Part I
Historical Developments

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The Development of the American Novel: The Transformations of Genre

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The story of the American novel is the history of a genre that has moved from the edges of respectability to a central place in our literary culture, gradually establishing itself as the most popular and most critically acclaimed form of narrative in the United States of America. It is the genre that scholars most often turn to when they try to define the distinctive characteristics of American life and the specific qualities that mark the American imagination. Study of the novel in the United States played a central role in the old emphasis on American exceptionalism, and it continues to play a large part in the current critical focus on the transnational and the global. Although discussions of the "Great American Novel" do not occupy the kind of space in public discourse that they did when eminent critics spent time debating whether that label should be applied to Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) or Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) or F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), the term still has a kind of resonance, while virtually no one speaks of the "Great American Poem" or the "Great American Play."[1] During the last 40 years, the novel and prose fiction in general displaced poetry as the genre that dominates classroom discussions and literary explorations in both undergraduate survey courses and graduate seminars. The novel's place in the literature classroom and in our cultural life now seems so secure that it is hard to remember that it is both a relatively new form and one that resists easy definition.

In fact, it is tempting to think of the novel, particularly in the United States, as an umbrella term that covers an almost limitless number of possibilities within the

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realm of prose fiction, incorporating genres that may be fundamentally social and political or intensely personal and psychological in their emphases; settings that can embody the specific details of particular times and places or symbolic realms that exist outside of real time and space; characters who may stand for certain social or political ideas or exemplify the rich complexity of the human mind in all of its aspirations, yearnings, fears, and doubts; and plot structures that may ultimately affirm the triumph of reason in an ordered universe or embrace the chaotic nature of much human experience in an uncertain world. The vitality of the American novel and its special place in the cultural life of the nation stem from its rich capacity to embrace multiple values and diverse traditions. Throughout its history, the American novel has continually reinvented itself, drawing on the form's remarkable ability to establish clear generic formulas for expressing certain values and its equally remarkable capacity to devise compelling ways of transforming, enlarging, or exploding those formulas into new forms of expression. If, as numerous commentators since De Tocqueville have suggested, the nature of a democratic society is continuous change, then it is not surprising that the novel has been the literary form most congenial to this dynamic spirit, the form with sufficient capacity for continual renewal and self-transformation to keep up with the fluidity and diversity of human experience in the United States.

The American novel's roots lie clearly in early English fiction, particularly in that group of early masterpieces that seemed to define the range of possibilities for the new genre of the novel as it emerged in the eighteenth century. Daniel Defoe showed that a sustained first person narrative, a work of fiction pretending to be an autobiographical recitation of an individual's personal history, could produce texts as substantial, as powerful, and as diverse as *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722), both of which explicitly deal with the transformative possibilities provided by the discovery of the Americas. Americans could certainly find much that was relevant in *Robinson Crusoe*, which focuses on the ability of a man to overcome years of isolation in a new world island and end up a triumphant conqueror of both the wilderness and other human beings. Equally relevant in its own way was the picaresque narrative of *Moll Flanders*, which featured the deceptions, schemes, and sexual misadventures of a female rogue conniving her way through the various levels of society and multiple men until she finally retires, financially successful and nominally repentant. The special kind of vitality and moral ambiguity central to Defoe's picaresque would eventually find significant counterparts in the American novel, perhaps most notably in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953).

American novelists would also discover that prose fiction based on the first person narrative of a traveling adventurer could provide a very different model in Jonathan Swift's satiric masterpiece, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), which can be said to mark the beginnings of the genre we now call science fiction. Swift brought a new kind of moral skepticism to fiction, rejecting Defoe's faith in the capacity of human beings to transform the world and their own lives, and ultimately insisting that fiction had an obligation to vex the reader as well as entertain and instruct.

