2). The expectation of self-sufficiency and success being entirely determined by one’s own personal strengths or faults is reminiscent of the more traditional “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” rhetoric commonly seen in similarly competitive

capitalistic societies. To this point, nearly all evidence of social stigma regarding mental illness in Japan tends toward a similar debate.

While the structure of stigma toward those with mental illnesses tend to have cross-cultural similarities (Yoshioka et al. 2016), there are also culturally specific aspects of Japan that contribute to the effect. Speaking on the former, one review of available literature on the subject notes that stigma prevents many people from seeking professional help. Later referencing Japan in particular, they cite that nearly two-thirds of all individuals with mental illnesses will not take that step toward psychiatric assistance (Ando et al. 2013). There is also strong evidence of self-stigma in individuals battling with mental illness. While it may seem self-explanatory, it is nonetheless important to highlight how stigma becomes internalized. Just as the gaze of the Other—the potential judgement for or against one’s behavior—can be internalized to create a self-editing effect, as in the Foucauldian framework, so too can stigma be internalized to create a system of self judgement. One article, while addressing the struggle faced by these individuals, states that “self-stigma leads to significantly diminished self-esteem and self-efficacy. It also negatively affects the course of their disease, their accomplishment of personal goals, and inhibits participation in treatment programs” (Nagai and Kajita, 2018, 2016).

On a more culturally specific level, there are additional factors making it difficult for those with mental illness to be seen clearly in Japanese society. As Miller and Toivonen note, Japan has a custom of keeping discussions of such issues “within the family” as it were (Miller and Toivonen 2009). This custom (called ‘kakaekomu bunka’ in Japanese), “forecloses the

possibility of seeking outside help (e.g. when a child withdraws) and leads to vicious circles of hardship” (13). Essentially, to speak of private affairs such as psychological disorders or the presence of a hikikomori in one’s family would produce a sense of shame for the family. This effect is avoided by maintaining silence, which unfortunately also renders the suffering individual unseen and may cause them to internalize beliefs about their burdensome nature. Beyond this, another factor contributing to the stigma is something rather reminiscent of an earlier discussion. That is, it is still common belief in Japan that mental disorders are the result of a weakness of character, rather than biological predispositions or environmental factors (Ando et al., 2013). These factors may account for the fact that only about 5% of Japan’s general public believe that one can recover from mental illnesses with professional help (Ando et al. 2013). Indeed, when one’s character is implicated in discussions of mental health, recovery necessarily becomes an issue of personal responsibility; doctors and medicine then become obsolete. Yoshioka et al. establish that these cultural characteristics are important in understanding how to approach the issue of mental health stigma in Japanese society, stating

The research examining stigmatizing attitudes and their correlates in the Japanese population highlights the important role of culture in shaping attitudes towards mental illness and stigma; therefore, Japanese cultural attitudes towards mental illness—for example, believing that mental illnesses are the fault of the ill person—should be considered when exploring ways to reduce stigma in this population. (Yoshioka et al. 2016, 184)

Again, this may seem somewhat obvious, but a statement such as Yoshioka's requires that a society take responsibility for their part in creating feelings of unwellness or distress. This is not a responsibility that belongs only to Japan, but rather to any and all nations where issues of mental health are met with extreme stigma. However, it still goes without saying that when analyzing the issue of mental illness and the hikikomori phenomenon in Japan, one must be aware of both the local and cross-cultural tendrils of the concern.

Along with the slight shift in Japan's mental health dialogue in the last few decades, there has also been a transformation in methods of professional treatment, which previously tended to favor institutionalizing those with known mental illnesses over reintegration-style approaches, the latter of which is now gaining traction (Kingston 2012). However, this shift has not been easy, as Japanese media, much like media in many other parts of the world, tends to sensationalize and highlight violent crimes by those deemed to be mentally ill, strengthening the prejudice and making the topic of reintegration an issue of public debate (Kingston 2012). As such, it is no surprise that the conversations surrounding mental illness at large are still generally hushed. Still, perceptions of freeters, NEETs, and hikikomori all tend to be slightly different. Of course, freeters and NEETs, while considered socially irresponsible, are clearly identified as not mentally ill. Rather, they are just a byproduct of a competitive market with limited opportunities for advancement. Hikikomori, as we have noted, is still a phenomenon under debate.

