

*The
Connell Guide
to*

The
American Novel
1880 - 1940

by Stephen Fender

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Introduction

In the 1950s half a dozen clever American scholars attempted to define the nature and character of American literature. Each of them saw something distinctive about it and their studies make fascinating, and instructive, reading.

Henry Nash Smith, in *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950), examined the way the western frontier shaped American society and captivated its imagination with the apparent promise of vast, empty tracts of country. It's hard to exaggerate the importance of this idea, an idea present in one way or another in all the great American novels we look at in this book. From their first settlement on the continent Americans were acutely aware of being on a frontier; they felt a mixture of exhilaration about starting again in a new world and anxiety about leaving the old one behind. The idea of escape towards the west, away from the centres of civilisation in Europe and the more settled parts of the American east, fired the imagination, as well it might.

R.W.B. Lewis, in *The American Adam* (1955), developed this theme, stressing above all the extent to which American culture was shaped primarily by its sense of being “new” – and by a conscious desire to distance itself from the fusty traditions, habits and ways of thinking of the Old World. Perry Miller, in *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956), echoes this but pays particular attention to the religious

dimension: Americans had come to New England, says Miller, as part of a mission to found a reformed society, free of the messy compromises and time-worn rituals which, in American eyes, beset the English church.

A year later, a fourth scholar, Richard Chase, weighed in with his highly influential *The American Novel and its Tradition* (1957). Boldly, Chase characterised classical American fiction as a kind of “romance”. In traditional literary terms, romances are tales of the exploits of heroic figures – often in exotic settings. (The stories of King Arthur and his knights are medieval romances.) American romances, said Chase, essentially evoke the “radical forms of alienation... and disorder” inherent in living in a New World. Many great American novels, he thought, are not realistic in the sense that great English novels like, say, *Middlemarch* are realistic: they are interested less in the development of character in a tightly knit domestic world than in the momentous struggles of brave or daring individuals in a hostile environment, of man alone taking on the universe – the most famous example being that quintessential American story, Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851).

Chase’s thesis is ingenious but overstated. Most culpably, it ignores not only the vastly underestimated Edith Wharton but one of the greatest of all novelists, American or otherwise, Henry James. Both James and Wharton were profoundly interested in the development of

character and in the minute observation of the way people behave. Both, of course, were shaped as much by their exposure to European culture as by their American origins, which is partly what sets them apart from their contemporaries. Indeed James once complained to Edith Wharton that it was impossible to set a wholly realistic novel – or “novel of manners” – in America. American society, he implied, was too new, too superficial. Producing a novel about it remained “a deadly difficulty”. James’s solution, and up to a point Wharton’s, was to write fictions in which Americans found themselves encountering, blundering into, perhaps even getting the better of, the elaborate social codes that their European forebears had left behind them.

But while his definition is too rigid, Chase undoubtedly identifies an important strand in American fiction. Many American novels do indeed pit individuals against a hostile universe and, invariably, the universe wins. Romances, at least romances as defined by Chase, tend to go wrong. As another great US critic, Lionel Trilling, put it in *The Liberal Imagination* (1950):

In the American metaphysic, reality is always material reality, hard, resistant, unformed, impenetrable and unpleasant. And that mind is alone felt to be trustworthy which most resembles this reality by most nearly reproducing the sensations it affords.

In other words, American naturalist authors felt that they were never more faithful to the truth than when their characters came to a bad end. So Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) follows a girl from childhood to her young adult years. Seduced by a bartender, she is turned out by her mother, tries to make a living as a prostitute, and finally throws herself into the East River. Frank Norris's *McTeague* (1899) is about a California gold miner turned dentist in San Francisco, who kills his wife, provoking the wrath of a jealous rival who tracks him to Death Valley, where he slips a pair of handcuffs on him, only to be killed by McTeague. So McTeague dies of thirst and exposure, handcuffed to the man he has killed.



THE STORY OF CAPTAIN SMITH AND POCAHONTAS

One of the first explorers of the New World was Captain John Smith (1580 – 1631), the leader of the English Virginia Colony at Jamestown, Virginia. In *The General History of Virginia* (1624), Smith describes how

he heroically explores the wilderness, confronts and defeats the natives, and wins the heart of Pocahontas, the daughter of the native chief. His *General History* is a sort of renaissance pageant in which a European prince conquers and colonises the wild men of the New World. Pocahontas's love for her English hero is a figurative marriage of American nature and European culture, with the best of Europe transforming, and being renewed by, the best of America.

All of the remarkable studies we have considered above set out to frame American literature, for the first time, as a subject for debate and study. And all of them are highly flattering to their subject. There is, however, one important and highly controversial exception. The exception is Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960). This was just as original as the studies which preceded it, but it was so far from flattering that it drew howls of outrage from contemporary critics, including Chase.