The British novel continued to establish itself as a vibrant form capable of apparently infinite variety. Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748), one of the longest novels in the English language, provided over a million words in epistolary form charting the complex and ultimately destructive relationship of the virtuous heroine and her would-be seducer, Lovelace. As its long subtitle indicated, this "History of a Young Lady" focused on "the most Important Concerns of Private Life" as well as "the Distresses that may attend the Misconduct Both of Parents and Children, in Relation to Marriage." Richardson's fictional letters provide incredibly detailed portrayals of the inner lives of its central figures, demonstrating the novel's potential for the kind of psychological exploration of character that ultimately results in the finest works of Henry James. Richardson also made the seduction of innocent women into a major topic of popular fiction in both Great Britain and the United States and paved the way for a greater emphasis on sensibility – on the emotional lives of characters and the emotional responses of readers – that established the sentimental novel as an enduring and immensely popular mode. After beginning his career as a novelist by parodying Richardson's early work, Henry Fielding went on to provide a more fully developed alternative vision of what the novel could be in *Tom Jones* (1749), a comic epic with a bolder, lustier treatment of human sexuality and a greater focus on the social and economic realities of the external world. If *Clarissa* offers the tragic story of a woman who loses her place in the world, *Tom Jones* presents a comic panorama of English society in which the protagonist ultimately discovers his true identity and finds a secure place in a world whose uncertainties and deceptions he has learned to comprehend. And then the comic possibilities of the novel were further extended by Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67), which provides a self-referential parody of almost everything in a book that rejects even the basic idea of plot in favor of a delightfully rambling voice reveling in its own inability to finish a story.

The novel in England continued to flourish and produce new varieties. The Gothic novel got off to a weak start with Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764), but proved itself to be a more significant form for the exploration of physical and psychological terror in the hands of authors like Ann Radcliffe, whose *The Mysteries of Udolfo* (1794) exemplifies the basic trappings of the form: a virtuous heroine as victim, a decadent nobleman as scheming villain, and an ancient castle as setting for a plot that relies heavily on entrapment and escape. In the early nineteenth century, Jane Austen secured the place of the novel of manners with a series of brilliant books marked by a subtle wit and graceful style, and Sir Walter Scott added the historical novel to the repertoire of modes with *Waverley* (1814), the first of a series of immensely popular works that made the past into a vital realm for fiction. The rise of the novel, as Ian Watt (1957) and others have noted, mirrored and supported the advancement of the middle class and the development of values congenial to the eventual emergence of both capitalism and democracy as dominant ideologies.

Unfortunately, aspiring American novelists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century faced some problems that never troubled their British counterparts. First of all, there was no centralized publishing industry in the United States. British

authors who wished to publish would take their manuscripts to Fleet Street in London, where they could attempt to sell their wares to a professional who knew how to print and market books. American writers could find local printers scattered throughout the states but not a centralized publishing industry with well developed modes of production and distribution; these kinds of publishers would not become established in the United States until the middle of the nineteenth century with the rise of Ticknor and Fields in Boston and Harper and Brothers in New York. Furthermore, those printers who were interested in making and selling books already had a reliable and much cheaper source of supply. An international copyright law was not recognized by the American government until 1899, which meant that English best sellers could be printed and sold without the payment of any royalties. In addition to competing with these pirated editions, American authors were often expected to underwrite at least part of the cost of publication. On the other hand, American writers had one advantage over their British rivals, who could not secure American copyright protection and the accompanying royalties. British copyright could be attained by having one's book published first in the United Kingdom, which explains why most of the major American novels throughout the nineteenth century were published first in Great Britain. For the most part, however, both legal requirements and business matters did not favor the financial interests of aspiring novelists in the new republic.

The lack of an infrastructure to support literary publishing by homegrown talent did little to prevent the calls for the development of a genuinely American literature that began soon after the revolution and echoed throughout much of the nineteenth century. Americans were conscious that they could not claim to match the cultural achievements of Europe, but took some pleasure in imagining a glorious future for the new republic. In these visions, the new nation was represented by a bright horizon while the old world landscape consisted mostly of decaying ruins. This focus on future development allowed and perhaps even demanded a reduced commitment to the arts. John Adams aptly summed up a common vision of the national priorities:

> I must study Politicks and War that my sons may have liberty to study Mathematicks and Philosophy. My sons ought to study Mathematics and Philosophy, Geography, natural History, Naval Architecture, navigation, Commerce and Agriculture in order to give their Children a right to study Painting, Poetry, Musick, Architecture, Statuary, Tapestry, and Porcelaine. (John Adams in letter to Abigail Adams, May 12, 1780, Adams, 2011: 300)

In addition to portraying the arts as a luxury for future investment, some Americans felt a deeper need to explain why their authors had not yet equaled or surpassed the masterpieces of European literature. Somewhat surprisingly, many of these explanations focused on the lack of suitable subject matter for the American novelist. Given the rich diversity of forms the novel had already assumed, the argument that the new world did not provide appropriate material may seem peculiar, but it is important

to understand the complex relationship between a genre and the culture that produces it.