In the early 2000s, there were a couple of violent crimes committed by hikikomori in Japan which stoked the public's fears of these reclusive individuals. However, as Tamaki Saitō

amply illustrates in his representation of hikikomori pathology, these fears were largely unfounded (Saitō 2013). As such, over time the visions of hikikomori in the public eye have begun to garner more sympathy than active fear. In general, if mental illness is seen as tied to physically dangerous acts, and hikikomori are not *particularly* dangerous, then their struggle may appear to be something else entirely. Nonetheless, hikikomori's nonsocial existence is still seen as socially threatening if not physically so. Thus, to combat the rise in social withdrawal, hikikomori reintegration programs have developed a powerful and much-needed presence.

With a deeper understanding of the place of mental illness in Japanese social discourse, it is worth exploring how hikikomori treatment programs approach the issue. In an interview discussing Nōki Futagami's reintegration campaigns for hikikomori, Futagami frames the phenomenon in social terms with which we are now more familiar, explaining that "there are many people who were unable to find employment after high school or college. Time passed, and they found themselves in something of a stupor within a structure where it's difficult to make a fresh start" (Futagami 2006). Notably, when deciding which applicants he would accept into his program, Futagami recalls choosing only those that seemed to be the most mild cases—the most easy to rehabilitate. It was not until he was challenged by another director of the program that he changed his methods.

In this case, Futagami had inadvertently fallen into the norms of society which made fresh starts so difficult for individuals in the first place. By choosing the "easiest" applicants, he had placed their needs and their potential along a stratified system where the lowest would not be given the chance of success. His change of heart forced him to come face-to-face with the

immense pressure experienced by Japanese youth—a pressure that he had almost reinforced. In a small anecdote, he recalls his new method for determining what applicants would be accepted into his reintegration program. He describes the event as follows:

I didn't have a plan, so I told those who came to an introductory meeting, "I'm just going to toss the applications in the air and the ones that fly the farthest will go." A number of kids started to cry. They are kids who can't adapt to the competitive society, right? And they came to this meeting filled with anxiety that they would be subjected to selection, like in an entrance exam, and they would be failed. So when I said, "The ones who fly farthest will go," it was as if they were suddenly freed from that trauma. I was shocked at how stressful a position Japanese kids have been placed in. (Futagami 2006)

This moment truly exemplifies the social pressures that may contribute to the hikikomori phenomenon. If a young individual finds themselves falling off the wagon of social success, it is incredibly difficult in a competitive society to find the motivation to catch up with their peers again.

Despite ample documentation of the common hikikomori struggle, government responses to the crisis have been incredibly slow, and they have not been largely effective either (Futagami 2006). Thus, programs like Futagami's, which includes sending these young people to a farm in Italy for a few weeks where they live and work in an accepting environment and receive psychiatric attention weekly, have become incredibly important to these trouble youths, which Futagami refers to as "social refugees" (Futagami 2006). In many ways, this approach is similar to that of other reintegration programs such as that featured in the Asian

Boss interview “Inside A Rehab Center For Japanese Hermits [Hikikomori]” (2019). Both programs use nature, and more specifically farm life, as grounds for rehabilitation. By trying to create positive relationships with nature and work for these young people, Futagami and directors of other reintegration programs for hikikomori are giving these struggling individuals a chance to fly, just as long as their applications fly first.

Chapter VI: On Two Reclusive Authors

To return to the idea of reconnection with nature as a positive reintegration technique for hikikomori and NEET individuals, it is worth noting the presence of influential works by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Henry David Thoreau which address a similar relationship. While neither author was reclusive in the same sense of a hikikomori, both engaged in prolonged periods of solitude. Rousseau was highly critical of the expectations of society as well as the lack of devotion he recognized in many of his acquaintances. As such, he experienced an acute sense of alienation during his more social years (Edmonds and Eidinow 2006). Due to his outspoken nature (regardless of the sensitivity of the subject) Rousseau suffered from an inability, or perhaps refusal, to fit the expected social mold. It is with nature, on his solitary walks, that he came to feel greater comfort. Thoreau, for his part, chose temporary reclusiveness in a natural landscape for the sake of better understanding his relationship to the larger society. The natural world, and perhaps loneliness itself, had an undeniable draw for these individuals. Both authors turned to nature as their primary source for understanding their plights.