Though about as far apart as two critics can be, Fiedler and Chase agree on one fundamental issue. Both believe American novelists of the period we are studying were ill at ease with the kind of realism

But to succeed Smith has largely cut himself off from the Old World. And while he is out exploring the wilderness (as he tells it), confronting the Indians and at length winning them over, back at the makeshift camp established by the English on first landing in Virginia, his cowardly social betters are lounging about, squabbling among themselves, and – worst of all – threatening more than once to abandon the whole enterprise and high-tail it for home.

So in one of America's

founding narratives the hero measures the success of his venture by the distance he travels from his European base. The frontier proclaims a value that is moral as well as geographical. And frontier heroes maintained their popularity in American fiction and folklore well into the 20th century. Think of any western hero, from the explorer and frontiersman Daniel Boone to the archetypal lonesome cowboy-gunfighter Shane, unable to settle down with the Starrett family even though they love him and he them. ■

central to the 19th century English novel. The difference, however, was that to Fiedler this meant they simply couldn't write fiction for grown-ups. In classic American novels, he said, heterosexual love between adults was typically displaced by homoerotic relationships between white men or white boys and black men. As examples he gave Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook in Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823 – 41), Ishmael and Queequeg in *Moby Dick* and Huck and Jim in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

By this he didn't mean that the male characters were having sex together; in fact, the absence of sex was the salient point. What Fiedler was saying, as he put it in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, was that these and other novelists were substituting a childlike view of human relationships for adult, heterosexual love.

The typical male protagonist of our fiction has been a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat – anywhere to avoid “civilization,” which is to say, the confrontation of a man and woman which leads in the fall to sex, marriage, and responsibility.

Fiedler's attack was a salutary counterweight to the more indulgent view of his contemporaries. What made it especially significant, and brave, was that it appeared at a time when America had emerged, after World War Two, as the most powerful and self-

confident country in the world. In this context, his assault seemed almost sacreligious. Was it fair? Up to a point, yes, though as we shall see in the chapters which follow, it does less than justice to some of the greatest American novels of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Portrait of a Lady

Isabel Archer, a spirited and beautiful young American woman, is invited by her aunt Lydia Touchett to visit her estranged husband, Isabel's uncle Daniel, a wealthy banker, at Gardencourt, their country house near London. There she meets their son, her cousin Ralph, with whom she forms a deep friendship, and the intelligent and engaging Lord Warburton, one of whose large estates lies nearby. Warburton falls instantly in love with Isabel, but she turns his proposal down because she thinks accepting it would prevent her fulfilling her destiny. She also refuses her ardent American suitor, Caspar Goodwood, who has followed her to England.

While in London with her friend, the American journalist Henrietta Stackpole, Isabel learns that Daniel Touchett is seriously ill. She hurries back to Gardencourt to find another house guest there, a friend of her aunt's, the mysterious Madame Merle. Ralph prevails upon his father to bequeath a large part of his wealth to Isabel, because, as he says, "I should like to put a little wind in her sails".

Now the heiress to a large fortune, Isabel takes off for a tour of Europe. In Florence Madame Merle introduces her to Gilbert Osmond, a man of no profession but of exquisite taste, whom at length, and against the advice of all her friends and family, she determines to marry.

The couple set themselves up in Rome, in the menacing Palazzo Roccanera. They have a son, who lives only six months, but even before then the marriage has begun to go wrong, with Osmond coming increasingly to value Isabel as a social ornament only, while resenting and fearing her independence of mind.

Osmond has a daughter, Pansy, whom he keeps in a convent. When she is courted by a young American art collector called Rosier, Isabel tries to help the mutually attracted couple, but Osmond objects strenuously on the grounds that Rosier isn't sufficiently rich or socially elevated. At this point



THE RADICAL CHANGES IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

The years from 1880 to 1940 brought more rapid and radical changes than any other six decades in American history, before or since. In 1880 most people (around 60

per cent of the population) were living on farms – and the rest in cities; by 1940 this proportion was almost exactly reversed. More than 30 million immigrants had arrived in the country, and the overall population had more than doubled.

In 1880 public transport was by riverboat or on the nation's early railroads, while locally people got around on

Lord Warburton reappears on the scene. Both Osmond and Madame Merle want him for Pansy, and knowing of his love for Isabel, ask her to help. She suspects that Warburton is more interested in her than Pansy, to which he admits. Osmond and Merle are furious.

Ralph is seriously ill at Gardencourt. Osmond forbids Isabel from going to him, but she defies him, promising Pansy that she will not abandon her. Ralph dies. Goodwood appears again, kissing her passionately and begging Isabel to come away with him, but Isabel decides to return to Rome.

Isabel Archer is one of Henry James's American girls. Said to be based on an idealised version of Minny Temple, his beloved cousin who died young, James's American girls are beautiful, well brought up, clever, independent, and usually rich.