Genre entails a series of conventions that either liberate or stifle serious writers, and these conventions both reflect and emerge from the values that define an individual culture. If both the subject matter and the form of a literary genre express the values of the underlying culture, then it seems logical that the authors in a newly formed democratic republic based on principles of equality and endless opportunity would have some problems adapting genres that emerged from older aristocratic societies based on the belief in a settled order in which individuals were expected to find their places in specific hierarchies. Writers of both prose and poetry faced these problems. For example, Dryden and Pope had established the heroic couplet as the most common and most powerful metrical form of the eighteenth century, which made it natural for the Connecticut Wits to employ it as the primary vehicle of their own poetry after the American Revolution. Unfortunately, the kind of order imposed and affirmed by the heroic couplet's relentless emphasis on rhyme and meter seems more appropriate for defenses of reason and order in Augustan age Britain than for the affirmation of republican principles in postrevolutionary America. In a similar vein, the novel of manners requires and perhaps ultimately validates a highly ordered society in which specific codes of behavior mark both class position and individual worth. The United States of America not only did not have the kind of rigid class distinctions and highly codified rules of social decorum that Great Britain had, but its political system – at least theoretically – disparaged these trappings of privilege. Furthermore, Americans were often reluctant to admit to those class boundaries that did exist. Indeed, one problem behind the call for a national literature is that it was fundamentally patriotic in spirit and thus inclined to favor glowing affirmations of the best qualities of the American experience and not an honest exploration of strength and weaknesses, of successes and failures. To the extent that the novel requires a complex and multivocal examination of human experience, as Bakhtin (1998) and others have suggested it does, the form itself is inherently in conflict with the basic premises of literary nationalism and its tendency towards univocal simplicity.

British literary tradition also depended upon a certain number of elements that were not a part of the American landscape. An English poet who wanted to write about poetry turned out verses about nightingales, a bird that served several metaphorical functions. Like most birds, it both flies and sings, thus demonstrating the power of the poet's voice to escape the mere earth. It, however, has two qualities that one rarely finds in other birds. First, it sings boldly and beautifully at night, a time when most other birds are silent. Second, it is connected by literary tradition to the myth of Philomela, a woman who is transformed by merciful gods into a nightingale after she is brutally violated by a man who then cuts out her tongue. Thus both ornithological fact and mythological reference provide the British poet with a bird who testifies to the transformative power of poetry, to its ability to confront all forms of darkness and give voice to those who have been silenced, to the capacity of great

poetry to, as T. S. Eliot puts it in *The Waste Land*, fill "all the desert with inviolable voice." Unfortunately, there were no nightingales in the United States of America, a fact that was pointed out to American poets who tried to write about them. When these poets then tried to write about mockingbirds, they ironically ended up demonstrating the problems of working with a landscape that was devoid of crucial details that had been enriched by a long literary tradition. Novelists who wanted to work in certain genres faced similar problems. Thus aspiring Gothic novelists in the United States had to face up to the basic fact that their country lacked both decaying castles and decadent noblemen, which are among the basic ingredients for this literary form. Historical novelists also complained of being shortchanged by their country's comparatively short history. Although the early scenes of exploration and colonial settlement and the events leading up to and culminating in the American Revolution certainly seem to offer much dramatic potential, Americans clearly felt that they lacked not only the long history but also the kind of resources available to Sir Walter Scott, the creator of the historical novel.

Even Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose success in both the Gothic tale and the historical romance seems to contradict such a lament, contributes to the discussion in explaining his choice of an Italian setting in his Preface to *The Marble Faun* (1860):

> Italy, as the site of his romance, was chiefly valuable to him as affording a sort of poetic or fairy precinct, where actualities would not be so terribly insisted upon as they are, and must needs be, in America. No author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land. It will be very long, I trust, before romance writers may find congenial and easily handled themes, either in the annals of our stalwart republic, or in any characteristic and probable events of our individual lives. Romance and poetry, ivy, lichens, and wallflowers, need ruin to make them grow. (1982: 854–5)

One wishes to find a sign of conscious irony in the claim that a nation about to fight an incredibly bloody civil war over slavery is completely devoid of "gloomy wrong," but his remarks are both characteristic of American commentary at the time and very instructive. The unwillingness of Americans to acknowledge that their nation contained anything except a "commonplace prosperity" deprived novelists and readers of the kind of subject matter that might have enriched the novel – what Philip Fisher (1985) has called the "hard facts" behind American life, including the harsh realities of racial injustice, slavery, and genocide.