Beginning with Rousseau, his *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* offers a complex analysis of the self and its relationship to both solitude and sociality. Rousseau was not necessarily reclusive by choice; instead, social and political misfortune in France led to his eventual isolation. Nearing the end of his life, he used nature walks as an opportunity to reflect on his past and present, critiquing the fickle perceptions and structures that ultimately led to his seclusion. On his first walk, he poses the following question regarding his critics and adversaries: “What have I to fear now that there is nothing more to be done? Since they can

make things no worse for me, they can no longer alarm me. They have finally set me free from all the evils of anxiety and apprehension; in this at least I can find some consolation” (Rousseau 2004, 29). His rumination points toward the sense of pressure that inevitably coincides with a social existence. To exist with others is to be confined to certain boundaries of expectation. By living a life separate from all others, one is also freed from such confines. One can, in solitude, live as one wishes, so long as one does not wish for a plentitude of companionship.

Rousseau, his mind poisoned by his unfortunate experiences, struggles with this dichotomy of sociality and freedom. He harbors a strong connection to the natural world, one that he cultivates in his solitude—though much of which he resents, as it was forced upon him. However, it is surrounded by the natural world, contemplating the state of the environment, and pursuing botanical knowledge, that he is able to consider these profound existential questions. What really *is* there to do when one is disconnected from others? What is there to fear? The solitary state of man allows for a lack of fear, a freedom to design a life as one pleases. For a moment, this freedom offers Rousseau a sort of comforting happiness. He writes,

My fellow men might return to me, but I should no longer be there to meet them. Such is the disdain they have inspired in me that I should find their company tedious and even burdensome, and I am a hundred times happier in my solitude than I could be if I lived among them. (Rousseau 2004, 30)

Ultimately, though, this freedom of design does not give Rousseau *lasting* happiness. Instead, he grows peaceful for a moment, and then falls into despair. Happiness, he decides, cannot be counted on to remain until tomorrow.

One thing that does continue to bring Rousseau joy, however, is his hobby of botany. This pastime, which he wrote about often, is one that he easily maintained in his solitude. He proposes during his seventh walk that botany is “the ideal study for the idle, unoccupied solitary,” (115) a statement which coincides with his affinity for deep contemplation during his nature walks. Botany is perfect for the solitary individual, he believes, because it requires no intricate knowledge of chemistry, anatomy, or other such studies, nor does it necessarily bring to mind the image of humanity and sociality. Nature exists in itself. To take on the hobby of botany, then, one only needs to observe what exists naturally around them and categorize based on these observations. In this sense, nature is a resting place—an environment in which the mind can wander freely without falling upon the corruption of human society.

Given these common themes in Rousseau’s *Reveries*, it would seem that he used nature to ignore humanity, but his past social experiences never let him fully find peace. Complete escape seems to be a futile endeavor as long as one’s consciousness clings to community, culture, etc. At the same time, Rousseau seems to argue that the natural world is a better environment for better self-development than society. Alone in nature, one can fashion oneself in whatever form one pleases. In this sense, solitude breeds new life while society stifles it.

Rousseau and Thoreau both shared a certain disdain for the workings of society. For Thoreau, the focus on productivity, managing time in such a way as to produce as much as possible, is ultimately fruitless. Humanity is meant to live in simplicity, he argues in *Walden*. To Thoreau, the development of competitive and restraining economies has given rise to a society in which we waste our lives by “working” toward no particular goal except to have completed

the work itself. Even to inherit a wealth of land and a method of business is to suffer the effects of unnatural ideas of 'development'. He writes that "the portionless, who struggle with no such unnecessary inherited encumbrances, find it labor enough to subdue and cultivate a few cubic feet of flesh" (Thoreau 2005, 9). According to Thoreau, living is, in and of itself, a difficult task, one that we have continued to complicate in our quest for wealth and progress. His work is largely a criticism of a quickly developing capitalist economy. To Thoreau, a society that works around such a system is only further removing itself from the meaningful nature of man.