They have the wit and confidence to challenge accepted standards, even (perhaps especially) if these

horseback or in buckboards and carriages over dirt roads. By 1940 mass movement was in fast trains and airliners, and more than 80 per cent of American households owned a car. Over the same time electric lighting, the radio, telephones and the moving pictures were introduced.

So by 1940 America had urbanised, modernised, centralised, diversified. In

1880 it had recently been torn apart by a terrible civil war, then uneasily reunited; by 1940, apart from enduring a traumatic depression, it had been through its first European war, and was about to be thrust into another, much greater, global struggle which would end with it becoming, indisputably, the most powerful country in the world. ■

are traditional and European. But not always the knowledge: “She thinks she knows a great deal of [the world],” Mrs Touchett says of Isabel, “but like most American girls she’s ridiculously mistaken.” Yet as the narrator puts it, “Isabel Archer was a young person of many theories”, a “remarkably active” imagination and a tendency “to care for knowledge that was tinged with the unfamiliar”. Among those theories was that “Isabel Archer was very fortunate in being independent, and that she ought to make some very enlightened use of that state”.

Towards the end of Chapter Seven, Mrs Touchett criticises Isabel for having sat up one night talking to Ralph and Lord Warburton. “Young girls here – in decent houses – don’t sit alone with the gentlemen late at night,” she tells her. Mystified, Isabel asks Mrs. Touchett to keep her informed of the things she shouldn’t do. “So as to do them?” asks her aunt. “So as to choose,” Isabel replies.

And how does Isabel exercise her choice? By marrying Osmond. This has baffled readers, as it has critics. For the English critic, Tony Tanner, the reason is partly that Osmond is the least sexy of her suitors. Isabel, he says, is driven by fear: she is “frightened of sexual passion, of her unexpected wealth, of her ‘freedom’”. Of her various offers, “Caspar Goodwood suggests oppression, coercion and constraint on the plain physical level. Lord Warburton, with his complex social relations and obligations, suggests immobilisation on the social level.”



A charcoal drawing of Henry James by John Singer Sargent (1912)

But why Osmond, of all people? Isabel thinks that “life can be lived as pure spirit in contempt of things”, which is what attracts her to Osmond, Tanner says, but what she doesn’t realise is that Osmond “has spiritualised the material”.

The American critic Millicent Bell is less critical of Isabel. Bell thinks her main motive for marrying Osmond is the same as Ralph’s in arranging her inheritance.

Her benevolence, like Ralph’s, results from her

own incapacity to use money directly. This incapacity is literal; as a woman she has no way to make money ‘work,’ since women of her type and time are only consumers.

What Isabel admires in Osmond is above all his good taste. Her mistake, as Dorothea Krook, astutely points out, is in thinking that his exquisite discrimination in *things* extends to his moral choices. “Isabel has to suffer, and through her suffering learn that the aesthetic is not coextensive with the moral, and that the touchstone of taste is not the touchstone by which a good life can be lived.”

It is characteristic of this novel – in which thought, opinion and feelings are at least as important as physical action – that its climax should take place as Isabel sits alone and undisturbed by a dying fire. The devastating Chapter 42, in which she reviews the full horror of her marriage, is perhaps the most moving extended passage of free indirect speech in the language. * At this point she has already begun to gather that her husband’s “more direct communication with Madame Merle than she suspected” is somehow mixed up in the Pansy business.

She then goes on to recapitulate the reasons for her original attraction to Osmond, the “charm” she had “been immensely under”: his praise for her as “the most imaginative woman he had

* That is, when a narrator takes on the voice or manner of thinking of a character.

known”; his vulnerability; the immense lightening of her burdensome conscience at the thought that her money would empower Osmond’s taste. And now her “cheek burn[s]” at the thought that she has married on such a “factitious theory”. Reviewing her predicament, she reflects that far from valuing her imagination, Osmond thinks that “she has too many ideas and that she must get rid of them”. As for his “taste”, what is that but a snobbish “contempt for everyone but some three or four very exalted people whom he envied, and for everything in the world but half a dozen ideas of his own” and a slavish “esteem for tradition”?

Richard Chase greatly admires *The Portrait of a Lady*, despite its un-American interest and skill in the realistic development of character. This is because he recognises that James consciously assimilated elements of romance “into the novelistic substance” of the novel – in the language of the book and in the typical outlook of Isabel, who “tends to see things as a romancer does”.

Certainly there are romance-like aspects of Isabel’s predicament. She is virtually held prisoner in the Palazzo Roccanera (“black fortress”) – like the Lady Lyonesse of Arthurian romance, captive in the Castle Perilous – and when she finally confronts Madame Merle (the name comes from the French word for “blackbird”, colloquially associated in French with cunning and sharp practice), the evil she finds seems to her to be supernatural. “Who are you? *What* are you?” she demands of Merle, as she