Americans hated it when Europeans reminded them of the ugly fact of slavery as a sharp contradiction to all the abstract claims for liberty and equality that the new republic made. In his famous challenge to American pretensions in 1820, Sydney Smith moved naturally from a reminder of the lack of cultural achievement to a clear demonstration of moral wrong:

> In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book? or goes to an American play? or looks at an American picture or statue? What does the world yet owe to American physicians or surgeons? What new substances have their chemists discovered? or what old ones have they analyzed? What new constellations have been discovered by the telescopes of Americans? – what have they done in the mathematics? Who drinks out of American glasses? or eats from American plates? or wears American coats or gowns? or sleeps in American blankets ? – Finally, under which of the old tyrannical governments of Europe is every sixth man a slave, whom his fellow creatures may buy and sell and torture? (Smith, 1820)

Americans might be able to claim that they would one day produce books, science, and manufactured goods, but slavery posed a more difficult problem for novelists who wished to speak of the glories of their native land.

Of course, some American writers not only wrote about slavery but actually defended it. In fact, the South ultimately developed a fictional tradition attempting to affirm the superior civilization of plantation life in works like John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* (1832, revised 1851), William Gilmore Simms' *Woodcraft* (1854), and Caroline Lee Hentz's *The Planter's Northern Bride* (1854). The central trope of this tradition is the conversion of Northern visitors from an ignorance of Southern mores to an appreciation of a pastoral society based on refinement and genteel leisure. Slavery may be acknowledged as a theoretical wrong, but it is ultimately defended as the proper state in which childlike darkies can be protected by benevolent masters. The dialogue placed into the mouth of slaves often asserts their enjoyment of an easy life in nature and sometimes even features a slave rejecting an offer of freedom. These plantation novels have received relatively little attention from literary scholars and rarely make their way into the classroom, but they are important historical documents, marking an attempt to create a pastoral mythology in defense of both Southern agrarianism and racism. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (1972) and others have noted the ways in which the need to defend slavery (and later segregation) stifled intellectual life and the literary imagination in the South for much of the nineteenth century. It is not until the rise of modernism in the South that we begin to see the kind of complex treatment of both race and the human experience that distinguishes the finest works of William Faulkner.

The "new critics" who introduced systematic methods of analyzing literature to the American university emphasized both a nonpolitical reading of fiction and a fiction that was essentially apolitical, arguing explicitly that the novel must be free to engage in an honest exploration of the culture that produces it, and not succumb to the demands of propaganda. More recently, both critical theorists and the new historicists have taught us to recognize the political foundation of all works of literature, encouraging greater focus on both the political undercurrents of the novel and the kinds of cultural work a novel can perform. It is tempting to cite the plantation novel as evidence that political propaganda destroys serious artistry, but that argument ignores the basic fact that these works had a long-lasting influence on American culture. The

nostalgic appeal of this branch of Southern fiction was powerful and endured for a surprisingly long time. Indeed, after the Civil War ended slavery, the plantation myth's fantasy of an idealized antebellum life of natural simplicity marked by idyllic master–slave relationships returned in the tales of Thomas Nelson Page and the writing of the Lost Cause historians, doing much to shape popular views of the South and contributing to the rise of racism and segregation in the late nineteenth century. In fact, the plantation myth continued to claim a significant stake in the popular imagination throughout the first half of the twentieth century, particularly in best-selling novels like *Gone with the Wind* (1936) and in immensely popular films, including *The Little Colonel* and *The Littlest Rebel* (both released in 1935 and both featuring Shirley Temple and Bill Robinson), and the Walt Disney film, *The Song of the South* (1946). Works like these are now deemed so transparently racist that they have been largely repressed, but their values dominated the treatment of African Americans in mass media for many decades. Plantation novels provided the origins of this pastoral tradition which fashioned a mythic and nostalgic construction of the slaveholding South. Furthermore, the American novel played a significant role in defending not only slavery, but also in supporting other more pervasive forms of racism, sometimes overtly as in Beverly Tucker's *The Partisan Leader* (1836), which predicted both southern secession and the Civil War, and Thomas Dixon's Ku Klux Klan trilogy (1902–7) which inspired D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* and the revival of the KKK, and sometimes by a quieter but insidious depiction of African Americans as untrustworthy children. Popular fiction also often treated interracial relationships and miscegenation with either horror or a perverse sentimental delight in the tragic potential of mixed race children.