This focus on productivity, the unfortunate inheritance of much of mankind at this point, is also a distraction from true sociality and community. We gain from such endeavors far less than we think we have, he argues. In a highly critical yet empathetic moment, Thoreau communicates this sadness in the following passage:

Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluous coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. Their fingers, from excessive toil, are too clumsy and tremble too much for that. Actually, the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day (...) he has no time to be anything but a machine. (...) the finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly.

(Thoreau 2005, 9)

To his eyes, humanity is lost to economy, lost to progress, lost to work. The world we have created has cultivated along with it a lack of sensitivity, a lack of tenderness. The goodness of

man, then, suffers at the hands of what we may commonly refer to as honest work. The focus of our society has shifted, our time is now defined by that which we can produce within a day, and our kind humanity and sensibilities have faded.

Thoreau advocates for a society ruled by simplicity. His time spent in isolation proved to be an exercise in attempting this lifestyle for himself. At one point, he states that “every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself” (72). Here nature acts as a model for human life itself. The connection between the self and nature allows Thoreau to feel greater peace. This was, from the first moment, his intention in becoming reclusive. He continues, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived” (74). A truer version of life, then, is one spent in simplicity with nature. He recognized from the beginning that nature had much that it could teach him about himself and about human society. His years spent in seclusion, then, allowed him to feel that he was truly living. This sense may coincide with the untethered freedom that Rousseau notes as accompanying isolation. However, it may also more broadly relate to a life spent with the purpose of not undertaking too much.

A common hikikomori complaint is that society expects a seemingly impossible life path to be followed by all young people. From middle school onwards, Japanese youth are thrust into a highly competitive environment, one in which test scores are considered proof of one’s future career possibility. From that point, they are expected to do well on college entrance exams, enter a top university, get hired immediately upon graduation, and live a life of comfort

and stability. However, these expectations certainly cannot be met by all individuals. No matter how hard some young people try, there are simply not enough opportunities available for all graduates to reach the same heights. With this prolonged pressure ending with no positive returns—instead only offering the cruel reality of an uncertain future—it is far too easy to lose hope. Hikikomori lifestyle is reminiscent of this loss.

The time constraints of society are too much. The career expectations are too much. The pressure placed on students is too much. These are common themes that hikikomori individuals and those experiencing school refusal point toward as their reasons for withdrawing. These complaints are not all that different from those presented by Rousseau and Thoreau. For Rousseau, the expectations and constraints placed on us socially are far too limiting. For Thoreau, the structure of society as a whole has shifted away from simplicity. As economies like Japan's have continued to develop, the expectations of society have grown with them. As Thoreau emphatically suggests to his readers, "simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million, count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on a thumb nail" (75). This is easier said than done, of course, in a modern social world. To subvert expectations, buying a farm in the middle of nowhere, and cultivating a life of simplicity there, as Thoreau did, is not a possibility that is accessible to everyone. However, there is a certain simplicity to the lives of hikikomori who have chosen, whether in conjunction with a mental health struggle or not, to reject social expectation in their own way. It begs the question, which both Rousseau and Thoreau reference at one point or another, of what it means to live. What does true life look like?

It is impossible to know how to live life “properly.” Thoreau argues that productivity and economy are simply distractions, that they poison the natural goodness of man, and that in solitude a more meaningful connection to one’s humanity can be cultivated. Rousseau acknowledges that life among the masses inevitably leads to pain and disappointment, and he contends that solitary existence offers a freedom that cannot be accessed through normative sociality. Sadly, the loneliness that accompanies a life of isolation renders Rousseau, in some respects, regretful. He writes in his *Reveries*:

Alone and neglected, I could feel the approach of the first frost, and my failing imagination no longer filled my solitude with beings formed after the desires of my heart. Sighing I said to myself: What have I done in this world? I was created to live, and I am dying without having lived. (Rousseau 2004, 37)

At this moment, looking back on his life and all its misfortunes, Rousseau realizes that the joys of solitude do not last forever. The implication is that, while Thoreau finds life in solitude to be an exercise in truly living, Rousseau would have felt more accomplished had he been able to live comfortably among others. Herein lies the dilemma of the recluse. It is possible that, had society functioned differently in both France and America during the lifetimes of these authors, their musings on the nature of solitude may have looked quite different.