Ironically, some of the most passionate of the Southern defenses of slavery and racism were prompted by anger at the most successful abolitionist novel, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Until fairly recently, Stowe's book was routinely maligned by literary critics for its reliance on melodrama, sentimentality, and a literary method that reduced human beings to the status of caricatures. Critics have also been quick to condemn the racial stereotyping of its major African American characters, especially Tom and Little Eva, but it is clear that Stowe's powerful depiction of the capacity of slavery to debase both blacks and whites provided an effective weapon for abolitionists and clearly swayed public opinion in both the American North and Europe. While the novel did not start the Civil War, it certainly contributed to the union victory, because its international impact made it almost impossible for the Confederacy to attain the support of the British and French it needed to have any hope of winning the war. If the archetypal scene of the plantation novel is the one in which the slave refuses freedom and asserts the propriety of his enslavement, then the central scene of the abolitionist tradition is one never found in plantation fiction – the slave auction that divides family, separating mother and children, man and wife. Stowe's greatest achievement may have been her ability to dramatize the crucial violation of family structures that she saw at the heart of slave systems. In other words, she demonstrated that genres based on melodrama and sentimentality

could create a political force more powerful than the pastoral fantasies on which Southern defenses were based.

For African Americans, the most important and most powerful literary form during the antebellum era was the slave narrative, which achieved artistic power in the hands of writers like Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Harriet Jacobs, William and Ellen Craft, Solomon Northrup, and Henry Box Brown. The novel, however, also provided African Americans with some ammunition in the war against slavery, perhaps most notably in Frederic Douglass's short novel, *The Heroic Slave* (1852), and the various versions of William Wells Brown's *Clotel, or the President's Daughter* (1853; revised and enlarged, 1864 and 1867). Recently critics have also begun to pay attention to the attacks on racism in Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857) and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), but a powerful African American tradition in the novel does not emerge until the 1890s with impressive works by Frances Harper, Pauline E. Hopkins, Charles Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and others. After the Civil War, a handful of white novelists also confronted the issues of racial justice. Albion W. Tourgée's *A Fool's Errand* (1879) probably offers the most direct attack on the racist foundations of Southern reconstruction, but more complex treatments of race appear in George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes* (1880) and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894). Although the novel played a role in both attacking and defending slavery and racism, only the works of Twain and Stowe are central parts of the current canon, and many American authors simply attempted to avoid treating these issues at any length in their fiction.

In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison (1992) emphasizes the central presence of African Americans in the white literary imagination, brilliantly illuminating the degree to which an "Africanist" presence and the metaphors provided by concepts of "blackness" shape the development of American literature. Other scholars have also emphasized the ways in which racial anxieties and the battle over slavery provide the background for the plots of Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, and others – even in works that do not appear to address the issue of slavery directly. Recent studies of the Gothic by Teresa A. Goddu (1997) and others have perceptively delineated the ways in which depictions of terror reveal racial fears and insecurities. For example, Poe, the only major writer to emerge out of the South during the antebellum period, almost never writes explicitly about slavery and rarely sets his fiction in the slave-holding South, but the sense of terror and doom that marks his greatest works in the Gothic mode seem to many critics to betray underlying anxieties that are rooted in the political realities of his time and place. In particular, the imagery and symbolism that runs through his only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), invite us to place the conventional Gothic emphasis on entrapment and escape, on fear and freedom, within a peculiarly American context rooted in racial issues. It is thus tempting to suggest that even when American novelists did not want to deal with slavery and the racial issues intertwined with it, they found themselves almost naturally falling into an engagement with this overwhelming political reality. Such a view, however, ignores the capacity of the novel and the novelist to evade the unpleasant and the difficult,

particularly in its treatment of African Americans and the American Indian, just as it ignores the consequence of a literary attitude that treats people as either invisible or doomed.

The writer who sought to engage the dramatic and narrative possibilities offered by the frontier had to face the central fact that the new lands being opened for settlement were already occupied. To treat the American Indian in fiction, early nineteenth-century writers needed to confront not only the extreme violence that the European conquest of the Americas had entailed, but also the reality that the assault on native peoples was far from over. It is possible to find texts expressing admiration for the American Indian as a kind of noble savage free of civilization's corrupting debauchery, and it is even easier to find fiction depicting the unspeakable brutality and savagery of the natives who occupied land that new settlers wanted, but the most remarkable fact about the literary treatment of our indigenous peoples may be the capacity of American novelists to imagine them as either already dead or inevitably doomed to extinction. James Fenimore Cooper, the novelist who earned the greatest critical esteem and greatest popular success writing about the shifting frontier and the sad demise of native peoples, produced the five volumes that comprise the Leatherstocking saga (1823–41) during the same period that saw the passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and the forced relocation of the Southeastern tribes. Works like Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, which was published in 1826 and set in 1757, seem to suggest that the extinction of entire tribes was an affair of the past, or an inevitable fact of history, but Indian removal and cultural genocide were really matters of current public policy which American novelists and novel readers rarely confronted. In the first significant literary history of the United States, Moses Coit Tyler actually apologized for the amount of space in early American writing devoted to native peoples, proclaiming that: "To us, of course, the American Indian is no longer a mysterious or even an interesting personage—he is simply a fierce dull biped standing in our way" (1878, vol. I: 10). Cooper certainly showed that the American Indian could be interesting, and sometimes even noble, but their virtues were always part of a vanishing past, never elements in a meaningful future. Even the most sympathetic accounts of the American Indian in our early novels, such as Lydia Maria Child's *Hobomok* (1824) and Catherine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* (1827) accept and perhaps affirm a historical process that validates the inevitable demise of the first Americans.[2]

Some of the most interesting early novels of the frontier treat the American Indian as a psychological projection of fears and dangers, as in Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* (1799). If the new world lacked the castles and decadent aristocrats that were the foundation of the British Gothic, it certainly possessed its own sources of terror – the frontier wilderness and the threats posed by dangerous animals and "savage" people. This shift in the Gothic mode illustrates what happens when American authors adapt British genres to the special demands of their own cultural and natural landscapes. In the British Gothic of Ann Radcliffe, protagonists seek to escape the prison of the castle for the safety offered by a benevolent nature. In the American Gothic of Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Huntly flees the nightmarish natural world

of the wilderness and seeks safety in settlements and civilization. If the source of terror comes from aristocrats and the castles which are markers of their political and social power, then the genre's foundation is largely political and sociological and the British Gothic naturally moves to a critique of social structure, as it does explicitly in the works of William Godwin. On the other hand, if the sources of terror stem from nature – from a wildly natural landscape and its fierce inhabitants – then the metaphors lend themselves to the creation of landscapes that are fundamentally symbolic and psychological, and we end up with the tradition of the American Gothic that begins with Brown, Poe, and Hawthorne and stretches onward to the present day. For the most part, American sources of terror rely on the creation of psychological landscapes in which protagonists must face symbolic versions of the self and plot structures based largely on the idea of symbolic death and rebirth.

Gothic elements figure in almost all of the great American novels that rely on the romance tradition. Richard Chase's immensely influential *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957) argued that the romance constituted the central tradition for American novelists, a view that was supported in different ways by other early landmark studies of American literary culture, including Charles Feidelson's *Symbolism and American Literature* (1953), R. W. B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955), Harry Levin's *Power of Blackness* (1958), and Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960). All of these texts tended to affirm an American literature that relied on symbolism and romantic modes and was best explored by a criticism that employed the art of close reading to search for mythic patterns and psychological meaning. Unfortunately, these insightful studies also gave us a literary canon that excluded almost all women writers and threatened to limit the novel largely to stories of male initiation. Romantic modes have been – with a few notable exceptions – male forms, in which women characters are often either victims who need to be rescued or moral touchstones by which to judge the value of male characters. In contrast, women characters in realism tend to be more fully realized and to play more significant roles. For a time, the scholarly emphasis on the romance withheld attention from many of the finest women writers in the United States, most of whom have worked primarily in forms of realism. Privileging the romance has also led to some peculiar acts of critical distortion, perhaps most notable in the occasional attempt to portray our greatest realist, Henry James, as an author of romances.

It might be more fruitful to recognize the way romantic and realistic modes interacted in the creation of our finest American novels. In his prefaces, Hawthorne clearly emphasizes the imaginative freedom he gains by presenting his narratives as romances in which the ideal and the real co-exist. *The Scarlet Letter* clearly illustrates many of the qualities we associate with the symbolic romance: a setting in the distant past or an exotic realm outside of time and space; larger than life characters who speak in an artificial literary language; a plot based on remarkable experiences, personal quests and obsessions, or entrapment and escape; and an immense reliance on symbolism that demands multiple acts of interpretation. Its fusion of two romantic forms – the Gothic and the historical novel – should not obscure, however, the ways in which *The*

Scarlet Letter also introduces realism into the American novel. While it certainly shares the romantic habit of identifying characters partly by their relationship to nature and the natural world, it also has the deep commitment to exploring complex social relationships that forms the core of American literary realism. We often forget that *The Scarlet Letter* is one of the first important novels about adultery in Western literature, a topic Hawthorne tackled before Flaubert or Tolstoy, and perhaps the only significant novel about adultery in which the female adulteress lives while the male adulterer dies of guilt. Hawthorne's fascination with the psychological consequences of the moral choices each character makes, his emphasis on the relationships between women and men, and his depiction of a social world in which characters interact with each other and the larger society in a variety of complex ways – all of these factors are more consistent with the realism that follows the novel than the romantic movement that largely preceded it. In the complexity with which Hawthorne treats her aspirations and frustrations as she struggles with the roles of wife, mother, lover, and would-be social reformer, Hester Prynne is much closer to the women of Henry James's novels than she is to any female figure in a romance. In short, it might be most accurate to describe *The Scarlet Letter* as Hawthorne's remarkable transformation of the historical novel into a form that fuses the symbolic potential of the Gothic romance with the psychological development of the realistic novel.