In the end, the literature of both Rousseau and Thoreau demonstrates the multitude of deficiencies present in the social world we have cultivated. Though their arguments encompass different aspects of social existence, ultimately the very same deficiencies in humanity, kindness, and patience that they reference are at the forefront of hikikomori’s social critique.

That two authors from centuries past can speak to the modern moment so aptly implies that we are witnessing the development of a longstanding concern. As the phenomenon continues to maintain its relevance, we can only hope that these critiques will finally be heard.

Conclusion

By this point, I've addressed the hikikomori phenomenon through a variety of lenses, including the sociological, economic, psychological, philosophical, and literary. Each discipline sheds a new light on both the phenomenon as a whole and the individual experience of withdrawal. While writing this project, it became exceedingly clear that no single perspective could possibly encompassed the entirety of the issue, and I am certain that my project—though it blends a multitude of theories and studies—similarly does not come close to revealing the true depths of such intensely private experiences. I was aware of this very early on in the process, and the knowledge that no absolute truth exists to explain hikikomori helped shape my project into what it is today: a deconstruction of common preconceptions of withdrawal.

I first approached this project wanting so urgently to be *right*. I had grandiose ideas about solving the issue of the increasing prevalence of social withdrawal. I thought I knew what it meant to heal, and what it meant to help others. I quickly learned that I was decidedly wrong. Though I had experienced social withdrawal as a teenager, I still felt the urge to simplify the singularity with which individuals suffer from a multitude of social pressures. As I proceeded with my project, I realized that I had equally simplified my own experience of social withdrawal. As such, I have had to look back at my own life through the lens of this project, detaching myself from some of my own assumptions and using this attachment to read that of others.

As humans and critics, we are tempted to use our own ordeals as case studies through which to understand the rest of the world. By knowing a bit about ourselves, we often assume we know more about others. It is so easy to essentialize even the most nuanced of experiences.

To pay respect to an issue, though, such urges are best resisted if any kind of truth is to emerge. To respect the Other is to allow them to breathe freely. Even this task, I realized, was impossible to undertake dispassionately. Accurate representation and perfect understanding are as destructive as they are unrealistic. Bits and pieces will always fall by the wayside or be rendered invisible, because I am a complex person studying complex people.

In life we tend to simplify the Other to preserve our own level of comfort. We also do it out of personal necessity. That is, we rarely have the capacity to account for our *own* inscrutable depths, let alone someone else's. The Other's unknowability can be deeply disturbing, but it is the condition of being human. Individuals always harbor more than they appear to. The urge to label hikikomori comes from this tendency toward simplification. This work is both about this tendency and how the voice of others overtook it.

Hikikomori is a phenomenon that elicits more questions than provides answers. It is a quandary that cannot be encompassed in 1,000, let alone 70 pages. I have not only had to accept this fact, but to lean into it, allowing the questions to breathe in new ways. Ultimately, this past year has been an exercise in imperfection, and I am grateful for having had the opportunity to see it through.

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Appendix

Translations:

1. 現在、日がな一日パソコンの前に座って、インターネットだけで世界と繋がっているオタクや引きこもりの数は増える一方だという。そういう人たちも、地下室の住人と同様、本当は生身の人間と繋がりたいと、「生きた生活」を渴望しているに違いない。そういう時代であるからこそ、『地下室の手記』のアクチュアリティは一層増していると思われる。人生に孤独や痛みは避けられないと知り抜いたうえで、そこを突き抜けた何かに希望を託そうとする必死の叫びを聞き取っていただければ幸いである。(translators note from <https://www.usamihiro.info/entry/2015/12/20/192733>)

These days, there are an increasing number of otaku and hikikomori who are sitting in front of the computer on the internet all day long, wanting connection with others. Similarly, the underground man truly wants to live life among other people. Due to the times we are in, it seems that the reality presented in “Notes from Underground” is increasing. After seeing that loneliness and pain are unavoidable in this kind of life, (we) hope that (you) will find a way to hold on to hope.

2. 意識過剰であまのじゃくな主人公は、他人との関係をうまく築くことができません。

他人を許せない心の狭さ、そんな狭量な自分を嫌悪して、次第に自分のことも許せなくなる。なので人と関わるのがつらくなるばかり。そして最終的には引きこもりになることを選びます。

自分を陰キャだと思う人は、主人公に共感できる部分が少なからずあるかもしれません。

ご興味がわいた方は是非お読みになってみてください。(https://uranaka-shobou.com/notes-from-underground/)

The main character, an overly conscious and wretched man, cannot maintain relationships with other people. He grows to hate himself, as he is unforgiving and narrow-minded with others. So, it becomes difficult for him to concern himself with others. In the end, he chooses to become a hikikomori.

People who see themselves as dark and shadowy might relate to/sympathize with the main character.

If you have become interested, please read it.

3. 引きこもりの方に何よりも読んでもらいたい本がドストエフスキーの「地下室の手記」です。

ドストエフスキーは 19 世紀のロシアの作家で「地下室の手記」は 1864 年の作品になります。

とっても古い本ですが、この本を読んだ時、まるで自分のことを書いてくれているような気になった本です。

この本を読んだ時の感動はどうっていいかわかりません。

生まれて初めてする強烈な人生体験で、読んだ後はしばらくの間、放心状態になりました。

その主人公の内面は正常な人間にとっては、ムカムカ、イライラするだけのものかもしれません。

しかし、引きこもりにとっては、まさに自分の事を言われているような感覚に陥る人は多いはずで。

学校生活や社会人生活で、屈辱まみれの体験を送った人にとって、

この主人公はまさに自分自身なのです。

(<http://neat-work.com/2017/10/10/ドストエフスキーの「地下室の手記」は引きこも/>)

One of the most necessary books for those living in withdrawal is Dostoevsky's "Notes from Underground." Dostoevsky is a 19th C. author who published "Notes from Underground" in 1864.

Even though it is very old, when you read the book it feels as though it is written about your life.

I don't know what your impression will be when you read it.

When I was reading it, for the first time I had an intense life experience. After I finished reading, I was felt at a loss for some time.

For most people, the interior life of the main character might be annoying.

However, there must be many hikikomori who feel who feel that they are reading about themselves.

For those who had humiliating or difficult experiences in school or at work, the protagonist might seem like oneself.

4. リアルひきこもりから見た『NHK によろこ』

最近、NHK 受信料の件でごちゃごちゃと世間は騒がしい。

だがそんなもの、テレビを持たぬ無職にはあずかり知らぬ事だ。

そう、この記事は放送局の NHK とはなんの関係もない

『NHK によろこ』というのは、ひきこもり主人公がなんやかんやリア充するアニメである。なお、この記事はネタバレなしでお送りする。

ここでいう NHK とは日本ひきこもり協会の略！

僕がこのアニメを見たのはちょうど無職になりたての、ポロアパートに一人暮らししながら引きこもりをしていた頃だった。かなり主人公に状況が似ていた。

そのため...

まったく共感出来なかった

このアニメのレビューを調べると

「こうはならないようにしよう」とか

「ダメ人間だから共感した」とか

「リアルな引きこもり描写の傑作」とか

そういうレビューばかり出てくる

だが、題材がひきこもりでもフィクションはフィクション。本物のひきこもり無職からすると、輝かしき理想郷でしかないのだ。

現実には助けてくれる美少女も、理解のある親も、気楽に話せる友達も、頼りになる先輩もいない。無職になると、それまでの交友関係は消える。社会から切り離されて孤独になるのだ。特に、精神的

な理由で無職になってしまった場合（僕や NHK によくその主人公のように）リアルの間人間関係を持続するのは極めて難しい。

環境が違う人間とは相当なコミュカがなければうまくいかないのだ。精神的に追い詰められている時に、そのような気遣いは出来るはずもない。僕も無職になってしばらくは普通に LINE を使っていたが、次第に話すことがなくなってついにはやめてしまった。