Realism clearly flourished in the years following the Civil War, opening new areas of possibility for the novelist who increasingly gained a capacity to recognize and explore the contradictions at the heart of American democracy. Americans embraced a myth of economic opportunity and social mobility that drew immigrants in huge numbers; they were not much interested in encouraging a fictional exploration of the boundaries that separated classes of people or in a form of the novel that equated a certain set of social manners with superior moral standing, as the British novel of manners often did. It took a surprisingly long time for American novelists to transform this genre into a vehicle for the sophisticated exploration of the role of class, wealth, and social mobility in a democratic society that forms the moral center of masterpieces like W. D. Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905), and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). In these texts, there is a startling conflict between money and morality and often a clear correlation between social mobility and moral decline. Howells, who was quite sympathetic to socialist ideas, provides one of our strongest portraits of the American businessman in his portrayal of Silas Lapham, who is a curious mixture of raw energy and crude vulgarity, of common sense and coarse materialism. Ultimately, it is his basic decency which both redeems him morally and ruins him financially. Wharton, who was more clearly ensconced in the upper classes than any other major American novelist, clearly describes how her choice of New York society as the subject matter for her novel inevitably led her to create Lily Bart: "A frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implications lie in its power of debasing people and ideas" (Wharton, 1985: 207). At the heart of Fitzgerald's finest novel is not only a deeply felt understanding of the corrosive effects

of the desire of money and social ambition but also an apparent belief in the criminal basis of wealth. While the British novel of manners often – at least implicitly – seems to validate class structures and social orders even if it mocks the social foibles of specific characters, the American novel of manners in its most successful examples appears founded on a significant critique of the established social order. Henry James demonstrated the power of this critical capacity in his international novels, which rest on a complex comparison of American and European values and often devote significant attention to the issue of class.

During the periods in which realism, naturalism, and modernism emerged, the American novel became increasingly open to wider influences and fresh possibilities and new transformations of old genres. Although we now think more in terms of transatlantic and global relationships, it is still useful to consider the ways in which different cultures develop characteristic treatments of genres. For instance, the English country house mystery differs from the American hard-boiled detective novel in almost every respect. The British tradition maintains a faith in class boundaries and in a code of ethics and ultimately in a rational order that is restored through the ingenious deductions of the analytic detective. In contrast, the American tradition not only tends to feature more violence, but also expresses a fundamental skepticism about those who wield political and economic power; the detective ultimately remains true to his own personal moral code in a corrupt world. One of the basic forms of the British novel is the *Bildungsroman*, which traces the development of a protagonist from youth to maturity and tends to follow a basic shape that was established by the novels of Henry Fielding and Charles Dickens. The main character is an orphan who travels over a vast social landscape, until he (or occasionally she) discovers his or her identity. The protagonist will often confront a series of symbolic father figures and sometimes discover who his real father is. In the process of finding an identity, the protagonist discovers a past (the real father), a present (a position and inheritance derived from that past), and a future (usually represented by marriage and the discovery of a vocation or social position). In short, the entire structure of the English novel asserts that identity is something to be found within a relatively stable world of clear hierarchies where each individual must learn his or her place.

In the fluid world of American democracy and the American novel, identity can sometimes be created and it can often be lost, but it is not something that can simply be found. American culture emphasizes the dynamic fluidity of experience, values social mobility and movement, and is more interested in the future than the past. If the British novel usually affirms traditional family roles, the American novel tends to place more emphasis on the individual's acts of self-discovery in a changing world. While the traditional happy ending in British fiction often includes and affirms marriage, major American novels rarely use marriage to signify a happy ending.[3] In fact, the loveless or unhappy marriage is often a source of grief for American protagonists. Furthermore, the great heroes of the American novel do not discover who their real fathers are – they may actually spend much time escaping father figures, figures of authority who prevent the individual from creating a true identity. In fact, they may

even fantasize about having no father, as both Huck Finn and Jay Gatsby do when they create new identities for themselves or discover, as the narrator of Ellison's *Invisible Man* does, that he needs to be his own father in order to embrace a world of possibility. In the major novels of American literature, identity is not something to be found, but something that is either created or lost. Indeed, the myth of America that continues to attract new immigrants is the belief in a place where an individual can be free of the restraints of static societies, take advantage of new opportunities, and create a new and more rewarding identity. It is this possibility of transforming the self that forms the central drama in many of our finest novels.

The central characters of *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Awakening*, *The House of Mirth*, *My Antonia*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Native Son*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Invisible Man*, and more recent novels often discover that the world is more complicated and more treacherous than they originally anticipated and then respond by attempting to construct a new identity that makes life meaningful. Those who are successful ultimately embrace the possibilities of life while accepting the limitations of the world. Those who fail to create new identities sometimes are trapped within the limited social roles provided by a repressive society. In the worst situations, the loss of identity precedes a meaningless death. While the traditional happy ending for the British novel is marriage, the closest thing the American novel offers to a happy ending usually leaves a character grappling with the process of self-discovery and self-creation as he or she attempts to find meaning in the experience that has just been narrated.

In the twentieth century, American novelists developed a greater ability to confront the meaning of history, to engage political and social realities, and ultimately to fashion works that raise fundamental questions about the nature of narrative and the possibilities and limitations of language itself. In the past 20 years, the American literary landscape has been enriched by the work of African American, Latino/a, and Asian American writers who have moved the novel into a fuller engagement with some of the basic contradictions at the heart of American democracy, the conflict between the ideals of a society devoted to freedom, equality, opportunity, and the realities. Often the process has entailed merging the conventional novel with fictionalized autobiography and/or the short story cycle to create works that both expand our concept of the novel and also redefine the idea of the representative self. These works frequently adapt the idea of the *Künstlerroman*, the novel about the growth of the artist, into a new kind of ethnic form that enables the artist to speak for an entire community while simultaneously affirming his or her identity as an individual. Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975) and Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984) exemplify the powerful effects achieved by this kind of genre busting. Indeed, many of our most important novelists are consciously engaged in metafictional inquiries that blend and transform conventional genres. Thus the most acclaimed novel of the past quarter century, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), is based on a brilliant fusion of multiple generic forms, merging the Gothic ghost story with the historical novel into a work that constitutes both our most powerful exploration of the horrors of America's racial past and a compelling portrayal of tragedy and redemption. Increas-

ingly major novelists are also now reinvigorating genres that were once dismissed as popular or even subliterary: both science fiction and crime fiction have recently served as the foundational genres for fascinating experiments in narrative form, such as the recent work of Cormac MacCarthy, Connie Willis, Paul Auster, Marge Piercy, and Michael Chabon. The multiple ways in which contemporary authors have expanded the boundaries of conventional genres, sometimes even breaking down the conventional barriers separating reality from the imagination, can be seen in such recent novels as Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1980), Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* (1989), Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), E. Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* (1993), William Kotzwinkle's *The Bear Went Over the Mountain* (1996), Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998), and Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* (2007). American novelists continue to transform the various genres in which they work, expanding and breaking conventional boundaries, as they create new ways of expressing and sometimes challenging the values of a continually changing culture.

Notes

1 For a valuable discussion of the term, see Kenneth E. Eble, "*The Great Gatsby* and the Great American Novel" (1985). The phrase "The Great American Novel" was first used as the title of an essay by John William De Forest, which appeared in *The Nation* (January 9, 1868).

2 One of the most popular nineteenth-century American novels devoted to defending American Indians, Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* (1884), also fails to imagine any possibility of success the native peoples of the United States. There are no known significant novels by Native Americans about American Indian life before the twentieth century. John Rollin Ridge's *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta* (1854) focuses on the famous Mexican bandit, but scholars have read it as a repressed account of Cherokee experience.

3 There are, of course, exceptions. For instance, the marriage of Holgrave and Phoebe at the end of Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables* (1851) and of Tom Corey and Penelope Lapham at the end of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) reflect the reconciliation of conflicts in their respective novels. Often the treatment of marriage is grimmer, especially in novels by American realists and modernists. Edith Wharton's *Summer* (1917) ends with the protagonist reduced to resignation to a loveless marriage. W. D. Howells probably devoted more attention to marriage than any other American novelist, depicting both happy marriages (*Their Wedding Journey*, 1872) and failed ones (*A Modern Instance,* 1882). American realists who focused on marriage, however, often have the wedding occur in the middle of the book, thus dividing the narrative into courtship and marriage, such as Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920).

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