ただ、アニメとしてはめちゃくちゃ面白い。

ストーリーは飽きない展開の連続で、1 話から最終話までだれずに楽しめる。

OP の音楽も雰囲気ぴったり。

12. 好きな作品で、原作も全巻読破している。

ただ、やっぱりアニメと現実は全然違う。

作者がひきこもり経験者なだけあって、他の作品に出てくるステレオタイプのひきこもり無職よりはだいぶよくかけている。

しかしながら、どこまでいっても二次元のお話である。ひきこもり無職の絶望感は薄れている。

というわけで、無職ではないみなさんにぜひ見て欲しい作品である。

(<http://higananetaro.blogspot.com/2017/12/nhk.html>)

An actual hikikomori's perspective on *Welcome to the NHK*:

Recently, the public has been focusing a lot on the NHK licensing fee.

However, if you are an unemployed person without a TV, you wouldn't have noticed.

Therefore, this post has nothing to do with the real NHK broadcasting network.

Welcome to the NHK is an anime with a hikikomori protagonist who spends his time doing this and that. There will be no spoilers in this review.

In the name of the show, the “NHK” stands for the “Japanese Hikikomori Association.”

I watched this anime when I was jobless, living alone in a shabby apartment, and experiencing withdrawal. My situation was really similar to that of the main character.

For this reason, I couldn't fully sympathize.

While looking at the reviews, responses such as “Try to avoid becoming like this,” “Because the main character is a good-for-nothing, I was sympathetic,” and “A masterful depiction of realistic withdrawal,” are the most common.

However, even if the subject matter is withdrawal, fiction is still just fiction. When you are a real, unemployed hikikomori, that world (of *Welcome to the NHK*) is just a shining paradise.

In reality, there is no beautiful girl who will try to help you, no kind and understanding parents, no friends that you can comfortably speak to, and no senior (senpai) that you can rely on. When you become unemployed, from that point on your old friendships fade away. You are separated from society, and it becomes very lonely. Particularly, if you are unemployed for mental or emotional reasons (like me or the main character from *Welcome to the NHK*), it is incredibly difficult to maintain real relationships with others.

If you can't appropriately communicate with different people in a variety of environments, things won't work out. In times when you feel mentally and emotionally drained/down, you can't do things like that.

When I became unemployed, I still used LINE* for a while and talked normally, but eventually even that stopped.

Still, it is an extremely entertaining anime.

The story is a succession of developments that don't become boring; it's enjoyable from the first episode to the last.

The soundtrack is also perfect for the atmosphere.

It's a production that I like very much, and I've read through all the volumes.

However, anime and reality are entirely different. Since the author experienced withdrawal, it is better than the usual stereotype of a hikikomori that often comes out.

Nevertheless, it is a two-dimensional story no matter how you spin it. The sense of unemployed hikikomori's despair seems to be fading.

For these reasons, everyone who is not employed should watch it.

Images:



4

⁴ Hikikomori portrait by photographer Maika Elan. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190129-the-plight-of-japans-modern-hermits>



AND NO ONE WILL EVER CALL ME A HIKIKOMORI* AGAIN!

YES! I WILL FINALLY REJOIN SOCIETY! I WILL GET A JOB!

*See Glossary, p.180



*See Glossary, p.180



I CAN COMPETE WITH THE AMOUNT OF TIME MR. OYAMA MASATATSU*, THE LEGENDARY KARATE MASTER, SECLUDED HIMSELF IN THE MOUNTAINS TO TRAIN IN HIS YOUNGER DAYS!

I'VE LOCKED MYSELF UP IN MY HOUSE... FOR FOUR YEARS!



I mustn't run away. I mustn't run away. I mustn't run away.

But I'm so afraid of job interviews ...!

IT'S TRUE! I'M CURRENTLY A HIKIKOMORI THROUGH AND THROUGH!

I, SATOU TATSUHIRO, AGE 22, AM A PRIME EXAMPLE OF JAPAN'S SOCIAL PROBLEMS!

⁵ Page 8, vol. 1 of the manga *Welcome to the NHK* written by Tatsuhiko Takimoto. 2006.